

Lyric E. West, Contract FEMA Agent with Texas Conservation Corp

Interviewed by Kianna Sills on October 9th 2017

At Home of Lyric West in Corpus Christi, Texas

Kianna Sills: This is the interview of Lyric West by Kianna Sills on October the 9, 2017. Um so tell us a little bit about yourself first.

Lyric West: Ok, I am 22 years old; I am from Atlanta, Georgia. I joined a lot of conservation programs during high school years up until college, then left for college. I uh the source of my work somehow ended me up on the path of helping the hurricane survivors from Harvey, and that's how I am here now.

KS: What was your experience with natural disasters previous to Harvey, Hurricane Harvey?

LW: I've had zero experience with natural disasters before Harvey, Hurricane Harvey.

KS: So how did that effect your handling of Hurricane Harvey and the work that you did?

LW: It was phenomenally impacting because everything was constantly changing; we were constantly roofing and tarping, constantly mucking and gutting, constantly chainsaw, constantly at multiple people's houses, and then it would be completely different; I would be in the volunteer center. I would be folding blankets and packing lunches for people who didn't have any food, so it's very fast paced, very confusing but it was good work that was done.

KS: What did anything, did you have any idea of what you were going in to and what things did you think we're going to happen that didn't happen or something that you weren't expecting to happen?

LW: During the training they drilled into us not expect anything at all because a situation constantly changes. A house could have slide off and completely collapsed by the time we got there; things were constantly changing so the expectations were really low, and I kind of like let things come as they came.

KS: How have you learned to deal with the stress of the things that you saw and the people that you dealt with?

LW: I dealt with the stress, my own personal stress, by putting the homeowners who suffered the most first. So their house was priority; their emotional wellbeing was our priority. Did they have a cup of coffee? Did they need someone to talk to? They were the biggest priority, and they were under way more stress then I could have ever been, so my stress level was pretty low just by focusing on helping the community.

KS: What is something that's going to stay with through out, and you'll think about when you hear of another hurricane?

LW: Um is everything going to get back to normal? What's going to be the new normal? What's going to be different? Who's going to be different? Who's not going to be here? Things like that; that's what I think about the next time I might be deployed out for another hurricane.

KS: So you've signed up again for another year to do this type of work?

LW: Yes, I am doing strictly disaster work from now on. I am leaving the conservation field and going straight to disaster work.

KS: Was this because of the Harvey incident or your work with the Harvey hurricane?

LW: It was, but it wasn't until later on. Um the state that I am going to naturally suffers from a lot of flooding area.

KS: And that state is?

LW: Louisiana

KS: Ok

LW: And um they are practically sinking because of the clay deposits that are no longer there anymore, so disaster work kind of came into it once I completed Hurricane Harvey's work, and then it kind of like finalized it for me that I really want to do this, I want to do this again for other people to help them out.

KS: Where were you during the hurricane because you are from Houston?

LW: Yeah Houston.

KS: You live in Houston. So where were you before and during the hurricane?

LW: Before the hurricane I was working out on Galveston doing a lot of coastal restoration work, but since it's so close to the coast, they actually cancelled work the day before it hit, and then the day it did hit Houston, I evacuated to Austin with my family.

KS: How did the experience of having to evacuate your home affect how you help people?

LW: It was, I guess, once I got to the survivors, I kind of pushed everything about me to the back of the line, because they were the priority, but I think the first time I felt stressed during the evacuation was when I got to a safe point and I saw the news and it was just, the nation was calling it a super disaster, superstorm, it's the worst that's ever hit beside Katrina and it was really hard to see that the place I go get coffee at was possibly under water and friends that couldn't evacuate were still there and that was really stressful. That was really hard to see.

KS: IS there anything you can think of that you want to share with us?

KS: we are in the family home of Lyric West so her siblings are around if you hear children's voices.

LW: Something I would like to keep around, to mention is that while some of us were blessed to have a home and family and everything to have a normal, there are some family that don't have a normal and in a blink of an eye, your house could be gone your family could be gone, and so I think it just makes the community as a whole stronger if we help out if we help out when we haven't been impacted or affected. Cause that goes a long way to the people you are helping because, you 'll forget them in a few years, but they will never forget you, so I think volunteer work is something that should be definitely considered if you have free time.

KS: And do you think that the nation responded well or do you feel like it galvanized and gave its support?

[Recording died]

KS: This is the second part of the interview with Lyric West by Kianna Sills on OCT 9th 2017; we are continuing this interview . I am going to restate the question that I asked earlier because it looks like we got cut off but. Do you feel that the support that the nation gave through FEMA matched what was needed on the ground in Rockport ?

LW: Yes and no. Yes because I worked alongside FEMA I stayed at their camps and they hosted us and so to come back after a long day of working and sit with people who also helped out, who also got people signed up, it felt like they were working just as hard, so I want to say yes, but then canvassing through homes, neighborhoods where they were minimally affected some homeowners felt they should receive a little bit more help from FEMA and American Red Cross. Specifically this one particularly area called Aransas Pass which is in-between Port Aransas and Rock Port

KS: And that was actually hit. Aransas Pass was hit pretty hard right? Right after Rockport being the main focus?

LW: Well not too, too hard. There were differently wind damage from majority of the houses I had been too. There could have been way more damage than I saw, but what I did see they were not affected too bad; they were in a community where there were senior citizens and retired people and so that definitely kinda determines you know how much help they can get from you know what they need. Plus what they can give out themselves, and so they didn't feel like they received enough support from FEMA and American Red Cross as over at Port Aransas and Rockport did. So they were a little disgruntled about it but.

KS: And how did that affect you working with them?

LW: It was, because my main organization is still Texas Conservation Corp under AmeriCorps it doesn't really impact me too much, but you know it just, it was a little hard to hear that this 62 year old lady- I won't mention her name- uh couldn't get a tree off her roof, she couldn't patch a hole she couldn't chain saw and FEMA could send out people and write her check to get her stuff taken care of, but they wouldn't because she should have had insurance anyway but

KS: And you had to be one of the representatives there while that was being explained to her?

LW: It was when I knocked on her door to asked if she needed some assistance, and she couldn't. She was denied assistance, and she's 62. She's retired so she definitely doesn't have the money to get a huge loan and a huge repairs done right away, thankfully we were able to offer free assistance but it's just hard to tell people and to see like, to expect "oh, well how much do I need to pay you" and it's like "no, were free and were here to help you. I am here from Houston to help you," and they were just expecting to be turned down. That was really hard. Or they were expecting "how much do I need to write you a check for?" It's really hard to make them have to pay for something when they suffered so much. I think that was a little hard.

KS: So that one of the hardest memories you have to hold on to. What's a good memory?

LW: A good memory is just faith in humanity as a whole. There was way more homeowners that were like 'Hey, I know I need this done, but you know what, you've helped me so much. I know there's more people that need this way more than I do' and it was the exact same line over and over with a lot of homeowners I hit, um interacted with and worked with; they were so selfless even though they also were struck by Hurricane Harvey just as the other person and the next person next to them but they were still selfless to know that "You know what, I got this done. These people need to be elsewhere helping somebody else even though I have this, this, this, and this." It was really nice. It was very nice. It was definitely one of my happiest moments. It just goes to show that there is faith for one community coming together and helping each other out and being neighborly.

KS: IS there anything else you would like to share with us or tell us?

LW: No, I think that will be all.