

Storm Stories

Meet Anthony & Marglen Tanner



by Sharleen Nelson

In the wee morning hours of August 24, 1992, a raging category 5 squall made landfall in south Florida's Miami-Dade County. With 165-mph winds and gusts reaching 200 mph, the storm peeled rooftops from houses and overturned entire buildings. Utility poles, traffic lights, trees, and other fragments were turned into ferocious airborne missiles as the wind lifted them up and hurled them through the sky; boats and cars were tossed about as if they were toys. Residents described the leveled and debris-strewn landscape in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew—one of the deadliest storms to hit Florida this century—as though a nuclear bomb had hit.

Marathon coach owner Anthony Tanner, who owned a local construction and rock mine business, drove to the scene of Hurricane Andrew to see if he could help with debris cleanup. "Because I was in the construction business at the time and business was a little slow, I was more than happy to help." The hurricane killed 65

people and left approximately 160,000 homeless. Most of the damage was in south Florida, where 126,000 buildings were destroyed or damaged; 9,000 mobile homes were also demolished, leaving an estimated 6 million tons of debris! As a result of the destruction, Anthony was able to procure a few contracts, get his heavy equipment in gear, and round up subcontractors to get started. What he didn't know at the time was that this would be the beginning of his career as a debris response and removal contractor. Anthony would later become associated with the "big six" debris removal contractors in the country.

Anthony's wife Marglen also played a vital role in the business. While Anthony obtained the contracts, Marglen took care of the mountains of paperwork and required documentation that follows every disaster, including the hiring of subcontractors and dealing with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and numerous other government agencies. The

Tanner's daughter Angela was involved in the business as well.

From that first hurricane in 1992 until they retired in 2005, the Tanners worked nonstop at the scene of nearly 100 disasters—ranging from hurricanes and tornados to wildfires and ice storms. "From 1992 on, we went from disaster to disaster," Anthony said. "Before we knew it, disasters were consuming all of our time."

Unfortunately, Mother Nature doesn't take a regularly scheduled season off, which frequently meant the Tanners had to drop everything at a moment's notice and rush to the scene of a disaster. "One year I was baking Christmas cookies and Anthony came in and said, 'How long before you'll be ready to go?,' and I said, 'Go where? That's how it always was—go *where?*'" The Tanners spent a significant amount of time watching "The Weather Channel" for information about gathering storms. "A lot of times you can tell if a storm is in the making because you've got cold pressure coming down from the north and warm pressure coming up from the gulf, and when they collide you get thunderstorms and tornados. When you go further north where it's cold enough, you get ice storms," said Anthony. "So when we would see a hurricane coming and we'd have some time, we would try to visit the areas that were in harm's way ahead of the storm, especially if we had a pre-position contract there."

As disaster preparedness has improved over the years, the majority of contracts are now secured long before a disaster strikes. Estab-



lishing contracts in advance, known as "pre-position contracts," is a more efficient method of responding to regions where local companies might be too incapacitated to get the job done. "Pre-position contracts made things flow a lot easier," Anthony said. "Many times you would have limited communication and you may not have electricity—the heaters don't work, or nothing works—so you have to be prepared for that type of disaster, where everybody knows what everyone else is doing in advance."

About 10 years ago when the Tanners responded to North Dakota's Red River flooding, they found themselves adrift. During a disaster, hotels and motels usually open first to emergency crews from the power company, the Red Cross, the Army Corps of Engineers, and FEMA, as well as to dislocated victims. "We had to drive more than 100 miles one way to an Indian Casino to have a place to stay. And then we had to drive back and forth to do our faxing and bring in bids," Marglen said. So Anthony called a friend who was selling his Marathon. The coach, the





first of four they would later purchase, played a significant role in their business, allowing them to be a fully mobile operation with the capability to take their business virtually anywhere and to remain on-site for extended periods of time. In addition, the company purchased a 54-foot tractor/trailer that served as a portable office. After that, the Tanners were sold on Marathons. "The only custom coach we've ever had has been a Marathon," said Marglen. Before they knew it, they had started a trend. "Several of the big contractors—pretty much all of them now—have coaches like ours because they ran into the same problems we did," Anthony said. "I tell you when you go out there and there's no power and no water, after a few days it's rough, but with the coach we could make it for a week because of the holding tank."

Over the years, Anthony and Marglen have spent anywhere from a few days to several months parked in RV parks, and stadium and big-box retailer parking lots using their generator to keep everything in the office and coach

operating. The coach became a functional and comfortable home away from home. "We had a house, but we didn't use it much," Marglen said. "It was a very tough life. It was 7 days a week, 18 to 20 hours a day, but we all did it and hung in there together."

The Tanners concede that they experienced many riveting moments, such as the wildfires that engulfed Florida in 1998 and an entire county had to be evacuated, and the 1999 tornado that hit Norman Oklahoma with the strongest winds ever recorded at 518 mph. "It pulled the asphalt right off the road!" Anthony said. "That's the worst I've ever seen. It took everything in its path."

Many times, particularly during a storm season, disasters overlapped. "If there was another disaster, Marglen and I would beat it and go to that one to get things going," Anthony said. "There were a couple of times when we got set up and another tornado came through the same area and so, we were right there in it," said Marglen. The 2004 Atlantic hurricane season was an extremely busy time for the Tanners because that year Florida was hit by four hurricanes and a tropical storm. Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne hit the east coast and followed a nearly identical path across the state, while Charley came ashore on the gulf coast and Ivan slammed the Florida Panhandle. "We had some 48 contractors and pre-position activated contracts, and 10,000 people working," Anthony said.

Working in close proximity to so many storms put the Tanners directly in harm's way a time or two. "We were pretty close to two or three of



the hurricanes and several tornados,” Marglen said. For example, in Key West they set up as close as they reasonably could without putting themselves at risk, but because hurricanes are notoriously unpredictable, when the storm suddenly turned, it was headed directly for them. “We were parked in a Walmart parking lot that was under construction,” she said. “We let all the air out of the airbags to get as close to the ground as we could and we tried to keep the front of the bus facing into the wind.”

Scary, life-threatening moments notwithstanding, arriving in the aftermath of a disaster almost always meant dealing with highly distraught people. Although it could take months to completely clear an area of storm debris, getting the roads open within a day of the event was a main priority. “The first thing we’d do is go in and clear the roads so the emergency crews could get through and open at least one lane of the road. Then as quick as you can you get the entire road open,” Anthony said. “Sometimes people are trapped or hurt, so it’s important for the emergency crews to get through and get people out, get them to a hospital or wherever they need to go, or to get food and water to them.” The Tanners always arrived at the scene as soon as it was safe to do so, yet even with the best pre-planning and preparation, disaster survivors who have lost property, possessions, and loved ones are naturally in a state of shock. “We had to treat these people with kid gloves because they were very distraught,” said Marglen. “I think the problem was that most people didn’t know what to do or what to expect *after*

the storm. So we’d try to explain it to them.”

In between disasters, the Tanners conducted training sessions—meeting with the city or county department heads of road maintenance, public works, fire departments, and police departments, etc., to go over the process of what to do after a storm or disaster hits, outlining the procedures for documentation of paperwork, and covering the tracking methods used from the beginning when the debris is picked up, all the way to disposal issues at temporary processing sites. “The United States is a lot more prepared today than it was in 1992 when Andrew hit the town of Homestead,” said Anthony. “Back then, many of the cities and counties had no clue what to do,” Marglen said, “but now with state and FEMA training and awareness, government agencies are much, much better prepared to handle disasters.”

The Tanners retired from the contracting business in January of 2005, eight months before catastrophic Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana. “They called me several times,” Anthony said, “but I’d had enough in 2004 and I just wasn’t up to going back.” Nonetheless, after years of perpetual mobility and excitement, retirement wasn’t exactly in the cards for Anthony. “I guess I got bored and bought an RV park,” he said, “right here in Inglis, Florida.” The Tanners bought the River Lodge RV Resort near the Withlacoochee River and Crystal River along Florida’s “Nature Coast.” Because the resort

had been closed for 16 years, the Tanners have been busy updating the electrical and adding Internet and TV services to the existing 150 sites. They also purchased 170 acres behind it with plans to add an additional 500 sites, a golf course, and other amenities.

"The original 150 sites are done, but it'll probably be a year before we open the other 500," Anthony said. "I need to be here for the expansion, so right now we're staying close to home and not traveling as much as we'd like."

When they aren't busy with the RV park, the Tanners try to find time to get away, but now, rather than using their coach as a home base at a disaster scene, it's strictly for leisurely pursuits. Their last road trip in 2007 brought the



Tanners through Oregon on their way to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to pick up their 13-year-old grandson. "We came through to get our other coach worked on, which was a big mistake," said Anthony. The Tanners ended up buying a brand new coach, their fourth. "We'd only had the other one for about eight months," he said, "but this one had bunks in it and we didn't have time to wait and get that one fixed, so we traded it in."

From there, the adventure-seeking Tanners headed out for the rugged state of Alaska to break in their new coach. "I told Anthony, 'I can't believe we're taking this BRAND NEW coach to Alaska!'" said Marglen. "Other people buy older coaches, but off we go in our brand new coach to Alaska. We had heard about the roads and rocks and everything, but it was good. The coach came through with flying colors."

After so many years spent working and living in coaches, their coach truly feels like a second home. "If we spend the night anywhere that we don't have the coach we end up with only half the stuff we're supposed to have," Marglen said. The Tanners also enjoy the ease and convenience of having Marathon's Florida facility close by. "We like the crew down there and we're only about an hour away, so it's handy," she said. "Every time we come home we just unload the few things that we need, and take it down there with our 'to-do' list."

Florida's service department also proved indispensable during the years the Tanners spent working disasters. "They were always wonderful about taking care of us when we were doing the storm stuff because they knew we'd have to come and go very quickly," Marglen said. "They always went out of their way to get us going." This is not surprising; it's the same principled approach that guided the Tanners as they traveled from one disaster to another—to help people get going again. •