

Helicopter Pilot Undertakes Rescue Missions in Hurricane Helene Aftermath

Gary Heavin was able to rescue a heart patient in need of medical care, and her dog, by landing in her backyard.

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Gary Heavin donates his time and effort to rescue operations in western North Carolina after Hurricane Helene. Courtesy of Gary Heavin



By [Matt McGregor](#)

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On his first rescue mission as a helicopter pilot bringing supplies and transporting people out of the destruction left by Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina, Gary Heavin was sent to rescue a woman and her two children. Upon arrival, he discovered they had already drowned; their bodies had just been discovered.

In response to Heavin's question about their age, a local fire department official said he didn't know, but in the mother's automobile were two children's car seats.

"That was just the first day," Heavin told The Epoch Times.

Heavin and his wife, from Gatesville, Texas, joined in Operation Airdrop's Hurricane Helene rescue mission based at the Hickory Regional Airport in Hickory, North Carolina.

Operation Airdrop is a private volunteer effort organized "to respond swiftly and effectively in times of crisis" to ensure "that essential

supplies reach those in need when traditional ground support is compromised,” its [website](#) states.

Heavin flew his Bell 505 helicopter over an unwelcoming terrain of destruction in search of coordinates leading him to those in need, bringing them supplies such as food, water, and medicine, and sometimes picking people up to bring them back to the airport where medical care was available.

Heavin said that at the beginning, more than 50 private helicopters were operating out of the airport base, all run by volunteers and flying out to community fire stations where supplies were distributed.

“It was a thing of beauty,” he said. “People were able to communicate and get out where they needed to be, rescuing those who were trapped.”

There were an average of four missions a day, which took up to 10 hours, with seven of those hours spent in a helicopter.

It wasn't his first rodeo, he said. He and his wife are the co-founders of women's fitness franchise Curves. After selling the business 12 years ago, they devoted their time to philanthropic efforts, such as responding to the earthquake in Haiti in 2021 and Hurricane Matthew

in 2016.

Helene, a Category 4 hurricane, dropped 40 trillion gallons of water on multiple southeastern states from Sept. 24 to 29. Winds reached 140 mph. The death count is currently at 227, but officials expect that number to rise.

‘Thousands of Stories’

There are thousands of stories, he said, conveying a litany of needs.

Some people don’t have access to insulin. At one point, wasps and bees were stirred up from their ground nests by the destruction and began stinging people and their pets. As a result, there was a [need for EpiPens](#).

Heavin was able to rescue a heart patient in need of medical care, and her dog, by landing in her backyard. They rescued a cancer patient who was undergoing chemo treatment, taking her back to the airport where a hangar had been turned into a medical clinic.





An aerial view of post-Hurricane Helene flood in western North Carolina. Courtesy of Gary Heavin

A Private, Volunteer Operation

Heavin emphasized that the operation was wholly private, without any assistance from the federal government.

Though volunteers such as himself were willing to pay for their own fuel, a GoFundMe page was started that raised up to \$500,000 for Operation Airdrop, he said.

“It’s a reminder that the government is a bureaucracy,” he said. “It’s slow, inefficient, and broke.”

One of Heavin’s jobs was to take Starlink satellite internet service donated by Starlink founder Elon Musk

to fire stations throughout western North Carolina. He said FEMA eventually confiscated those and other supplies to control how they were being distributed, which he said bottlenecked the operation.

FEMA didn't respond to The Epoch Times' request for comment by publication time, but in an Oct. 7 [statement](#), it said that federal support for Hurricane Helene survivors has surpassed \$210 million.

“FEMA remains focused on coordinating comprehensive recovery efforts across the Southeast, mobilizing resources and personnel to provide immediate and long-term support to those affected,” the agency said.

Heavin tells people who are looking to donate funds to give to Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse headquartered in Boone, North Carolina. Based on his experience in disaster relief, it's been the most effective organization when it comes to using the money to distribute supplies.

When asked what inspired him and his wife to donate their time and resources to those in need, he said he lives by the biblical code, “To whom much has been given, much is expected.”

Samantha Flom contributed to this

report.



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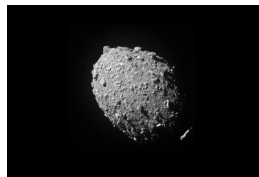
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