

‘Civilization is pretty much gone’ after Helene tears through Spruce Pine, NC

BY JOSH SHAFFER
jshaffer@newsobserver.com

SPRUCE PINE
With the mud ankle-deep inside her music store, and the water stains climbing 8 feet high on the walls, Angie Buchanan said goodbye to 50 years of teaching music in Spruce Pine.
Then she walked through the stinking sludge of Lower Street and tossed her prized cello on a trash pile.
“My life is in there,” she said. “It’s hard. Very hard.”
The Mitchell County town of 2,000 took a beating from the North Toe River, which destroyed its historic brick riverfront and left neighbors still enduring life without power, water or cell service a week after Hurricane Helene roared through.
“Our water treatment plant washed away,” said Sonja Emmett, who was out walking her dog. “All the garbage trucks washed away. Everything civilization is pretty much gone.”

TINY PLUMTREE’S NEAR-IMPASSABLE ROADS
Nearby, the community store in tiny Plumtree still served as a Grand Central Station for side-by-sides carrying water, food, diapers and toilet paper up narrow, muddy, near-impassable roads where neighbors sat stranded.
And around midday Thursday, they learned one of their own had been found dead after a week.



Andrew Zook, left, helps to clear instruments and other items from the mud inside Majestic Music in downtown Spruce Pine on Thursday, days after Hurricane Helene brought heavy flooding to the area.

Nobody wanted to talk about it. They hugged and cried as the relief operation became an outdoor wake powered by generators.
Helicopters flew overhead, National Guard trucks rolled past and a community of 818 kept feverishly looking after each other, keeping a list of who is stuck where and who needs what, sending out side-by-sides like free DoorDash service.
“The main thing we don’t want is people to think, ‘These poor, old, ignorant Appalachian mountain people,’” said Libby Wise, running to check on her 90-year-old mother. “We have plenty of college-educated people

here. We are so appreciative of all the outside people are doing for us. Please don’t think you’re sending food and water to a log cabin.”
THOSE STILL ‘UNACCOUNTED FOR’
Back in Spruce Pine, a makeshift relief station opened up outside L&L Furniture on the Upper Road, which barely escaped disaster, unlike its riverfront neighbor.
Many residents couldn’t get out of their houses until Sunday, and an army of 100 volunteers has cut them free one-by-one. One of them on Lower Road Thursday said he’d gotten out 15 families since last weekend.

But fears persist of those still “unaccounted for,” the term Spruce Pine uses rather than missing.
Much like Plumtree, neighbors keep a tally of who is where, sending volunteers out to check. But when the find empty houses, mostly intact, the communication blackout forces them to guess at whether their friends have taken up with family elsewhere or disappeared down the North Toe.
“I can sometimes get Facebook with a generator and a Starlink,” said Shirley Singleton, whose daughter owns L&L. “Kind of that’s how we’re finding people.”



Sheet music sits on a mud-caked floor inside Majestic Music in downtown Spruce Pine on Thursday, days after Hurricane Helene brought heavy flooding to the area.



Marlin King, a volunteer from Pennsylvania, helps to clear mud and debris from Locust Street on Thursday in Spruce Pine following damage from Hurricane Helene.

SPRUCE PINE’S LIVING ROOM WASHED AWAY
Down on Lower Street, David Niven was shoveling the mud out of DT’s Blue Ridge Java, also sunk under 8 feet of water.
“It’s only \$2 million down the drain,” he joked. “I’ve got 40 gallons of gas sitting at my house. I’m blessed.”
He and his wife Tricia opened their coffee house 20 years ago, inside a building listed on the National Register.
“I wish you could have seen it,” she said. “We were the living room of Spruce Pine. Every church group met here. Everyone and anyone met here. God has kept us for 20 years

through fires, through pandemic. On the third day after the flood, God spoke to me and said, ‘We’re rebuilding.’”
On the day after the storm, before she even saw the ruined guitars, drums and dulcimers, someone broke into Buchanan’s music store and stole a harp.
“Kids, probably,” she said. “Probably just kids.”
Somehow, she thought, in storm or fair weather, she will get Spruce Pine playing music again.

Josh Shaffer: 919-829-4818, @joshshaffer08



Late-night show host Stephen Colbert recently asked “The Late Show” viewers to consider donating to help the communities affected by Helene, specifically calling out the destruction in North Carolina.

Stephen Colbert asks viewers to support NC after Helene

BY RENEE UMSTED
rumsted@newsobserver.com
Late-night show host Stephen Colbert asked “The Late Show” viewers Monday night to consider donating to help the communities affected by Helene, specifically calling out the destruction in North Carolina.
Colbert, a South Carolina native, asked his bandleader Louis Cato how friends and family in Cato’s home state of North Carolina were doing following the storm during an episode that aired Monday, Sept. 30. Cato grew up in Albemarle and has been a member of the band since 2015 and its leader since 2022, Charlotte Magazine previously reported.
“I’m really grateful. My immediate family is all well and OK,” Cato said.

“I’ve got a lot of friends in Asheville who we’re still waiting to hear from. They got hit really hard.”
During the show, which aired on Sept. 30, an emotional Colbert described the aftermath of the storm, including challenges with power outages, food and water availability and lack of cell service.
He also showed footage of flooding in Asheville. Buncombe County is one of a couple of dozen counties in Western North Carolina affected by Helene.
“The situation in that entire region is dire,” Colbert said.
Colbert directed viewers to colbertlateshow.com/hurricanehelene for a list of charities.
Renee Umsted: +1 202-383-6008, @renee_umsted

30-truck convoy rides through Helene’s worst in Avery County

BY JOSH SHAFFER
jshaffer@newsobserver.com

BANNER ELK
The long climb to Banner Elk follows switchbacks tangled with power lines, blocked by tree trunks and complicated by a two-lane highway reduced to a pile of boulders, and when you reach the top, you find a town living without running water for the last five days.
The police lieutenant saw his house float away, so he’s been sleeping on the couch at Town Hall.
For days, food, water and diapers have arrived by helicopter.
Some parts of town may go without water for months because Hurricane Helene took the pipes.
“How are we holding up?” asked Town Manger Rick Owen. “You can ask me when I’m tearing up or when I’m feeling strong.”
And yet on Tuesday, a convoy of volunteers loaded Banner Elk’s supplies and headed down the mountain in a 30-truck convoy.
Because down in Avery County, people fared far worse.

PEOPLE MISSING IN AVERY COUNTY, NC
Driving in Avery County, known for its ski resorts, gets tricky on a normal day.
But post-Helene, the roads lay scattered with rocks and river mud, cratered with sinkholes and sudden dropoffs — all passing through landscapes marked by pulverized houses and cars floating upside-down.
The convoy made its first stop in the tiny community of Frank, pop-



Volunteers unload donated supplies at Spear Country Store & Hardware in Avery County as residents recover from the effects of Hurricane Helene on Tuesday in Spear.

ulation 158, just down the road from tinier Minneapolis, where fire Capt. Kacey Hughes pointed out two houses that slid down a hillside and smashed into tall oak trunks. They remained there in a thousand dangling pieces.
“We have one person missing from that,” he said. “It’s just devastating. We have people who can’t get their insulin. We have people who can’t get their inhalers. Welcome to the Metropolis of Frank.”
To these far-flung communities, bigger and more tourist-friendly cities like Asheville take all the attention.
Around Frank and Minneapolis, churches set up folding tables on the side of the road, handing out donated water. Signs get tacked to trees, saying, “Food here.”
IN BANNER ELK, CHAIN SAWS, GENERATORS AND THE NEED FOR TOILETS
In Banner Elk, Lowe’s opened its doors to all takers, handing out chain-

saws, generators and batteries.
They fear the attention will fade.
This catastrophe will last months, if not years. Meanwhile, the town needs trash bins for spoiling food.
“Portable toilets would be phenomenal,” said Police Chief Kevin Hodges.
“Let’s be honest,” said Fire Chief Tyler Burr. “We’re the stepchild of the nation. If Taylor Swift gets engaged tomorrow, we’re an afterthought.”

AFTER LOSING THEIR HOMES TO HELENE, THEY HELPED OTHERS
On its second stop, the convoy pulled into the even tinier community of Spear, where trucks donating food and clothing formed a rural traffic jam.
Erin and Derek Buchanan have five employees at their country store who lost their houses in Helene, and all five were helping gather donations.
“One of them is living in a tent,” she said.
Asked if that person was available to talk, she said,

“He’s on a grading crew right now, working in the roads.”
Her sister is the local mail carrier, though Helene’s flooding tore through the nearby post office in Plumtree, reducing it to studs and insulation.
She knows everyone on her route, and she made her rounds making a tally of who was still there.
How many?
“Most of them,” Buchanan said.

SMASHED CARS IN CORN FIELDS, LIVE WIRES ON ROADS
For their last stop, the convoy pushed on to Spruce Pine, past smashed cars in corn fields, past a Dollar General shoveling out from under two feet of mud.
They passed country lanes few ever travel — Licklog Road and Tattertown Lane — knowing many people now missing will not be turning up with a story to tell.
Then a few miles from Spruce Pine, the convoy stopped dead. Nobody moved for 30 minutes. Finally, a patrol car flew past with blue lights flashing.
Live wire on the road.
Everybody turned around, back into the ruins they passed.
They dropped what canned goods and condensed milk they had with a church and its folding tables, and they drove back to Banner Elk, which now seemed like civilization.
“Nobody’s talking politics,” said Mike Dunn, a town councilman and one among 100 volunteers working 14 hours a day.
“Nobody’s talking religion. Nobody’s talking anything else,” Burr, the fire chief, chimed in.
“A week ago,” he said, “I was worried about my credit score. Now we’ve got to save the town.”
Josh Shaffer: 919-829-4818, @joshshaffer08