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Marianne

2 Hurricane Fiona struck Nova Scotia on September 24, 2022 with sustained winds of 140 km/hour, uprooting trees, tearing off roofs and turning lives upside down. Evidence of Hurricane Fiona are everywhere eight months after the storm hit.  
3 Many homes haven't been repaired or rebuilt because disaster relief hasn't arrived, or because there are no contractors available to do the work. Enter MDS.

4 At first most of the people were skeptical – what’s the catch? But as homes were repaired and relationships were made, people in the community grew to appreciate and welcome the workers. “Thank you for what you are doing” has been heard many times.  
5 An example of this is when one of the trucks had tire issues. Canadian tire didn’t have time to fix it, so they were directed to a small shop who took them right in. After fixing the tire, it was time to settle up. “Mennonites don’t pay here” was the reply, and he was given a large bag of Nova Scotia pins (which some of us are wearing)

6 We were based at Camp Bretrondean, an Anglican Church camp about 15 minutes south of Sydney, which MDS needs to vacate by the end of June.  
7 The United Way paid for the cost of the camp rental.  
8 The storm damage is visible with many downed trees along the driveway,  
 and patches in the roofs of the buildings.  
9 In spring MDS approached Sydney River Protestant United Church about using some of their facility as their new “base camp” location. The pastor took it to his board, and they came back with “how could we not!” When 2 of the MDS leaders went there the week we were there, they discovered that they had already put in water & sewer hookups for shower trailers, that will be provided by Samaritan’s purse, and power connections for the trailers. The local police use the parking lot for shift changes between vehicles, and when they heard they said they’d keep an eye on the tool trailers and RV’s and to let them know if they’re anything else needed. God is at work!

10 Most of the “first wave” of MRMCers met at the Sydney airport on Sunday, May 21, arriving at the camp in time for the evening meeting.   
11 Gord and I were flying in from Montreal after spending time with Kyle, and came very close to landing, but due to fog we took the scenic route and ended up in Moncton for supper and the night. Finally arriving in Sydney Monday morning, it was straight to work for us.

12 Here’s the schedule of a typical day –  
13pack your lunch,  
14check the board to see where you are heading (making sure your lunch get into the right cooler) As you can see there were 8 job sites on the go during our week, which kept the director for the week, Peter, very busy. Our group ended up working at 5 of the 8 sites.  
15After breakfast it’s into the vehicles and off to work at the various locations in Glace Bay, Sydney, North Sydney and Sydney Mines. Most of the locations were about 30 minutes away from the camp. The others will share about their work. After the work day it’s back to camp, unload tools no longer needed, take the cooler to the dining hall & hit the showers   
16 before a fabulous meal prepared by our cooks. We sang grace, including 600 one night, which blew those without a Mennonite background away. The next morning, the person who was doing devotions said he wasn’t going to sing because he’s a prison singer; always behind 2 bars and can’t find the right key.  
17 There was time for some table games and visiting, but most of us turned in early as 6am comes quickly.

Our day ended earlier on Friday for us to get back and do a good cleaning of the vehicles and to get tools put away.  
18 We were treated to a freshly caught lobster dinner!  
19The locals eat their lobsters cold there, which was different for most of us,  
20 but it was an amazing feast that we enjoyed!  
21 (sorry Garth – you leave early, you lose out)

Ray

22 Peter Thiessen, who was in charge of the MDS project at Glace Bay, called Ron before we arrived asking if anyone from Mt. Royal had experience with metal roofing. Ron volunteered me as a metal expert and so I had advance notice of the task ahead of me.

23 The crew consisted of Hank Patkeu, Gord , another MDSer named Robert and myself. The weather cooperated with us as it wasn’t as windy as usual.   
24 The lady who’s house we worked on was Mary Lovell. We were the most spoiled crew on the project; she insisted on giving us cake every afternoon coffee break.  
25 Compensation for the difficulty of working on such a steep roof! I had wanted to try lobster for the first time while in the Maritimes. I had heard that it was lobster season but the restaurant I was going to order lobster at wanted $85 for a lobster. I passed on that! On Friday everyone on the MDS crew had a lobster supper cooked by Mary for $8 a lobster!

Hank’s report (read by Ray)

26 When we were assigned the roof repair at Mary’s house I didn’t know what I could do to help. Then Peter said to me “Mary loves to visit…you are it!”

27 So many people we would meet or talk to really appreciated the work that was being done by MDS. Even in the hospital a gentleman came by my bed and told me how our people had come to their Presbyterian church and he was so impressed with the work being done.

By way of explanation: while there Hank experienced severe pain, eventually having to go to the hospital. He says

Polymalgia Rheumatica was what they called it. My shoulders and hips were affected. Nerves controlling muscles were not working. No strength in my arms and legs, couldn’t stand up. Hospital started treatment with strong steroids and over night I could feel improvement already.

Gord

28 When we arrived in Sydney on Monday morning we headed straight to work, Marianne one direction and me the other. I headed straight to Sydney Mines and arrived at Mary's home about half hour before the rest of the crew.  
29 I sat in her kitchen and had some water while we waited and talked. She told me of her bouts with cancer and that she is doing better now. She told me about the house and how she had had a rent to own arrangement and just managed to buy it out.   
30 That they've been working slowly to fix it up but the roof was just something they had no hope in being able to get it fixed.   
31 With the 4 of us working on getting the roof prepped progress was apparent and Mary was very grateful.  
32 With rain expected on Thursday I was sent to Glace Bay with another couple Neil and Audrey to install flooring on the second floor. The floor was far from level with a section of subfloor missing where there used to be a wall. The floor right at the top of the stairs rose about 2 inches in span across the stair. At least by the end of the day the floor was in and looked so much better. The owners even stopped in to check on the progress, they were so eager to move back in. They were also excited to note that even though it was raining out there was no water coming in through the front door thanks to Neil's repair job.  
33 Friday was another perfect day to work on Mary's roof and we managed to finish covering the area we prepped on Wednesday.  
34 Mary and Don were so happy with how it was coming along.

35When we attended the dedication service at a home in Glace Bay we saw that every room was renovated except the kitchen due to the damage from the tree and the subsequent water coming in. The house looked great and the young boy was so excited to move in to his new room. The yard had several very large poplar trees in the back that had blown over in the storm and a couple months later when the trees were being cleaned up as they cut some of the large branches off the tree suddenly snapped upright back in the hole it came from. A little scary I'm sure. Every night we all went to bed exhausted but got up every morning eager to do it again knowing the people waiting for their homes are so grateful for the help.

Ray

Just a couple more notes: On the rainy Thursday I spent the day painting ceilings at another MDS house.

36To add a bit about the house dedication service Gord and I attended:

The couple whose house it was had a 5 year old son and a daughter about 16 months of age. We asked them to share a little about what they experienced the night of the storm. She had been sleeping but for some reason woke up. On looking out she noticed that several of the large trees near their house had already blown over and realized it was only a matter of time before one would strike the house. They drove to the neighborhood school, of which he was custodian, taking a half hour for what would normally be a 10 minute walk. As they picked their way through the debris the car kept lifting off the ground because the wind was so strong. A tree did in fact strike the house shortly after they left, crashing into the bedroom where their daughter had been sleeping. Hugs were shared as they expressed with tears the gratitude they had for a restored house.

Grace

37 It was great to be able to work with the experts, Marlies and Florence in the kitchen.

Florence cooked a full menu of breakfast foods, a long and inclusive list. While Marlies laid out everything for breakfast, swept, wiped, scrubbed and scraped,   
38 and made those 99% perfect buns and chocolate cake, I made cheese cake for supper, granola and porridge for breakfast, puffed wheat squares and cookies for the lunches and carafes of coffee for the sites.

39 We were kept busy preparing the lunch and supper meals, complete with desserts. We washed, peeled and chopped vegetables, made salads, dressings and sauces, roasted and baked meats. Then we had a break and came back in time to finish up all the details, serve the meal, and clean it up. The camp kitchen was smaller but laid out well to handle 3 workers. Florence was excellent at planning interesting and varied meals that were nutritious, less expensive, creative and satisfying. We washed and washed dishes, utensils and pots. We washed down tables, counters, coolers and coffee makers, swept and vacuumed. We expanded the volume of food prepared as guests joined us. During the week Florence went shopping for supplies 3 times, as the group was larger than usual and we kept on running out of things. We shared our recipes, stories of our families and Christian walk and discussed past MDS experiences.

Susan Thiessen, the office manager, came daily to help us consume the leftovers and to see how we were doing. She reached out in friendship and cared about this aspect of the project.

The workers helped with the supper dishes and were so appreciative and complimentary. It was an upbuilding experience and worth repeating.

Marlies

40 This was my first experience with MDS. My wish was to work in the kitchen where I Knew what I was doing. I was surprised how early our day started, 6 am in the kitchen.  
41 The lunch items for bag lunches were set out, while we got breakfast going. After the workers left for the day, kitchen staff sat down to plan the day and menu items. Our very capable cook, Florence, had some things planned for the week.

42 Once she knew that i made buns, they came onto the menu several times.  
We had 3 to 4 staff so we did get some rest time after lunch. I enjoyed my time there but i missed going out to job sites to meet people and see the extent of damage. Next time maybe!

Heather

MDS Report for Heather, Ron, Dan, and Garth

43 This is Brianna’s house on Beacon Street in Sydney.  She’s a single mother with 2 children, a daughter and a son.   
44 Also occupying the house is a very large Bull Mastiff (which we steered clear of), an English Bulldog, 3 cats, and a bald Python.

45 Garth, Dan, and I spent the first 2-3 days drywalling two upstairs bedrooms  
46 over the lathe. It was suspected that there was asbestos in the ceiling insulation and plaster so we wore N95 or P100 masks every day. What a fashion statement!

47 There wasn’t a corner, wall, or ceiling that was square with anything else, and the angled roof lines didn’t help.. Not only that, ceiling joists were impossible to find!    
48 These areas were called Dalmations because the drywall was full of holes that looked like spots.   
49The drywall was stored on the main floor so we hauled 8 and 10 foot sheets up a narrow staircase with 2 corners to the second floor.   
50 The rest of our week was spent mudding, first with quick-set where needed, then with drywall mud and by the end, almost everything had one coat and some areas had two.   
More damp drywall was found on the main floor in the entrance and pantry, so Dan, Garth, and Ron removed it and once it dried out, they installed the new drywall.

52 Ron and Jared, who was a young man from Langley BC, spent most of their first day building the scaffold and the wooden scaffold on the porch roof.  There were too many overhead lines and/or ground slope to use a boom truck or scissor lift. The roof was a very steep 12/12 pitch, so they wore harnesses and were attached to an anchor point.  This safety measure proved important as Jared slipped twice and was caught by the harness before going over the edge.  Thursday and Friday, they helped us inside because of the rain.    
53 After a shorter work day Friday, it was clean up time!

Looking back over the week, we had great times getting to know our fellow MRMCers better, meeting up with MDSer’s we’d worked with before in Texas, Princeton, and Monte Lake.  We also met many new people and made new friends.  Hopefully we’ll run into them again at a future project.    
54 At every meal, we tried to sit by someone new, but with such a large MRMC group, it was hard to do so.  While the home owners and community in general appreciate MDS, and express it in various ways, we feel we receive more than we contribute.

Pam

55 I worked in 3 different homes in my week in Cape Breton. First at Doug’s house. This house was finished during the week and I was not able to attend the dedication, but it sounds like Gord & Ray attended. Doug’s house was unique in that all of it was renovated except the kitchen. It was also unique in that the homeowner had some rudimentary carpentry skills. The home owner was very motivated and if a project was suggested to him that wasn’t on the MDS work order (but would really help with making the place look finished), Doug tackled the job in the evenings or weekends while we weren’t there.  
56 For example, a very worn staircase had not been damaged in the hurricane so MDS wasn’t going to fix it. The staircase connected beautifully renovated rooms upstairs and down. The crew chief on our site helped Doug figure out what he could do to fix the staircase as well and have the whole project look seamless. It turned out great, and Doug was proud of his achievement.

Marianne

57 After changing into work clothes at the airport I was off to work with Neil, Audrey and Jane. Jane now lives in Ontario, but she grew up in Sydney Mines and gave us lots of details we wouldn’t know otherwise. This house is an example of the homes that people used to live in – small, not well insulated, but sturdy as it’s still standing.  
58 We were at Tera & Michael’s house in Glace Bay. We were doing painting both upstairs and on the main level, being very careful as there was no railing on the stairs and you had to duck at the top and twist to get around the sloped ceiling. This is the same house that Gord did flooring at on Thursday.

59 The rest of the week I was at the home of James and Susan, doing mostly painting and   
60 some cutting of molding and trim.  
It’s amazing what a fresh coat of lighter paint and some finishing will do!  
61 James & Susan were very concerned for the feral cats in the neighborhood, stopping by at least twice a day to feed them. They were very excited that they would be getting their home back within a week of us leaving, and were very thankful for all MDS had done for them.

Joy

62 I was part of an all-female team that worked on 4 different homes during the week. Our jobs included trim and touchup painting, as well as final cleanup in the 1st; demoing, insulating and installing a vapor barrier in an attic ceiling in 29 degree heat in the 2nd; mudding drywall in a small porch in the 3rd; and in the 4th, sanding, cleaning, painting the ceiling, along with reinstalling trim and an outside cleanup that included filling a dump trailer with material previously cleaned out of the house.

63 I really appreciated working with a female crew. Our team lead, Jan, is a retired career military individual who believes that women are far more capable in this work than they think. She was a really good mentor and knew how to encourage us less-experienced women to keep going to get the job done.

While this describes the physical nature of the restorative work we did, that was only part of it. Our job as MDS’ers also includes restoring hope for a more positive future for our home owners. I was honored to be a part of the dedication of our first client’s home.   
Our clients were just beaming when we got there. Included in the group were the home owners, representatives from the United Way and the provincial MLA’s office, as well as 8 of us MDS’ers. After a history of repairs, there were several presentations by us, followed by a house blessing and the return of the house keys, the homeowner’s response and a final song. The owners were so appreciative of the work, saying they thought originally that the house would be bulldozed because of the extent of the hurricane damage. While there was still work for them to do, they now had hope and a renewed energy to complete the job. They asked what they could do. MDS coordinator, Roman Heuft’s reply was for them to pray for us.

64 On our last day, it seemed initially that not much went right. Once the sanding and cleaning had been done, we realized we had forgotten our paint at the camp, so we had to go back. When we returned, our client was waiting for us. We spent the next 1 ½ hours with her as she shared about the various traumas she had experienced in her life even before Fiona and the long tough road she was on to get better. She continued to express how she had never shared so much before and how grateful she felt to know she was not alone. Following this, we discovered that the paint was the wrong color, necessitating a road trip for all of us (client included) to buy more paint. This enabled us to spend more time with her, listening and sharing. When our job was finally complete, our client beamed that she could now invite neighbors back into her house, with pride. She also shared that she was hopeful that she was now on the upside of her road to recovery.

Roman had told us previously that while we may have our plans, they may not always align with God’s plans. That day was truly a case of God’s plans being very different and far more important than the ones we started the day with.

Steve

65 In some ways, our experience was a counterpoint to that of the rest of the Mount Royal group that volunteered for MDS. We joined late. Much planning had already been done before we started attending here. Nonetheless, MDS seemed like a good idea so we decided to try it on our own, given that the week the bigger group went was already fully booked.

Ours was a much smaller group, a total of 17 instead of the 30+ that the others experienced. A big part of the difference was a change in the policy of Canadian Immigration. They declined a total of 72 visas for this year for Americans who wanted to come to help.

66 We were also an older group. While our youngest were 16, 20 & 43, the rest of us were in our 60’s and up, all the way to age 82. During one of our after-supper debriefings, one team made the recommendation that MDS try to recruit a younger cohort. They had calculated the average age of their roofing crew that day as 73. I too thought that was getting up there until I calculated the average age of the drywall boarding crew I had been on at 76.

67 So if something in these reports appeals to your sense of adventure, your own number of birthdays does not disqualify you. If you feel lacking in qualifications, I suggest you talk to Joy about learning new skills. And with a few days contemplation of our MDS experience, I’m thinking that the best part is that the contacts that quickly turned into friendships will be instantly renewed with a grin and a hug whenever we meet these people again.

68 Our volunteers went on two different weeks. On this final picture, our first group of volunteers are in the top picture and the second week’s volunteers are in the lower group.