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Gulf Coast residents who insisted on staying died in Hurricane Ike

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Associated Press

GALVESTON, Texas — The final hours brought the awful realization to victims of Hurricane Ike that they had waited too long. This storm wasn't like the others, the ones that left nothing worse than a harrowing tale to tell.

George Helmond, a hardy Galveston salt, watched the water rise and told a buddy: I was born on this island and I'll die on this island.

Gail Ettenger, a free spirit who adopted the Bolivar Peninsula as her home 15 years ago, told a friend in a last phone call: I really messed up this time.

Within hours, the old salt and the free spirit were gone as the powerful Category 2 hurricane wracked the Texas Gulf Coast on Sept. 13, flattening houses, obliterating entire towns and claiming at least 33 lives.

The dead — as young as 4, as old as 79 — included lifelong Galvestonians firmly rooted on the island and transplants drawn by the quiet of coastal living.

Hundreds of people remain missing three weeks after Ike's assault on Texas. Local and city officials are no longer keeping their own count of missing residents, and the estimate varies wildly from one agency to another.

According to the nonprofit Laura Recovery Center, about 300 people are missing. Of those, about 200 from Galveston. However, the number "goes up and down by the minute" as people call in to remove or add names, cautioned executive director Bob Walcutt.

Immediately after the hurricane, Galveston officials conducted door-to-door searches for survivors and possible victims. But the city is no longer taking an active role in the search, city spokeswoman Alicia Cahill said.

Instead, search teams of sher-

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iff's deputies, volunteer firefighters and special K-9 search and recovery units have been using airboats and all-terrain vehicles to sift through debris fields, tangled and fetid marshlands, and the rubble left behind by Ike.

"We are definitely looking and are going to do anything we can to find them, but there may not be any answers to be given," said Galveston County emergency management spokesman Colin Rizzo. "There are definitely going to be people from Hurricane Ike that are never found."

Gail Ettenger stumbled upon her house in Gilchrist by accident. But once she saw the site on the bay side of Bolivar Peninsula, she knew she would never leave.

Ettenger, a native of New Jersey, instilled the house with her own energy and style. The 58-year-old's garden bloomed with vibrant birds-of-paradise.

Ettenger, a chemist at Exxon-Mobil, didn't evacuate, reasoning that her house had weathered Hurricane Rita in 2005 without a problem. She also did not want to leave Reba, her 11-year-old Great Dane, who could no longer climb into Ettenger's Jeep.

Hours before Ike made landfall, Ettenger knew she had made the wrong choice. She called JoAnne Burks, her neighbor and close friend, and described the water pushing up under her feet, the propane tanks and other household items drifting by her windows, and wondered which would float better: her Jeep or her house.

Burks spent the next 10 days searching for her friend, calling local, county and state officials without success. She tried the American Red Cross, FEMA, even private investigators.

Ettenger's body was found Sept. 23, tossed on a debris field in a Chambers County marsh about 10 miles from her house.



At 72, George Helmond had ridden out many storms and thought he could take on Ike, too, neighbor Don Hanson said. "A lot of old Galvestonians are like that."

Helmond had been one of the first residents of Sydnor Lane, which overlooks a bayou on one side and a golf course on the other. A retired electrician, Helmond was a die-hard fisherman, a dove hunter and straight-shooter intensely proud of his Galveston roots.

Around 10 a.m., Helmond called Hanson, who had already left, to say the water had already slipped over the road and toward his house. The street — the only way out of the neighborhood — was already impassable.

At 9:30 p.m., Helmond and Hanson talked for the last time. Hanson begged his friend to grab a life vest at his house or to seek shelter there.

But at 2:30 a.m., for reasons no one knows, Helmond got in his pickup truck and drove off at the height of Ike's fury.

Neighbors found Helmond's body the next day inside the truck, which had slammed into the white golf course fence. The windshield was shattered.

Helmond's home suffered little damage. The water had reached above the first-floor garage, but not inside the house.

"If he had stayed home and hadn't gone out, he'd be OK, but he panicked," said Hanson, 66. "Life goes on, but I will miss a good friend and I will think about him."

How many times have we heard this?
At Naples we've had 9 Cat 2 and 10 Cat 3 Hurricanes in 150 years.

He didn't have a plan!