

Volunteer puts his own troubles on back burner to aid community

By Marialuisa Rincon

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Gitesh Desai is the president of the Houston chapter of Sewa International, which mobilized more than 1,200 volunteers after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston.

Early on that unforgettable Monday morning, as Hurricane Harvey brought the Barker Reservoir's waters up his front yard and then under the front door, Gitesh Desai knew his own recovery efforts would have to be side tracked.

Desai's neighbourhood, Fleetwood, sits in the flood pool of the reservoir on Memorial Drive in the Energy Corridor. Most of the houses in the subdivision took on at least 7 feet of water and two weeks after the storm had passed, Fleetwood was still inaccessible to its residents.

"The first floor is completely gone, everything I possessed was destroyed," Desai said. "My books, my memories, irreplaceable pictures and albums - it's all gone."

Desa is president of the Houston chapter of Sewa International, a nonprofit that participates in disaster rescue and recovery worldwide.

Sewa means selfless service - service above self - in Sanskrit.

In the storm's immediate aftermath, the 63-year-old coordinated Sewa's partnership with 40 organizations in the Indian community. Sewa recruited more than 1,200 volunteers who logged nearly 45,000 work-hours, brought in 21 truckloads of supplies, set up a 24-hour helpline and rescued 687 people from floodwaters.

Vijay Pallod, a leader in the local Indian community, met Desai in 1993, during relief efforts for the Latur earthquake in India. That earthquake destroyed 52 villages, killed nearly 10,000 people and injured 30,000 more.

"I was very impressed with his dedicated volunteer work to help the community," Pallod said. "He is well-respected as a true leader in the community."

As in the earthquake and countless other natural disasters since, Pallod said, Desai emerged as a community leader when Harvey struck.

"He never talked about his own problems and being away from his home, but he was ready to listen to others' problems," Pallod said.

Three months have passed since Desai's home was flooded and he is still living in a hotel. He has plans to repair his home, Desai said, but the execution is going slowly.

Though Houston has seen more than one rainstorm since Harvey and life has returned to normal for many, Desai and Sewa continue to help rebuild the lives of those who lost everything.

The organization's work is mostly based in Rosharon, Desai said. It has raised \$450,000 to aid in relief efforts.

"It's hard to describe how hard it is," Desai said. "But it doesn't break our spirit. That's why we keep doing it."