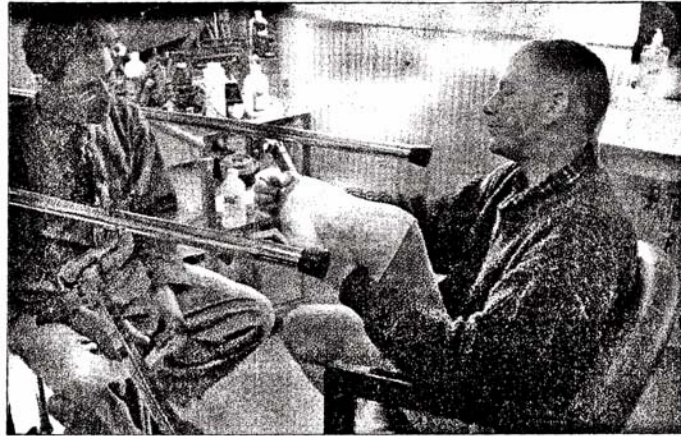


## Nightmare of mud haunts mountain hollow

He'd waited months to see the "stub doctor," he joked of the guy fitting him for a new left leg. The original was amputated after being crushed by a 600-pound wood stove blown on top of him inside his house in Peeks Creek, a tiny mountain community virtually wiped out in mid-September by Hurricane Ivan. Five people died.

Three months later, Randy Downs, 53, sat inside an Asheville prosthetic center, trying to move on. The center's president, Gregory Straub, told Downs he was



**Randy Downs, who lost a leg when Hurricane Ivan hit his mountain community, is fitted for a new limb by Gregory Straub, an Asheville, N.C., prosthetist.**

DREW JUBERA / Staff

lucky to have a below-the-knee amputation ("You can do real well"), offered a selection of liners for his still swollen stump ("Feel this," he said of some custom urethane from Ireland), and then noted that "stump" was no longer appropriate usage ("Residual limb" is what we call it now). "You've boosted my morale 500 percent," Downs told Straub, even as he caught himself trying to put a sock back on a foot no longer there.

As Downs rolled through the lobby later in his wheelchair, a youngster pointed at his empty pants leg and yelled, "That man only has one leg!"

Downs did his best to smile. "Yeah," he said, "but they're going to give me a magic one that makes me play basketball better than before!"

The kid just stared. Outside, Downs lit a cigarette.

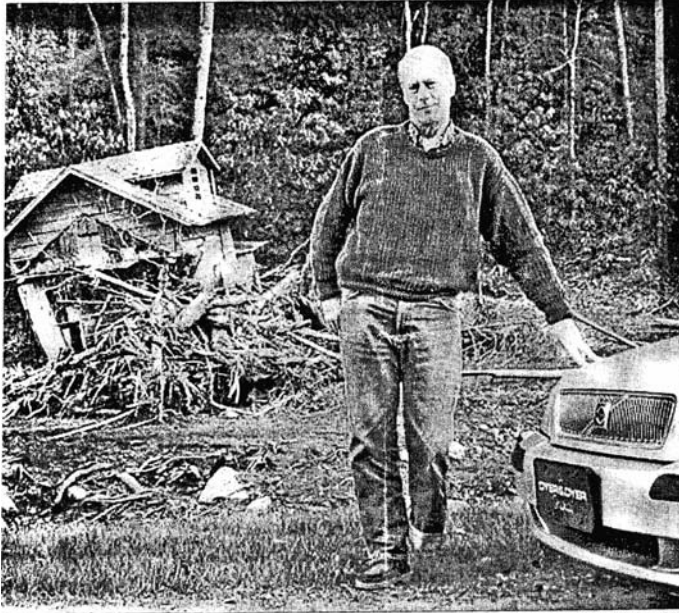
"I'm not real thrilled about being a one-legged man," he said. "But, look, I'm a success story. I'm moving into a new house. I got a new leg comin' in."

Downs is one of dozens of survivors gamely trying to move on from the disaster at Peeks Creek, a tragic microcosm of the reach, wrath and fallout of one of the worst hurricane seasons in U.S. history.

In the remote hollow of about 30 houses, almost half the homes were destroyed. Five people were killed, including an unborn baby and a couple that had fled Ivan in Florida. The mother-to-be, who was seven months pregnant, also lost a leg. And a 3-year-old son. And her mother-in-law.

"its total devastation," said Jim Cabe, a Franklin lawyer representing about 10 Peeks Creek residents threatening a lawsuit because the insurance claims on their demolished houses have been denied. "Financially, emotionally – there's been a loss of life, limb—just about any way you can look at human nature, it's been devastating."

Months after the rest of the country has largely forgotten the four catastrophic storms that clobbered the Southeast this year, people are still picking up the pieces. Combined damage in the hardest hit states—Florida, Alabama, North Carolina and Georgia – is estimated at more than \$20 billion...It'll never be the same, say those still



Photos by DREW JUBERA / Staff

living amid the downed trees, 16-ton boulders that were tossed about and splintered houses piled hundreds of feet from where they once stood. Not only are houses gone, but in many cases the land they sat on has been washed and blown away.

“It’s kind of sad right now,” said Nellie Dills Carpenter, 76, born and raised in the hollow, toting a long-handled ax in front of her house to clear the brush.

While her house was spared—as were most houses on the same side of the creek, while nearly all those on the other side

were demolished—she lost a nephew in the storm. He was found dead four miles down the Cullasaja River, into which Peek Creek empties.

Carpenter looked at the creek that once ran almost level with the road. Now it cuts deep into the mountainside. Some people call it Peek Gorge.

“It’s not going to be the same place anymore,” she said.

– **The Atlanta Journal-Constitution** by Drew Jubara