

Good Morning America's 'Asheville

Rising' live broadcast raises \$2.7 million for WNC

Story by Tiana Kennell, Asheville Citizen Times • •



ASHEVILLE - ABC's Good Morning America, based in New York City, brought its live broadcast to Asheville for a special edition, "Asheville Rising," on the six-month anniversary of Tropical Storm Helene.

The Category 4 Hurricane Helene arrived in Western North Carolina as a tropical storm on Sept. 27 and has been declared the deadliest and costliest since Hurricane Katrina. More than 100 lives in WNC and more than 200 lives across the South were lost due to Helene.

On March 27, nearly 200 Western North Carolina residents, businesses and nonprofit organization leaders, staff and volunteers attended the early morning show, hosted at Highland Brewing Company and BeLoved Asheville in East Asheville.

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GMA hosts Robin Roberts, Sam Champion and Ginger Zee shared stories of strength, hope and resilience, and community members were honored for their heroic response and continued relief work.

Highland Brewing, Asheville's pioneer brewery, which opened in 1994, and BeLoved Asheville, a grassroots nonprofit, were early responders, including acting as food, water and supply donation and distribution centers.

"It's a surreal honor," said Leah Wong Ashburn, president, CEO and family-owner of the brewery. "We know that we've done good work and we're proud of that. We also are aware that we're surrounded by heroes in Western North Carolina and people are still enduring pain and hardships from this storm."

In collaboration with local affiliate WLOS, the episode illustrated the widespread damage and rebuilding process of hard-hit communities, including Chimney Rock and Swannanoa.

Zee, a meteorologist, provided live updates on the wildfires blanketing the Carolinas, spurred by dry air and Helene debris, and the weather prediction tracking a needed rain system to arrive over the weekend.

During "Asheville Rising," the tone was reverence, positivity and celebration, as it brought awareness to communities that will need support long after Helene. GMA announced that \$2,734,981 million in donations were raised for WNC recovery, presented to recipients during the two-hour broadcast.

A QR code was shared on air for viewers to donate additional funds from home.

Asheville is open'

One of the messages throughout the episode was that "Asheville is open. " Visitors were encouraged to return to Asheville and WNC. Helene hit the region at the beginning of "leaf season" — the peak time of the year when tourists travel to the area to view the leaves changing colors in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

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Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority Board reported an estimated 74% decline in lodging sales last October compared to the same month in 2023. Explore Asheville, a tourism and convention agency, and community partners have led a marketing campaign, “Be Part of the Comeback,” to drive tourism since November.

Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority President and CEO Vic Isley said in an email that GMA’s coverage shows that “Asheville is still stunning and still standing.”

“With progress being made every day, we wanted to show the world that we’re open, and that visiting our deeply rooted, creative community means more than ever,” Isley said.

Kaye Bentley, owner of Asheville Rooftop Bar Tours and a GMA audience member, said her business suffered significantly and is still recovering. As the weather warms this spring, the tour company has received more calls and bookings, but she predicted a slow and steady return to tourism.

“Our business, like a lot of others, are still trying to find our way forward,” Bentley said. “We’ve had a tourism economy for a long time, and it is truly crucial to our community and to our workers and the folks who live here and call this home.”

‘Asheville Rising’ donations

Donations were allocated to residents, nonprofits and other community groups, including BeLoved Asheville, Southside Community Farm, and the River Arts District Artists Foundation.

Jeremy Dotts, Mountain Heritage High School instructor in Burnsville, and the 18 senior carpentry students were commended for building modular homes for displaced residents.

The school partnered with Rebuilding Hollers to support devastated communities in Yancey and Mitchell Counties.

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Rebuilding Hollers received \$15,000 from 84Lumber and \$15,000 from Armstrong Flooring. Founder Stephanie Johnson said flooring and lumber were critical for the organization to complete its 389 projects.

Brittany Killian, a Cane Creek Middle School staff member, was named a “Hometown Hero” for her assistance responding to Helene and received a surprise gift of a 2024 Toyota RAV4 XLE.

Highland Brewing shared it would donate 100% of sales from its Highland Haze, a juicy 7.4% hazy IPA, through August to the North Carolina Hospitality Workers Relief Fund, earmarked for WNC, with a goal of \$10,000. Skyland Distributing will match the sales amounts. Highland Haze is available at Highland Brewing taprooms and through its four-state distribution market, comprised of the Carolinas, Tennessee and Georgia.

“It’s well known that neighbors help neighbors, so when people come to Asheville and spend money, that money tends to stay here,” Leah Wong Ashburn said. “That support will keep giving when people come here because we’re all here to keep this entire place thriving after the storm.”

Total giving:

- \$2 million and \$150,000 cash and \$50,000 in products, Lowe's.
- \$10,000 Starbucks Foundation.
- \$50,000 Food Lion.
- \$20,000 Bojangles Foundation.
- \$17,981, Red Ventures.
- \$30,000 in laptops, HP.
- 100 tablets, estimated value \$25,000, Samsung.
- \$270,000 of online therapy and mental health resources, Better Help.
- \$28,000 value of car giveaway, Hertz.
- \$15,000, 84Lumber.
- \$15,000 Armstrong Flooring.

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