

Archives 2013.039.0016

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
HOBOKEN STORIES:
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

INTERVIEWEE: MARK SINGLETON
INTERVIEWER: EILEEN LYNCH
LOCATION: SHIPYARD CONFERENCE ROOM
DATE: 2 OCTOBER 2013

EL: Okay. All right. This is Eileen Lynch. I am with Mark Singleton on October 2nd, 2013, at the Shipyard Conference Room.

Mark, let me start by asking you what your connection is to Hoboken.

MS: Well, I've lived in Hoboken for most of my life. I've lived here since 1970, actually. I've lived and worked here for most of my life. I was part of the Hoboken school system, and I'm now married with two children. We live half a block from where I grew up, so I live on Tenth Street, between Bloomfield and Garden right now. I love Hoboken, and have loved working here. I'm a partner in a real estate company here in town, where I've worked for almost thirty years. I'm also very involved in the congregation at St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran, up on

Eighth and Hudson, as well as I'm involved in the life of the Hoboken shelter. I currently serve as president of the board of the Communities of Faith for Housing, that administers the shelter. So I've been involved in homeless services, providing food and comfort to homeless people for many, many, many years.

EL: Now when did you first hear of Sandy?

MS: Well, obviously, like everyone else, we went to bed on Monday night, woke up on Tuesday morning, and realized that all hell had, in fact, broken loose. The first thing I did after making sure my family was okay was I went up to St. Matthew's, and discovered that, because of the weird electrical grid issue, that St. Matthew's had power. So we had heat and electricity, unlike most of the town. And because it was a Tuesday, like every Tuesday we were actually serving our lunchtime ministry. Four days a week we serve lunch to between sixty and eighty homeless men and women, or just hungry men and women. Some of them are migrant workers; some are senior citizens; some are homeless people.

So we were in the middle of our lunchtime ministry, feeling very grateful that we had power and would

be able to continue to do that. About 11:00 in the morning, Lou Casciano -- whom I know now as head of the CERT team, which is a community volunteer organization -- came in and asked if he could have a tour of our facility, because he was running around, scouting some locations. He had let me know that the city's planned shelter at the Wallace School had flooded, so their plan for sheltering had gone awry. No one expected the flooding could be that bad; in fact, the flooding at Wallace School had inundated the heating system, so they lost power, they lost their backup generator, and they had nowhere to shelter.

So after looking at our church, and realizing we still had lights, he asked if we would be willing to act as a temporary shelter. I said, "Yes, of course, but we have no facilities for that. We're not a shelter, we just feed." He said the Red Cross would drop off cots, and he asked if we would be willing to shelter seventy-five people or more, for the duration of the storm.

So we said yes, we closed up our lunchtime ministry at noon, and then at about 12:30 cots started to arrive from the Red Cross. By about 2:30, people started to arrive, so that began a week-long sheltering effort at St. Matthew's.

EL: Who were the staff who served these people?

MS: Oh, it was interesting. Of course, CERT said, "Don't worry. We'll staff everything. We'll take care of everything." In fact, as it turned out -- CERT was obviously taxed to the max anyway -- the good thing was that because we had our lunchtime ministry, which operates so regularly, all of my regular congregational volunteers just started showing up. The wonderful thing, also, is that people in the neighborhood started showing up. And, of course, CERT had a team there, as well, primarily Rose Orozco, who was a real stalwart, and really was there pretty much for the entire duration of the place. So Rose was there, and also Rich Tremiditi was there. Then a varying group of people.

So it was staffed by a weird mix of volunteers and pastors -- known volunteers to me, and pastors [unclear] strangers, and CERT volunteers.

EL: They did an amazing job, I thought.

MS: They did an amazing job. Well, what was really amazing to me was the people who ended up in the

shelter. It was just such a typically Hoboken mix of people. The people who showed they were in need and needed to be serviced were everyone from homeless people -- street-dwelling homeless people, in fact, who, strangely enough, have become more homeless during the storm (if there is such a thing, because you need to remember that their usual places for shelter -- like the train station, like the hospital, like the library -- all the places where homeless people might go for some shelter were now flooded), so they had nowhere to go. So, in fact, people who had been out of doors for many years came indoors for the first time, people like the woman who has the little cat, on Washington Street. She hasn't shown up at any of our shelters, for years. She came in and stayed.

So it was some of them. Then we had senior citizens who were flooded out of their senior-citizens' building.

EL: Some of whom had special needs.

MS: Some of whom had some special needs. We also had homeowners, condo-owners, so it was a broad spectrum of Hoboken.

EL: I think you had some commuters there.

MS: We did.

EL: People who got up and went to work in the morning.

MS: Yep. It was really an amazing thing. It was a real cross-section of Hoboken, and a microcosm of the best of what Hoboken is, in my view. But it was a difficult situation because we had people who were very upset. We had senior citizens who were confused. We did our best to serve -- we served three meals a day, at least. We had a continuous flow of food. Restaurants started bringing in food. Volunteers started bringing in food. We, of course, served everything we had, and we really did the best we could. It was an amazing group effort. But some of the other things that came about, which were interesting -- we had more than a few instances where people from out of town had lost contact with a loved one, and they were desperately searching for their family members, whom they hadn't heard from in sometimes two and three days. We had a few of those reuniting that happened, where desperate

family members came in to find their mothers, their grandmothers, and their aunts and uncles.

But you know, some of the other interesting things that happened -- one of the things we didn't anticipate -- that people who were forced out of their apartment were forced away from their medications. So what became clear was -- we had some people who suffered with mental illness, who came on the first day fairly normal, but by the third day were starting to show signs of deterioration. Who showed up, oddly enough, was Doctors Without Borders. Doctors Without Borders showed up -- which is an organization I had always heard of, mostly doing international work. But I think because Anderson Cooper was on CNN, and the story of Hoboken went nationwide, Doctors Without Borders showed up, and they were absolutely a godsend. They got people appropriately medicated.

EL: Because they were able to write prescriptions.

MS: They could write prescriptions. They could get prescriptions, they delivered the prescriptions and made sure everything was fine -- and offered whatever counseling they could. So they were a real godsend to us.

As I said, whenever you have that many different people, from that many different backgrounds, together in one place, in a stressful situation, there will be moments. So I won't say that it was without stress, but I have to say that, for the most part, everyone pulled together and did what they needed to do. I think we managed to provide a really valuable service.

EL: Oh, yes. I was there, and I just thought it was a great group of people. It was just a real nice feeling of community, and what a great bunch of volunteers.

MS: Yes. And again, I think part of the reason we were able to do it so seamlessly was because we had already been doing it. Because of our lunchtime ministry, we were prepared already. So it was fairly seamless. Also, obviously, St. Peter and Paul was the other location, another church in town, which was another temporary shelter.

EL: And was a shelter downstairs in St. Peter and Paul? Because I was upstairs, in the church --

MS: They were downstairs, in their community [unclear]. Yes. So they were acting as -- because they have [unclear].

EL: Also, I wanted to ask you to just talk a little bit about the Bishop Mahurter [phonetic] Shelter, which I think you're the president of.

MS: Yep -- the Bishop Mahurter Shelter, or the Hoboken Homeless Shelter, as we call it now, is located on the corner of Third and Bloomfield. It was in an area that did lose all power and all lights. The Hoboken Homeless Shelter serves 250 meals a day, and we shelter fifty-five people overnight. So we have fifty-five residents, and probably about thirty to thirty-five men, and fifteen to twenty women at this point. So we have our own population that sleeps there, but we also have lots of people who come there for services. They lost complete power, so they were in the dark.

EL: So you weren't able to utilize that space?

MS: Well, we did. We stayed there. Not only did we stay there, but we had our fifty-five, our regular guests, but we also opened the door to anyone who needed to come and stay. So I would say, on the first three nights, we probably had somewhere around seventy-five people, maybe even 100 people some nights, staying overnight.

So yes, we continued to shelter, in the dark.

EL: You didn't have generators.

MS: No. We had no generators until Thursday night. Somebody from the National Guard or Red Cross -- I'm not sure who -- came and brought us a smallish generator on about Thursday, or maybe Friday. So we had power for the last two days of the storm, on a limited basis. What we had to do there -- we were prepared for -- we had huge freezers full of food, all of which were going bad. So the volunteers and the staff at the shelter just started cooking everything in sight -- because we did have gas. Essentially, we just started feeding anyone who came by, any food that we had, because, otherwise, we were going to lose it.

But our staff there. We had one of our members -- Barry -- who was on our staff, stayed there for four days straight, day and night, twenty-four hours a day. He lives out of town, but he was there. Travel was tough, so he just stayed and hunkered down. So we had some of our staff who were very, very dedicated, and really worked hard to keep the place going. There again, we also had -- somebody from the National Guard would come by and check, and I was running back and forth between St. Matthew's and the shelter, sharing whatever food we could share, and other commodities that we needed -- blankets and things like that.

That was the other thing that started happening immediately. Blankets, and clothes, and everything else started showing up at both locations. It was almost overwhelming, so much came in. In fact, on Thursday we got a call from the city, because they said they had a truckload of clothes coming from down South, "Can you take them?" At the shelter we never say no, but we were expecting a small van or kind of a truck, and as it turned out there were two eighteen-wheelers full of clothes, that came. They got dropped in our lap -- as much as we could take. We filled up every available inch of the shelter. Then they really just started -- the city

distributed the rest in the street, down at Observer Highway, which sort of degenerated into a bit of a mess, but -- so it was almost much too much that started coming in at one point. We were just overwhelmed. What was interesting in the shelter -- I certainly expected the shelter to flood at some point -- because the water, as we all know, came in, in the north and the south, and then started coming back toward Washington Street as it got higher. Literally, the water came to just west of Garden Street. So it was within 250 yards of the shelter.

EL: Amazing.

MS: Because we didn't have a contingency plan at the shelter. The next step was, all the people from the shelter would have come up to St. Matthew's and filled up our sanctuary, as people retreated to higher ground. But, luckily, that didn't need to happen. The water stopped. We got a generator to run some basic lights and refrigeration, for the last two days, and we continued operation at the shelter.

EL: Would you say that you've seen a continuing impact on homelessness in Hoboken, since Sandy?

MS: It's always hard to parse out what's what, but I can tell you that our numbers for this past year (and it's been almost a year) are up in all categories. Our [unclear] is up. People are just in need. Because I said, we house fifty-five overnight, but we serve almost 250 meals a day. So those people, many of them have homes but just don't have enough money to buy food, so they come in and eat. So all those numbers are up. It's hard to say what impact was from Sandy and what was from other places, but I can tell you that I think there's an ongoing impact, yes. I think there's a continuation of some people who are marginal -- marginally housed, marginally employed, marginally keeping it together, who are having a hard time since Sandy, in all of those categories.

EL: Do you think some of these people have left Hoboken?

MS: Yes, I think so. Again, I'm also in the real estate business, as I said, and we have seen that there are some apartments that were completely destroyed during Sandy, which are not being rebuilt. So those homeowners have certainly gone somewhere in town. Now, you

know, Hoboken being Hoboken, they're building hundreds of units at the same time. But yes, there's been a movement all right. There are some people who left.

And, of course, any natural-disaster emergency like Sandy is always hardest on the people at the fringes, people at the margins. So yes. I think there's been an ongoing impact, for sure.

EL: Do you think that Sandy has had any lingering effects on real estate in Hoboken?

MS: You know, it's strange.

EL: That's another hard one to answer.

MS: It's another hard one to answer, but I can tell you -- in fact, I got calls from people, relatives of mine in the Midwest, saying, "Oh, your real estate market must be decimated. I feel so bad for you." The fact of the matter is, in real life, the market is up over ten-percent since Hurricane Sandy. So there's no demonstrable effect on the market. Hoboken is this amazing little bubble, and for the most part I think people are operating as if it were a once-off kind of thing, and won't ever

happen again. Whether they're right or not will remain to be seen. It depends upon which climatologist you listen to. But no, there hasn't been a real negative effect on the real estate market.

EL: You don't think that, like people are saying, "Oh, I don't want to live over on the west side, or I don't want to live downtown" --

MS: It's a question every client asks now: "How did this place do during Hurricane Sandy?" They all ask it, and we tell them. Since Hurricane Sandy I've sold units in the middle of the flood zones, that have flooded completely. I've sold units that were completely destroyed and rebuilt. So it doesn't really seem to be impacting decision-making process so much. It is amazing. I find it hard to believe. I've been telling people the story that there was a condo down on Jackson Street, between Observer Highway and First, that was completely destroyed on the first level. It was only "parking," but the "parking" was flooded; the lobby was completely destroyed; the back yard, which was a public amenity, was completely destroyed; the elevator wasn't working. An agent in town put on a unit in that building, a week after Sandy, and I was saying to

myself, "Why is this person putting a unit on the market right now? It's never going to sell. You have to walk up through a construction site." The units themselves didn't get damaged. Sure enough, a week after Sandy, there was a bidding war on that property. It was shocking to me.

EL: Wow.

MS: You had to walk up the stairs, because the elevator wasn't working. All the sheet rock was ripped off to four-feet in the hallway. The tiles were all buckled. So Hoboken is just that kind of weird, amazing place, from a real estate standpoint. But, again, it's also a place where there are very rich and very poor. I think that the real impact has been on the very poor and the marginal. That's where the real impact is.

EL: Did you have a lot of interaction with the city during that week?

MS: They came and checked on us, and did have a continuing CERT presence. But I do think that the city, like everyone else, was learning as they went. I wouldn't say it was seamless, and I certainly wouldn't say

that it was without confusion, but they did the best they could with what they had. All told, I think it was great. But, again, it's really -- these types of issues have always been handled more by the communities of faith in town. The churches have always been the ones who have taken responsibility for the homeless population. The City of Hoboken doesn't donate one dime to the Hoboken Shelter. They did recently give us a one-time donation, but the Hoboken Shelter is funded completely by volunteers, by the local communities of faith, and by some state and federal money, and county.

Anyway, I think what became clear in Sandy was that when all hell breaks loose, the city relies on the churches and other community organizations to pick up a lot of that slack -- which we did.

EL: I think our national government is sort of the same way.

MS: The same way. Yes.

EL: I was going to ask you -- you said from the city you got a one-time donation. Anything that maybe the shelter can get from, maybe, Rebuild Hoboken.org?

MS: Well, at the shelter our needs are always the same. Our needs are always for basic toiletries. That's very hard for us to fundraise for. Things like toilet paper, believe it or not, are a real commodity.

EL: And feminine hygiene.

MS: Feminine hygiene, toilet paper --

EL: What do you do if you're poor?

MS: Absolutely. Razors and soap. Soap is huge. We offer showers to the homeless population five days a week, and soap is obviously -- so people donate a bar of soap, and we take a big knife out and cut the bar of soap into six pieces, and give it to six people. That kind of thing. And food. All those basic kind of things are always important for us. The other thing I always like to tell people is socks. Socks are gold to the homeless community.

EL: Because they have problems with their feet.

MS: Right. A homeless person walks miles a day, and in a wet pair of socks that's not a very comfortable thing. Last year, in the All-Saints Episcopal Day School -- the church and school there -- they raised money and donated 2,500 pairs of socks to the Hoboken Shelter, and we donated them out in sixty days. So that gives you an idea of what the need is like. It's almost unlimited, how many socks we can give out -- especially warm, large socks.

Anyway, that's something I always like to highlight for people who don't know what they can give. Buy an extra bag of socks when they're at Target. That kind of thing is important.

So it was an interesting experience, Sandy, altogether. It brought out the best of what Hoboken is, in many ways, but also highlighted some of the areas that we really need to work on.

EL: The fault lines. Yes. All right. So going forward -- what's something you might do at St. Matthew's? Or has it changed any of your routines?

MS: It's interesting. Yes. I think one of the things we're thinking about more at St. Matthew's and

at the shelter is keeping an emergency store of basic supplies, like water, and blankets, and things like that.

EL: Outside of your location?

MS: No, no. In our location, just to be available. St. Matthew's, being on Eighth and Hudson, is pretty high ground. So I think there will always be a place there. The other thing, oddly enough, is that we're also the backup emergency, off-site location for about six other organizations, like the Hoboken Charter School, and the All-Saints Episcopal Day School. So if there's a school lockdown, or an emergency or a fire, like there was --

EL: -- they will come over to St. Matthew's.

MS: That's exactly what happened.

EL: There are so many schools.

MS: That's what happened during the fire at the old Sacred Heart building, which is the Hoboken Charter. So a year ago, they all came to us. So yes, we're trying to really keep a backup supply, to act on an

emergency basis. I think the city is obviously doing some planning, and really expanding the CERT organization, which I think is wonderful. I have to say that one of the really beautiful things about Hurricane Sandy was the volunteers who stepped up, many of them from CERT, who came by and worked tirelessly and really, really well, in all aspects of the shelter. And also community volunteers. There were people who came (and I could name names), people who came and just went above and beyond.

A couple stories I thought were touching. We had an older, older gentleman who was separated from his family. He was confused. He was in this late eighties, and he had some special needs. By the third day, he really wanted a bath. He wanted to be clean. Obviously, we don't have showers at St. Matthew's. So a woman who came by to volunteer took him in and washed him. Now that's really going above and beyond, as far as I'm concerned. And there was another woman named Jennifer who came and asked a homeless man if he needed anything, and he said, "I could really use some socks and shoes." She came, and instead of just giving him the socks and shoes, she actually knelt down and changed his feet -- changed his dressing, and changed his shoes and socks. Which I thought was really, really touching. And the people -- acts of generosity like

that, that were exhibited throughout the shelter, that were really very heartening to me, and made me remember why I love Hoboken, and why I love living in Hoboken.

EL: I remember something that Rose told me about the clothes. She said when the clothes came in they were dividing them up, and some people were saying, "Oh, this looks like this fits so-and-so, and this fits so-and-so." And Rose said, "Let's let them come up here and choose their own clothes," because you never get to choose when you are reliant on services like that. You take whatever is handed to you. And Rose was like, "Let's let them come up and choose, because they really don't get that."

MS: And that's important.

EL: It's a little tiny thing, that people just don't think about.

MS: And people felt very out of control during the entire experience. They were separated from their homes. This weird, catastrophic event was happening, and they had no control. Something like that is just a little bit of personal autonomy that we can give people.

EL: That's what I liked about St. Matthew's. There really was a feeling of community.

MS: I guess the other thing we never talked about was the charging, of course -- what I called the iPhone zombies; people wandering the streets, looking at their dead iPhones, and they were needing a plug. We had dozens and dozens and dozens of people who were coming to ostensibly charge their iPhones, but also they came up for some company. People like Sada Fretz came up. Sada came up to visit, just to spend some time with other people, because they were alone.

EL: You're isolated.

MS: Yes. So it became a community center. And there was one man who had a laptop plugged in, and he was actually keeping one of the New Jersey websites going from St. Matt's. He was keeping an online blog. It wasn't New Jersey.com or one of those places. He was here from the minute we opened in the morning until the minute we closed at midnight, running his blog out of a chair. He was doing

his thing. It was an interesting group. It was an interesting group of people.

And, of course, as we all know, everyone who had power was throwing power cords out their windows, and offering food. It was a funny time. It was scary, but it was also -- people came together.

EL: Well, it forced you to get out of your comfort zone and talk to people. It was funny how everybody had their favorite little charging station. "I always go around there, because I like talking to those --" It was kind of funny, because even when it was all over, like in the next couple of days after it was over, it was like, "Now am I going to go out and charge my phone?" You almost felt nostalgic for being able to go out and hang out with the crowd of people, and find out information.

MS: More than a few people have related it to the days of September 12th and 13th -- remember? -- right after the tragedy there, where people were still figuring everything out and coming together. There was a real sense of togetherness. It was kind of like that, in a way. People had survived a common peril, and were doing the best they

could. I heard almost no incidents of problems, or looting, or anything like that.

EL: Nothing like that.

MS: People just came together, did what they needed to do, and helped each other.

EL: So, on a personal note, how did your family hold up?

MS: Well, it was interesting. I have two young kids. I have a twelve-year-old and a fourteen-year-old; and my wife; and also my mother, who lives around the corner; and my sister and brother-in-law. What we did -- we made a decision early on to say, "Look, we're going to be out of communication here. Every day at 5:00, no matter what we're doing, we're going to come back and meet at my house, and we'll have a meal, as best we can." It was a way we could check in. I was spending most of my time up at St. Matthew's. My sister, Jill, was worrying about her school community. But every day at 5:00 we got together, told stories, and cooked whatever we had. My barbecue grill still worked, so we cooked meat there, and we did the best

we could. I would say the kids were probably excited about the idea of living in an age without electricity for about twenty-four hours; after that it was just purely annoying to them.

My family did fine. My house did fine. We took in a little bit of water in the basement; nothing compared to what happened --

EL: I'm surprised -- Tenth and Bloomfield.

MS: Yes. We did really well. Again, the water never made it up that flight. But then, of course, we all were witnessing the days after, when everyone's belongings were in the street, and the piles of furniture and clothes were higher than the cars. That was a scary time -- scary for my kids, because that was --

EL: It was so unbelievable to see. I remember going with Rose to see her apartment. She hadn't seen it. That was Friday, after the storm. Walking over there, the streets were lined with debris, piles of debris. I said to Rose, "I feel like I'm walking through a war zone." All of a sudden, it hit me. I hadn't been over there, and I hadn't seen that.

MS: Yes. And the other thing to remember -- for me, personally, and for other people I spoke to -- we didn't know what was going to happen, in the sense that was Hoboken changed forever? Was it ever going to be normal again? Would the water ever recede? This big catastrophe that we've been hearing about?

EL: Are we writing off sections of the city?

MS: Right. So we just didn't know, and there was a lot of uncertainty. Again, that's what we did on a family level. Then, of course, we had some friends who were lucky enough to still have power, so we went to their house for refrigeration and for watching the news. It was interesting -- people throughout the country knew more about what was going on in Hoboken than we did, because we had no access to television. They had radio and television.

EL: I had friends calling me, going, "Your mayor's on TV." And I'm like, "Well, how am I going to know that? What's she saying?"

MS: And social media, interestingly enough. Because I had a computer at St. Matt's, I would log onto my Facebook account, and I would post updates about what was happening in Hoboken and at St. Matt's, on my Facebook account. People afterwards, relatives and people throughout the country, said how grateful they were for those little updates. A reporter from the *L.A. Times* walked into St. Matt's on the fourth day. It was shocking to me. We were just doing what we needed to do, but apparently we were a national story, as well.

Afterwards, I feel a little bit, a year later, like Hoboken's done pretty well, and we're kind of back to normal. But I can't say the same thing for areas on the Jersey Shore. The devastation that happened in Monmouth and Ocean County is just beyond belief. So I've been telling people, "Concentrate your efforts down there. We're okay in Hoboken. We're doing all right."

EL: Anything you'd like to close with?

MS: Just that, again, I always say to people, Hurricane Sandy was an interesting week, and it was an experience that I don't want to relive again, anytime in the near future. But, like all catastrophes, there were

silver linings, and there were moments of real togetherness. Again, it really did bring out the best of what Hoboken is. I wish I could have filmed that little microcosm that was living in St. Matthew's for that week, because it was a real, heartwarming, touching -- a little microcosm of Hoboken's best. Not that I'm looking to go there again; not that I want it to happen again. But we did what we needed to do, and it was great.

EL: All right. Well, Mark Singleton, thank you very much for your time.

MS: My pleasure.