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THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM

HOBOKEN STORIES:

REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

INTERVIEWEE: ALLISON OUTWATER

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTINE ZIEGLER McPHERSON

LOCATION: HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM

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CZ: I just want to ask you some background questions. If you could state your name.

AO: Allison Outwater.

CZ: And where are you from?

AO: I'm from Wall Township, New Jersey.

CZ: And how long have you lived in Hoboken?

AO: Two years and about three months.

CZ: What do you do for a living?

AO: I'm a student.

CZ: Where?

AO: Stevens Institute of Technology.

CZ: And what do you study?

AO: I study civil engineering.

CZ: And what year are you?

AO: I'm A-3 out of four.

CZ: Thank you very much for your time in answering these questions for us. I'm wondering when, about, did you first year about Hurricane Sandy?

AO: I heard about Hurricane Sandy about a week before it hit. I keep up on the weather a lot, from the beach, so we watch the weather a lot at home. And while I was looking on Facebook and different websites that I use, I saw both the hurricane forming, as we as when the week went on, the front and the full moon and everything -- as I was watching I realized it was going to be a really big storm, even though everyone else said it wasn't.

CZ: And where were you Monday night, when the storm hit?

AO: I was in the house I was living in on campus. I was hanging out with friends, went back to my dorm, knowing I was going to be locked in there for a few days. I settled down and decided to catch up on some [unclear].

CZ: Why did you decide to stay, versus evacuate?

AO: I'm from central Jersey. I live at the beach, and it is safer for me to be up here than it is for me to go home. My parents are first-responders. I knew if I was home I would be out with them, in the midst of everything. They were out during Irene, when I stayed up here. We decided it was safer, since I was up on a hill, for me to stay at Stevens, and that way, when classes resumed, I would still be able to be here, in the event that I couldn't get "out of harm."

CZ: What do your parents do? You said they're first-responders.

AO: My parents have full-time jobs, but my dad's part of a volunteer first-aid squad and fire department. My mom may as well be. She volunteers with them enough. Our whole family works with them a lot. It's a small town, but they're a water-rescue squad in that town. Very few people are trained on it, so during hurricanes and floods they're the town that has to respond to quite a few towns. So they just kind of jump right in.

CZ: So how exactly did you become coordinator of volunteers for the city?

AO: It's still not fully known. I actually don't fully know how it happened. But on Tuesday morning we were allowed out of our dorms -- or Wednesday, when we were allowed out of our dorms -- I lived in an all-girls' house, and I just had to get out of there. I could not be around all the girliness anymore, so I went for a walk

around campus. My phone still had great cell service, so I was looking on Facebook to see what was happening at home. I was seeing all the pictures posted of all the devastation. I saw Hoboken on the Facebook page, and the Twitter post: "If you want to volunteer, come down to City Hall." I didn't give it a second thought; I went right down. I carried buckets of water to Marine View, up and down eight, ten flights of stairs. I went back to City Hall that night, and was going around with a few people, to try and get food to bring to the shelters. They then told me that they needed someone to work the call center, from 2:00 A.M. until 6:00 A.M., and 6:00 A.M. to 9:00 A.M. So I signed up for the shift, because I was available. I figured I didn't have classes. It didn't matter if I didn't sleep. I wasn't going to be doing anything anyway.

I went down, and toward the end of my shift more people were coming toward the volunteer center. All these volunteers were coming in to work for the day. I had planned to stay and volunteer. Someone in the call center asked me to start walking people upstairs. I knew how to get upstairs, so I started walking people upstairs. Then, as the day went on, there would be assigned jobs, and people would ask me to write down everyone's name and cellphone number, and their email address. So I was collecting people's information. Then they were asking me to send people out to do all sorts of different things. As that went on, they just kept giving me more and more jobs. I was just someone who went to volunteer that day, but I knew how to get upstairs from downstairs, and volunteered to bring them upstairs to where they needed to put them. Then they just started assigning me jobs. Later that day I was given a lot more jobs. Then Thursday morning I ended up being the volunteer coordinator. I had the Chief of Staff of the city come in and tell me that was my title, that's what I was doing, and to figure it out. That's basically how it happened.

CZ: So what kind of support, assistance, direction did you get from the mayor, from the city council -- ?

AO: I actually got a lot of direction from them. They would assign me jobs to assign other people. They would come and find me and say, "We need ten volunteers here. We've got these Buffalo trucks to go out. As time went on, I got to know more and more of, "These need to be done repeatedly. These are what supplies we have." So it was less and less of me having to go to them and say, "What do you need?" and more and more we were figuring it out as we went. I had a bunch of students who came down, a few that I knew, a few that other people knew, who were really, really amazing. It was about ten or so of us every day who worked. We would just come in, and we figured it all out. At the beginning, I really didn't know Hoboken. I didn't really know much about the city or what was going on, but I knew that the National Guard had just gotten there. I knew that the city was still flooded, and I knew they were just trying to get people into building, to check on people, and that's what we started with.

CZ: Now where you were living on campus -- did that have power? Or was it out of power?

AO: I actually had power. I lived on Castle Point Terrace, and my house never lost power. I didn't really get to use the power very much because I was always down at City Hall. But we never lost power. So it was good, but I didn't really get to use it. At night I could charge my phone.

CZ: How did you communicate with other people in the city -- the mayor of the city, council people, the chief of staff?

AO: Well, they ended up sending radios, multiple radios, throughout the day, to communicate with the head of CERT, Lou Casciano, and OEM and some people, or I would -- as the students who worked with me got better and better, they were running a lot and doing the repetitive stuff, and I would just run off and find

who I needed to find, to get permission for stuff, or questions answered. My cellphone also had exceptional service, so we used that.

CZ: How was that?

AO: I don't know.

CZ: What kind of cellphone do you have?

AO: I have an iPhone 4. It's really not that good. It's just Verizon, but for some reason I had service. My parents at home had service, too, so I guess our plan ended up being useful. I'm never changing my phone because of that. But my cellphone was mostly used to communicate with volunteers throughout the city. Plenty of them had cell service; they were able to text in or call in to me, and my phone became one of the few emergency hotlines of the city. We only had one phone that was working for a while in the call center, and that was strictly for call-in emergencies. So my phone became, when a volunteer needed something, or to give out to people.

CZ: I'm curious about the call center -- given that so few people had phone service. Exactly how did that work?

AO: A lot of land lines, even if the power goes out, they still work. And if people had cellphones that were working, they were able to call in. Or, if they could find someone with a cellphone that worked, they could call in, and that was really some of the only communication they had throughout the city, because radios were down, communicators were down, everything -- the ward police department, the fire department, the first-aid squad -- everything.

CZ: I was wondering what experience you had before this, in organizing large groups of people.

AO: I was a student leader on campus, and I've always done stuff with my parents. I'm part of a service fraternity. I was in charge of some service events, but it's thirty-forty people. I didn't really have that much experience beforehand. The whole thing was a learning process for me. When you've got 200 people standing in front of you -- it just came naturally to me that I just had to get them jobs, get them out, and make sure that everyone in the city was as okay as possible, and do as much as we could for people. So it just kind of came. I have a large voice, so I was able to project well. I wasn't afraid to tell people to move. I didn't have any experience, I just learned as I went.

CZ: What kind of issues did you face in trying to organize people? And did these get resolved relatively quickly as the week went on, or did they continue throughout the couple of weeks after the storm?

AO: We had a lot of different stuff happen. We'd have crazy people come in and start yelling at us. They'd be angry about stuff because we were who they could get to. We were based in the court room, and when people came into City Hall, they couldn't get to the mayor's office, they couldn't get to OEM (there was security) there, but they could get into where all the volunteers were going, and we had a lot of people come in and yell at us. We were all just like, "We're students. You can yell at us all you want. We can't do anything." That never fully got resolved. Eventually, as the police were outside, they were able to push some of those people away. Saturday and Sunday we had so many volunteers you couldn't fit them in the building. We were running out of jobs to give to some people. At first we had all the donations brought into City Hall. Well, we had so many donations, we didn't know what to do with them. Luckily, that was able to be resolved. We used the high school. We used the entirety of

the high school, because we had so many donations. We were able to set up a whole other system over there. We sent a lot of volunteers there, to constantly just organize stuff, and label stuff, and get stuff out that was needed to get out. It was a big, very large, hectic process, but that was able to be run, and we were able to clear out a lot of space in City Hall, as well.

Then I had some issues of -- we would have some of the volunteers out but collecting the information back from them was kind of difficult. Having them call in or text to my cellphone became very frantic when there were a couple hundred volunteers out. We had a lot of issues. I was pretty well resolved with having at least one person from each group come back with where they were, and what needed to be done where. We had issues of a lot of people needing medication. I'm still not sure why some of the people didn't fill up on basic medications when they knew there was a storm coming, even if it isn't something big. It was very hectic. So we were able to get a system set up -- one of the students was able to really help figure out what needed to be done there, to get the pharmacists and the mayor to write prescriptions; get CVS and Walgreen's open; get the prescriptions filled and have volunteers deliver them. That became a great system that worked extremely well. We helped a lot of people with that.

But for the most part, most of the issues were resolved where we just found a way to work around them -- the crazy people coming in and screaming at us: You just let them scream, and you do something else while they're screaming their heads off. It made them feel better; it made them feel like something was getting done. If it was something we could help with, we would help with it. Otherwise, we can't bring everybody Diet Coke when they want Diet Coke. It's just not something in an emergency that's possible.

CZ: So how did you manage with the fact that, on the one hand, you had City Hall, which was the center of a lot of operations. But so much was also happening at the high school, in terms of coordinating between those two sites?

AO: We had one person who was in charge of the high school. We had a few people who were there every day, and knew what was going on. We would be in communication with them. Every morning I would go into City Hall extra early, and have meetings with the different people we needed to have meetings with. They would come, as well, and sit down with us. They ran their own processes. Once everything was organized, it was very simple getting stuff organized; getting stuff out; and when we had extra volunteers, especially children -- children cannot climb up ten flights of stairs with water, but they can easily run a few boxes of pasta around. So we were able to send families down there because, as the power was out longer and longer, the kids got antsy and antsy, parents brought them in to volunteer. So it was great to get that going. I saw some amazing kids over there, doing so much to help. Even if there wasn't anything to do, they would be in the kitchen cleaning up. Because people would drop off food, and they would go in and clean up and sweep the floors, and wash the tables. It was nice to see such young individuals helping out and trying to do as much as they could. But once we had that system set up, we just needed some volunteers. If they needed anything from us, they were able to call us, or radio us, and we could see what we could do as soon as possible.

CZ: How did you figure out what people needed, in terms of -- and remember all the supplies at the high school. I'm wondering how did that then get distributed, and how as it that you figured out what people needed and where they were?

AO: If anyone one was anyone was unable to leave their apartment and needed something -- especially the elderly -- the volunteers we sent out to each building multiple times a day would write it down, bring it back to City Hall, and report it to us. We would send a volunteer to the high school to get those items, and bring it to them. We also had [unclear] distribution centers around the city, pods. I think

there were six of them. We would every morning send meals ready to eat, [unclear], water and other -- dog food, baby supplies, canned foods -- to each of these centers, and people in that area of the city could go to these pods and pick up food that they needed, whatever they needed. People could also go to the high school and pick up food, or clothes, or toys. Everything was being donated. The hallways were filled in the high school with everything. So we knew if we needed something they likely had it, because there was so much of it. People were able to -- this was after the flooding receded but no power went in and out of the city. We couldn't get deliveries. Most of the food stores were closed and flooded. So we were able to get the food to these points of distribution, and people were able to go there and pick them up; or, if necessary, we could bring it to them.

CZ: I'm curious. What happened to all that clothing? I remember the hallway just stacked with coats and scarves.

AO: A lot of it went to people who needed it, in the city. A lot of it went to the homeless shelter. A lot of the food went to the homeless shelter, as well, and Our Lady of Grace, where their food pantry is. A lot of the stuff we had, actually, once we knew Hoboken was safe -- there was still so much, down on the shore, that needed help, so many places seaside -- Toms River, even my home area, Balmoral -- everything needed so much. While we were getting back on our feet and pretty stable up here, they still weren't, so we were able to get people with pickup trucks to bring stuff down to them, for people who needed it down there. Especially people whose homes were completely destroyed and were living in hotels. They didn't have clothes and stuff like that. So we were able to bring stuff to them, and get it to as many people in the city as needed it. There was just so much stuff, so it was great to see.

CZ: I'm wondering -- what do you know now that you wish you had known on October 28th?

AO: Well, there's a lot that changed in me; a lot that I saw in my friends who volunteered; a lot in the city itself. I really wish I knew that -- I got very stressed out. I was always running and doing stuff. We had a lot of people coming in, claiming to be experts, who would start yelling at me and telling me I was doing stuff wrong. I actually took it to heart. I kind of wish I'd known then -- a lot of people like to talk, and pretend that they're big hot-shots. They're really not. A year later now, watching the city go, and all these different things that happened -- I actually did as much as I could, and I thought I didn't screw up. I'm a student in college, whose home town was underwater; whose family was underwater; whose home had damage, and we couldn't get in contact with anyone. So all these people were telling me I was doing stuff wrong. For what I was able to do, I did it right. With what resources I had, I did right. I also wish I knew that you can't make everyone happy. There were going to be so many angry people, who just like to be angry. Nothing could have happened to them; they just want someone to yell at because they can. We were there. I wish I knew to just ignore them; let them get it out, and focus on what was really important. I did listen to a lot of people yelling at me about the stupidest of things. They were just people who wanted to be angry. They didn't have damage. Half of them still had power who were yelling at me. I definitely wish I knew that.

CZ: Are you still working with the city in various ways?

Volunteering, or -- ?

AO: I volunteer for the city all the time. I did before the storm. I worked at the music festival, the harvest festival. I just finished with the Ragamuffin Parade. I love doing those things. I'm very involved in my community-service fraternity, and I love volunteering. I help at as many things as I possibly can, a lot of which are in Hoboken, or involve Hoboken, because Hoboken is extremely important to me since the storm, especially anything with the recovery effort. Also, I'm in classes for the

Community Emergency Response Team right now. I wasn't able to take it last semester because of class conflict, but I'm doing that now. I'm working with the head of CERT and a few other people to plan for another storm, or another emergency, to get things set into place. In the event that anything that happens, we're a little bit more ready. We're a little bit more prepared, know who's in charge of what, and what's going on with that. [Unclear] I still see a lot of people from the city all the time, at service events, at random things around the city. I try to help out as much as possible. I still enjoy it, and it's nice now, because now I see people -- where I saw them a lot before, I didn't know who they were. Now I know who they are.

CZ: So when you go to volunteer for the city, are there particular offices that you volunteer with? Or do you just go to City Hall and say, "I'm here for this event?"

AO: I work with Cultural Affairs. They plan a bunch of events in the city. My fraternity works with them for all sorts of events, and through our fraternity I'm in charge of those events for the brothers. So I work with them on all their different stuff that they have -- their craft shows and all different events. If I know of an event that's going on in the city, even if it's not through City Hall, I go down and try to get our fraternity involved. We have about 200 brothers, so we're able to do a lot. Every once in a while I know something is going on at City Hall that they need volunteers for, and I do pop down and see what I can do.

CZ: I'm wondering, how has this experience changed your aspirations for the future?

AO: When the storm started, I was a double major. I was part of so many clubs on campus, and did so much. The storm made me realize what was important in my life. It helped me to realize that I only wanted one major; I didn't need

two majors. I didn't need to kill myself, and take so many classes. I could take just what was right, and be a lot more relaxed, and be able to still get the jobs that I wanted, and do what I wanted to do. I didn't have to kill myself, to try and do so much. I dropped out of a lot of clubs that I was doing because other people wanted me to do them. I was holding positions in those groups because other people wanted me to. I figured out what was most important to me, and I really focus on those groups now. I focus on myself a lot more, my friends. I spend a lot of time with friends now that I wasn't able to before. I'm able to not go home as often -- because there is always stuff going on at home -- but I'm able to talk to my parents more, and my family, and it really made me realize -- I already had a love of community service before, but it made me really love it, because during the storm, after the storm, I was able to see people's reactions and talk to people, and realize that, through community service, I really am actually helping someone, and that is the greatest thing ever, to me. So I realized that I kind of got my life a little more in line, a little bit earlier, [unclear] people, so I guess that ended up well.

CZ: That's good. Now you have to figure out if there's a job that involves community service and volunteering.

AO: I would love that. I actually had a discussion with my friend about that the other night. It would be the greatest thing ever for me. But I love engineering, too. I realized that I had wanted to work for Disney most of my life, as an engineer. But I realize now that I want to stay near home. I want to stay near my family and my friends, and just kind of help [unclear] and help where I'm from. Up here, this is not far away from home. So being able to help in Hoboken also -- I wish there was a job that involved engineering and community service that I could make a living off of. But when I retire, I figure I'll probably end up doing a lot of work for different service organizations, and that will be so much fun to me. So, in the long run, I'll be able to. But right now, I'm doing engineering. I love engineering, so I can help people through building stuff.

CZ: Do you think you might stay in Hoboken after you graduate?

AO: I've looked into it. It's kind of expensive. It's a little bit difficult. It depends on, really, where I get a job. The type of job I want to get -- unfortunately, a lot of students, when they graduate, try to stay up here, so there aren't as many jobs up here. But home is only an hour, max, away. It's great, because I can still come up here all the time. If I know there's another hurricane coming, I'll probably end up coming back up to Hoboken, to stay here for a while. I've definitely looked into it. I would love to stay in Hoboken. Hoboken really has become a home to me. But it all depends. I don't know where I'm going to be a year from now. So I'll see what happens.

CZ: All right. Well, thank you very, very much for your time. I appreciate it.