Over the last week, I have worked with the leadership of our town to restore the services that Hurricane Helene took down, and I have seen a lot. The 20-inch rainfall and the high winds took a toll on the town. Huge trees that had withstood a hundred years of summer storms, freezing winter winds, and torrential rains finally lost the battle to stand fast, and they fell by the hundreds. Roads were blocked, power lines ripped off their poles, and rising waters pressed dams to their limits.

As the winds howled and rain pummeled homes, fire and rescue squads braved the elements to retrieve stranded residents, block off dangerous areas, and ensure the safety of the people.

After the rains stopped and the winds abated, the damage was clear to us all. The fallen trees, homes damaged, water gushing over dams and down waterfalls in a quality and rage not seen by anyone in lifetimes remembered. Despite the wind and rain, the town stood, battered but not broken.

Before the sky would clear, the process of rebuilding had to start damage assessment, emergency repairs, and most communications with the residents to first inform them of the weather situation and the recovery operations, but more so to instill confidence through commutations that those that were capable of helping were doing so. Those in need would soon be helped.

In the darkness of night, with the lights out and Main Street deserted, I took my Jeep into town, not knowing what to expect. Too often these days, we see the worse of mankind in these dangerous times. Those taking advantage of the darkness, seeking something that is not theirs, smashing, grabbing, and skulking off into the night with their ill-gotten gain. What I saw was a strange calmness: rain falling less than before, winds not so terrifying, and a sleeping town, doors and windows secured, and businesses patiently waiting for the return to normal.

As nature began to back away, withdrawing her angry winds and rains, more people emerged. Friends knocked on doors, checking on neighbors, the sound of chainsaws echoing through the mountain streets, filling the air with the sounds of recovery as they cleared the fallen woods from entranceways and roads. Just regular people doing whatever they could to assist each other. With every hour, more heroes emerged, the grocery store opened in the dark with no power, and people shopped the shelves using flashlights to guide their way to needed food. A restaurant opens its doors to feed its employees and families, then serves the people of the town. Volunteers gather food and supplies and then distribute them to those in need. A Town staff working 24 hours a day, staffing a shelter, and providing need status through all methods of communication.

As telephone lines and cell phones began to return, mayors of neighboring towns were communicating to assist each other. Power crews from Connecticut drove hundreds of miles to assist our town in rebuilding the power grid. During the Worst of Times, it was the Best of Times.

Our little community is back. The power is on, and businesses are reopened; the Blue Bike is serving breakfast, the coffee group is back meeting at Caulder’s Coffee shop, and Bryson's food store, although it lost so much due to spoilage, is open and serving the needs of the town, the Ugly Dog restaurant is still open, still serving, and even has the game on the big screen. The first responders are getting a well-deserved break; they and the town can take pride in their stellar, professional performance.

It is in times like these that we must pause and reflect on what we have, and for what we are grateful. It is also a time to hope that the spirit of goodwill, cooperation, and fellowship that emerged during this crisis will endure. Let us continue to embrace what we have in common, not what divides us, and remember the lessons of resilience and unity that this experience has taught us.

Mankind is at its best when things are at their worst. Thus ends the lesson.