

# They bought the town's oldest restaurant and renovated it. Then Helene destroyed it.

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## BAKERSVILLE

When the brand-new owners of Helen's Restaurant, Donna Stafford and her mom, Mary Stafford, posted a sneak peek of the Bakersville diner's remodel in July 2023 on Facebook, they couldn't have known that just over a year later, it would all be gone.

Of course they couldn't. None of us could.

Bakersville is a small town — population 1,757, per the 2020 census — in Western North Carolina. Its nickname is the "Gateway to Roan Mountain," and it is the county seat of Mitchell County.

The town has experienced flooding before — including the infamous Flood of 1977 and the Flood of 1998 — but it had never experienced anything like it would with the devastation of Hurricane Helene.

## DECades of memories at Helen's Restaurant

There are only a few restaurants in Bakersville, and Helen's was its oldest.

In our first conversation, Donna couldn't remember which year it opened — she would have to look at the newspaper article framed on the restaurant's wall to confirm — and that's not an option anymore.

She then texted the daughter of the owners who sold her the restaurant (yes, Helen's daughter), who confirmed the restaurant opened in 1956. The Mitchell County Historical Society said it started as a drive-in.

Helen Hopson, along with her husband, Wiley, owned and operated the restaurant from 1961 until she died in 1996. It was a town fixture for decades — and for a time, it was the only eatery in town, Donna said.

Helen's sits along NC-226, one of those winding mountain roads surrounded by lush green fields, houses on hills and peaks off in the distance. Take a left at the flashing light in downtown if you're coming in from Spruce Pine, then you've found it — it's on your left.

Behind the restaurant, a walking path runs along Cane Creek, which feeds into North Toe River. It's part of the town's Creekwalk project, which also includes a playground, sports fields and more.

## Renovating a relic

Donna and Mary pur-



GOOGLE STREET VIEW AND COURTESY OF HELEN'S RESTAURANT

Helen's Restaurant in Bakersville, N.C., was destroyed during Hurricane Helene. A wall on the lower level is gone, and the support beams for the building are also gone. Shown at top and left are Google Street View images from before the storm.

chased Helen's Restaurant in 2023, then got to work.

"We completely remodeled the restaurant with focus on maintaining a cozy, small-town community vibe, keeping the counter barstools," Donna said.

They were putting in 16-hour days. Mary is 80. And Donna, who is 60, became ill just before the restaurant's reopening. She was diagnosed with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Lyme disease, meningitis, Bell's palsy, myocardiitis and other co-infections.

But all the labor felt worth it. The Stafford family goes back several generations in Mitchell County. Donna was born here; her brothers, too. It wasn't just the town's legacy they were investing in — it was personal.

## HELEN'S REOPENED IN AUGUST 2023

With the community cheering their efforts the whole way, they reopened the restaurant in August 2023. A Rhododendron Dining Room with a collage wall celebrated Bakersville's annual Rhododendron Festival. A black bear on a clock proclaimed the restaurant was "on mountain time."

Joe Cole, a Mitchell County native who worked at Helen's in 1965, gifted the restaurant a signed dulcimer that he made using locally sourced wood.

For the next 13+ months, the restaurant served up hearty meals, including impressively sized double cheeseburgers, hot ham and cheese sandwiches and Southern chopped steak. Breakfast was available on the weekends, and Saturdays were for live music.

At times, Helen's needed to close unexpectedly due to staff illness, including Donna's. These short-notice closings were posted to the restaurant's Facebook page, and customers would comment with well wishes and shares, getting the word out.

"We were just past our first year of operations and were not making a profit yet, putting every dime towards salaries and food vendors," Donna said.

## THE WEEK OF THE HURRICANE

On Wednesday, Sept. 25, a powerful storm came through. "The basement flooded like never before," Donna said.

Photos of the damage

show freezers knocked on their sides, food spilled out and covered in sludge. A crumpled cardboard container in a puddle on the floor of the basement displays "KEEP FROZEN" in block letters under a layer of cracked mud.

Fresh broccoli florets in bags surround other food, including a bread-and-butter pickle jar. Boxes lie everywhere, mud lines are on the walls and splattered on the side of the stairs. A mop bucket has surrendered, turned on its side and coated in the slushy mess.

The basement flooded 4-5 feet that day, Donna said. "We obviously closed Thursday and spent the day throwing away the lost food and scooping out as much water and mud as possible."

When she went to bed

Thursday night, she knew

Helen's was on its way,

and she figured there

would be more flooding.

"It was shocking. It still

is. My shock set in even

before I arrived at the

our losses from Wednesday's storm."

She pulled up her restaurant security cameras from home, where she watched helplessly as the basement flooded, again. She watched her freezers fall over, again. The outside cameras showed the water even higher than Wednesday.

She watched until she couldn't watch anymore — until 5:30 a.m. Friday, Sept. 27, when her power went out.

Then Hurricane Helene arrived.

## HURRICANE HELENE

Hurricane Helene was particularly hard on Bakersville. Roads were decimated. Tornadoes ripped through the area.

Flash floods destroyed

everything the water could reach. The park was demolished and so were the playground and soccer fields. Downtown was completely flooded, along with the businesses there.

And Donna was trapped

in her home, which had

also been damaged in the

storm. "I had no way of

getting my car out and no

means of communication."

Three days later, her

brother was able to make

his way to her. He had

stopped to check on the

restaurant and showed

her photos of its damage.

A wall of the restaurant's

lower level was gone,

along with six freezers, all

the food, a washer/dryer

and a walk-in cooler.

Even the supports holding

up the two-story building

were gone.

Three days after that,

Donna was finally able to

get her car out and go see

her businesses — and her

town — for herself.

"It was shocking. It still

is. My shock set in even

before I arrived at the

restaurant. Roads are gone, forests are no longer forests as trees are all lying down in a tangled mess. Electricity poles are broken in half and lying on top of what is left of homes, buildings and roads."

And without its support beams, the restaurant's building could collapse at any time.

On Oct. 5, Helen's Restaurant was officially condemned.

"We are no longer allowed to enter the building. Praying for us all," the Staffords wrote on Facebook.

Donna said inspectors told her she will never be allowed inside again — it's not safe. That means the restaurant security cameras from home, where she watched helplessly as the basement flooded, again.

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