

Archives 2013.039.0019

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
HOBOKEN STORIES:
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

INTERVIEWEE: SUSAN O'KANE
INTERVIEWER: ALAN SKONTRA
LOCATION: 35 HACKENSACK AVENUE,
WEEHAWKEN, NEW JERSEY
DATE: 11 OCTOBER, 2013

Track #1

AS: What is your connection to the Weehawken Shades? How long have you lived in the area? Who, if anyone, do you live with, and what is your professional background?

SO: Well, my connection to The Shades is that I'm a resident here. I own a home and I live here, and who I live with or don't live with, I'm not going to make a comment on. I've been here for many, many years. I lived in Hoboken for eighteen years before I moved over here.

AS: When did you first hear the words "Hurricane Sandy?"

SO: I didn't hear them, I read them. There was a document, or a letter, from the city that was left in

the vestibule of the building, about 3:30 on October 29th, saying that we should evacuate. But I hadn't heard anything about it before then.

AS: Based on hearing that notice, a short time before the storm actually hit, what did you expect to happen?

SO: Almost nothing. Around 7:00 the fireman who is my next-door neighbor, was on the street outside, on Hackensack, and he as in his combat uniform, with big heavy boots. And he said, "Susan, you have to evacuate. Look down the street. Look at all that water." And I said to him, "Joe, I don't have to worry. I've never had a drop of water in my basement." The water just stood there. It didn't go anywhere. But it was going down toward the Palisades and into the back area here, in the Weehawken Shades. I came back in the house, and just minutes afterwards the water began to pour in the house; just began to pour in the house.

Track #2

AS: So when the storm hit, you were home?

SO: Yes.

AS: Did you feel that you had enough provisions and supplies when the storm hit?

SO: No.

AS: So how much water did this area and your home get during the storm?

SO: About eleven feet.

AS: So, in other words, were you trapped in your home?

SO: No. I live on the corner here, and it went about six and a half feet in my basement, and then came about four feet into my house. But I have a three-story building, with tenants there, and this is the one-story extension. So I got out quickly, quickly then up in the front.

AS: So what was your reaction, as all this was happening -- in terms of the water coming, and feeling it surrounding you?

SO: I was amazed, dazzled by it, but a certain kind of calmness came over me, also -- because I knew it was a real calamity. I'm not one, when I'm in the middle of a calamity, who falls apart. I knew I had to keep my wits about me, to be able to get through this, but it was such an astonishing event. I saw the water just pouring into my house. It came underneath the floorboards, and just rose so rapidly. I mean, the ocean really poured into my house. Within a minute or so it was feet-high.

AS: Did you lose electricity.

SO: Yes. When I went out into the hall, some of my tenants came down and said, "The mayor is looking for you. The mayor is looking for you." They said he was across the street. But he was trapped there because the water was up so high. He did wade through the water and come knocking on my door here, just to make sure I was all right.

AS: How else did that interaction with the mayor go? What did you tell him?

SO: Well, I didn't have to tell him anything. He could obviously just see. He just inquired about my

security, and that I was going to be all right, and where am I going to stay, etc. As a senior citizen. He just coddled us and took care of us -- I found out. [Laughs]

AS: What kind of damage did your building suffer, and the surrounding neighborhood?

SO: The damage to my house was almost total. When the ocean came in, it broke the foundation of my extension here. I had termites in my foundation that I didn't know about, and when the ocean came in it broke the studs, and the beams, and the joists. The salt water was so high it corroded all the electricity. It ruined the boiler and the hot water tanks, and I had to replace all that. It took my clothing, it took my furniture, it took my address book, my telephone book, all my records. I was homeless for about three and a half months, until I was able to get the foundation taken care of. I'm just kind of moving back into my house, and I've just had a cable and a bed for some time. I didn't move in until they could get my hot water and my furnace in. But I had to put in all new plumbing, and I lost a lot of my books. I didn't lose any of my paintings, but it was total -- for the neighborhood -- the man next door, the whole back end of his house was removed, because the ocean

just poured into my garden and went -- here in the Shades we have about eleven feet of water. I was able to walk out the front end of my building. However, that night they were taking people out in rowboats, and the Northampton Fire Department didn't have any more boats, and the Boat Island Fire Department came down with their boats, and they were taking us out of the second-story window here. There was much, much more water in the Shades than there was in Hoboken. In Hoboken, I'm told, there was about three feet of water, but it covered 1,000 homes. Here, it covered every one of the homes, and there are about 150-200 homes here. But it affected everyone -- except for one family I know, who wasn't affected.

AS: So if I understand correctly, you were evacuated during the storm.

SO: Yes. Well, I stayed here with one of my tenants, and then went over to the Sheraton the next day -- which is the hotel where the mayor put us up. I stayed there because I couldn't come into my house. I mean, the water was so high -- the kitchen, the bedroom, the living room. Everything.

AS: In the days after the storm, for example, let's say, a week after the storm -- did you feel that you were getting enough information about the situation?

SO: I don't understand the question. What information? I'm the one who would give the information out. What information? Are you talking about FEMA and companies like that?

AS: Yes, in terms of the city relief agencies informing residents about "This is where the water is. This is how much water's left. This is when we think power will be restored." Things of that nature.

SO: Well, I think the administration here, under Richard Turner, our mayor for twenty-three years, was remarkable. He came and ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner with us at the Sheraton, and then set up a similar kitchen for us over here at the St. Lawrence Community Center. He was sort of like a cheerleader for us during that period, making sure that we kept our morale up. Very shortly after that he brought in his building department crew, and all the directors, then brought in FEMA people; set up tables over here (that was about a week, a week and a half later), so we

could get registered with FEMA; we could get registered with the buildings department, with all the departments, like plumbing, electricity, and demolition, etc., to help us. The fire department had many of their firemen come down and help us to get rid of all the wet mattresses and books, and the Department of Public Works came down and began to evacuate all the rubbish that was put out on the sidewalk. There were a lot of scam artists who appeared; a lot of people who are professionally geared to responding to disasters. Because I lost all of my address books, records, my telephone, everything -- I was kind of hopeless. I couldn't reach out to anybody. Who do I contact, like construction people, plumbers and electricians that I'd worked with in the past. I kind of had to reconstruct my life. Even with telephone numbers, I had to use my muscular memory, in dialing a touchtone -- like, "Is this the number for my best friend? Is this the number for my favorite cousin? Is this the one to dial to get in touch with him? I'm all right?" Because I lost telephone numbers on everybody. That was really very difficult.

AS: So how did you begin to recover those numbers, and reconnect with people.

SO: I had a friend of my from Stevens who brought over a telephone book to me, and as a gift, he and his wife brought me a cellphone. I had people who had done work for me before just appear at the door. That's kind of how things began to get reconstructed. I did take out of the trash a notepad that I had, that was absolutely soaking wet, but it was a very good calendar book. The paper was very good, and I put it out to dry. It took about three weeks, where I could begin to separate the pages, and I was able to go through that, and start collecting the numbers, and telephone numbers of people. That's one of the ways I began to reconstruct my life.

AS: What was the mood in this neighborhood? Were residents angry? Distraught? Optimistic? What were people feeling here?

SO: People were remarkable. The cohesion, the optimism, the resilience was just do remarkably shining. I just want to say one little thing that was interesting. When we were all at the Sheraton, which is just five buildings away from here and on the waterfront -- it had suffered, just like we did here. There was no hot water, no electricity, no heat. I met a couple from Canada who were

there, and the very last day he said to me, "You people really are resilient. Had this happened to us in Canada, we would have just been saying, 'Oh, my. I'm so depressed. I'm never going to come out of this.' You, as Americans, are just having a good time. You look so optimistic and resilient." That's a generalization, but isn't that a remarkable observation -- the difference in our attitude.

The mayor was very much like a cheerleader, and he would just not allow us to -- not that we had to be guided in that way -- but he helped get us through this, very much. So that was good.

No, the people here, they knew they were going to get through it. There's a big family who lives down here, and they have a brother who was up in Boston. He came down, and did all the electricity things. We all knew, here, that we were going to get through. My next door neighbor's family have been here in this little community for 153 years. That's the man whose back end of his house was blown out. He's a fireman, and volunteered -- he took out so much of my wet junk and threw it on the sidewalk for me. He had moved away, with his family, down to Ocean County, but he was very unhappy down there -- unhappy because everybody in the neighborhood was a stranger to each other. Here, everybody seems to know each other. On the fifth day after

this, he was standing outside in all the rubbish on the street, and the back end of his house was gone. He looked up at me, he put his arms up in the air, and said, "Susan, I'm so happy to be back." I thought that was just a remarkable comment. So even with all this devastation he was happy, because really what makes life is the people that you're around, and he was very happy to be back here -- even though his father-in-law had just died, who lived across the street, and he was there with him, trying to get his house taken care of. His father-in-law died; ten days after Hurricane Sandy, his mother died, and she just lived around the corner here.

So that's the way people are here. Many people say, "I don't want to move down here," because it's kind of like what Hoboken used to be years ago: Everybody knew each other, helped each other, and stayed together.

AS: I want to circle back and ask, how long were you in the Sheraton?

SO: I was there until Saturday.

AS: How did you pass the time there?

SO: Well, I listened to a lot of meetings being conducted by the mayor. We were served breakfast, lunch and dinner, and I took the ferry twice, during those four days, five days I was there, and went into New York City, and toured New York City along the waterfront, to see what had happened there. Then I rode back and forth between here, at the house, to get clothing that maybe I could take to the laundry, and get -- could you excuse me for a moment, please?

Track #3

SO: Am I using too many words?

AS: No, no. You're doing great.

How did you pass the time while you were in the Sheraton?

SO: Well, as I would normally -- taking a bath, and eating. They were serving us breakfast, lunch and dinner over there. Then the mayor came, with updates as to what was happening, how we would proceed, and what we could do to facilitate cleaning out our houses. Then, also, on two days I took the ferry, went into New York, and went down to the waterfront areas -- down to the Battery, just to see

what was going on there. I came over here to the house to get laundry, anything I could. That's more or less how I spent the time.

AS: How did the areas in New York City compare to here, in terms of damage?

SO: I thought the damage was much worse here.

AS: Approximately how long did the cleanup effort take, in terms of your building and the neighborhood as a whole. How long was there debris laying about? How long did it take for the physical removal of that debris?

SO: It took weeks, because every basement was flooded down here, and some first floors. There was an awful lot of debris. The Department of Public Works (Bobby "Barse" [phonetic] is the director of that) was down here to help us. They brought in big trucks, and took all the debris. It went on for weeks, I would say three to four weeks, and we had volunteers who came in. The North Hudson Fire Department brought a lot of their volunteer firemen down to help us, and a few of just-people, from the Hoboken Housing groups down there on Jackson and Marshall Street; crews of those guys

came over, and we hired them. One of the fellows at the electrical place across the street brought his brother and a crew in from Newark, and they helped us to clean out things. Because we had to take down all the sheet rock. We had to take the floors out -- because we had to replace all the plumbing, all the gas lines, all the electric lines. So there was a lot of demolition going on, besides removing a lot of our things.

AS: Do you know how long it took for the water to go away?

SO: Well, it took about two days here on 19th Street, because the cars here were floating. Back here on Grand and Chestnut, it took about a day longer. But I met a man who came here on Friday, he came with a video and he was interviewing us here on the street, on 19th. So the water was totally gone there.

AS: Is this area generally flood-prone? For example, in certain section of Hoboken, even during rain, there will be several inches of flooding on the street. Does that happen here?

SO: Well, I've never had water in my basement, never here at all, ever, and I've had the house for a few decades. But I know in the back, a few houses there will have water come up from the sewage. I know a few of the houses in the back, at the base of the Palisades, may have sump-pumps back there. This area is called The Shades because we're right at the base of the Palisades, and there used to be a waterfall that would come from Union City, down to a pond that was here in the back. Before the automobile era, there were horses that used to be brought in from Hoboken, and they would go back there to drink water, and then stand in the shade of all the trees from the Palisades. The flooding for some houses back there may be bad, but I've never seen it on the street, like you will in the back end of Hoboken.

AS: You had mentioned attending meetings where representative discussed, for example, applying for FEMA relief. Did you apply for anything like that?

SO: Yes.

AS: And what was your experience with that process?

SO: I thought it was pretty efficient -- and certainly helpful. Yes, they brought in FEMA people, along with all the building department representatives from here in Weehawken, and they gave us a registration number. People from FEMA, from offices in New Mexico and Pennsylvania came up. I met them in the garden here. My garden was -- all the "furniture," everything was just thrown here at the back end; the fence was torn down by the impact of the ocean coming in. They were all very reassuring. A man from FEMA came in on a Monday and did the evaluation of the damage here, and by Thursday of that week a check was sent out to me, and I had it put in the bank in a matter of a few days. So I thought the response was remarkable.

AS: Did you do anything similar with any insurance companies?

SO: No.

AS: So a year later, do you feel as if you have recovered, in the sense of both your home and just your state of well-being? And do you feel the same way about The Shades as a neighborhood?

SO: Well, actually, it has turned out to be rather a blessing. I kind of felt that at the time. You asked me how long I stayed at the Sheraton. I stayed there from Tuesday to Saturday. The man that I told you came down to interview here, on Friday -- he invited me and other people to come to his house. His house was on top of the Palisades -- "Crestview" and Weehawken. He works with the Christian Rescue Agency, and he's worked in China, Tibet, and Afghanistan, helping refugees. That's what we all were; refugees from this Hurricane Sandy. So I went up and I stayed with them. I had an emergency operation in December, when this happened, and I was taken to the Palisade Hospital and operated on. I hadn't been in the hospital since I was three years old. I've always been healthy, and never sick. So I went to that, and the mayor made sure everything was all right. The mayor sent down, from the North Hudson Committee, the action -- the health agency -- with a mobile truck down here, to have everybody examined for blood pressure, for diabetes, whatever else may be a problem, and to make sure that, mentally, we were strong and could get through this. The people I stayed with were very, very warm and very helpful, and gave me great comfort during that period. I just had tremendous benefits from this.

You know, as you go along in life you kind of collect an awful lot of stuff. [Laughs] Life can get cluttered. Well, the storm came along and kind of de-cluttered things. So when I say this was kind of like a blessing, it sort of cleared things out, and kind of made you concentrate on what was *really* important. Important things like letters from my parents I've lost. Photographs of my family, who have been here in this country for hundreds of years -- I lost a lot of that. That's really hard. But just seeing how people got together and helped each other, and how the government representatives did not abandon us, but really helped us get through this as smoothly as possible was helpful. I just had great health benefits that came from this also. So I would say it was a very good event.

AS: When did you resume living in your home, after the storm?

SO: About three and a half months afterwards. Almost February.

AS: And are you still making repairs to your home now?

SO: Yes, I am. [Laughs]

AS: How much do you estimate that you have left to do? Or that you would like to do?

SO: Well, I hired a structural engineer to draw up plans to rebuild my foundation. He fixed the foundation in the [unclear], but not underneath the kitchen. On Tuesday I'm meeting with a department head of the building department, with my contractor who did the work and the structural engineer, to do the remedial work for the foundation under my kitchen.

AS: Do you feel The Shades, as a neighborhood, has recovered? Does it feel like it did before the storm?

SO: Yes.

AS: And have the people here recovered, in terms of repairing their homes? Or do you still see work being done on the homes here?

SO: A good many of them have been repaired. I just yesterday talked with one of the ladies -- her sister's house down here in The Shades has to be demolished, so that has to be rebuilt. So some people just haven't been able to come back, because they didn't have the money to restore their house. And for some, it's taken so long to get the insurance money, to get going. And there have been a lot more deaths that have happened this year than I've known before. The stress has been difficult.

AS: Have you felt stress during this time?

SO: Remarkably, I have felt very calm. I have said to this family [unclear] family, that I was for a period of time kind of in a state of grace. [Laughs] I'm not a religious person, but I do know what something kind of remarkable overcomes your well-being. I don't know, otherwise, how to describe it.

AS: What do you think the people of The Shades learned about themselves, having gone through this experience

SO: Well, I don't know if they learned it. I think they might have already known it. I think they understand that nothing is so important as another human being, and that as a community, if you stick together and help each other, you can get through it. My next-door neighbor, as I said -- Joe "Rovito" [phonetic] -- he's been here since 1853 [sic] -- the man who put his arms up and said, "I'm so happy to be back." People are very inter-related down here. It's a very cohesive group. I know people who live in many other areas who want to move down here. In fact, I have to tell you -- a seventh-generation Hobokeniter lives back here. His father was the superintendent of schools in Hoboken, and he lives back here in The Shades, and he says he lives here because this community has the feeling that Hoboken used to have, years ago, before it was so gentrified.

AS: Is there anything you would like to add that I didn't already ask about?

SO: Well, Alan, I think you've just done a terrific job. I'm very impressed with you. [Unclear]

AS: Thank you. Thank you.

Track #4

AS: What steps has the local government taken to protect The Shades?

SO: Well, they have [unclear] the township of Weehawken with the North Hudson Sewage Authority, which is at the northern end of Hoboken. It's just on the other side of [Unclear], which is maybe two or three blocks away from here. They have applied to grant money to protect the pump here, that's located in The Shades.

Track #5

AS: Given the damage here, have you ever considered moving out of The Shades?

SO: Well, I haven't really considered moving, although I've had quite a few people ask me why don't I, and where I could go to higher ground and not do this. I feel, being a property owner here, and a resident here in The Shades -- I used to live in Hoboken for years and then moved here -- I feel that I have a proprietorship here. I feel that I'm in a position where I can ask my government, my

local government, to do something to protect us from intense storms in the future -- a repeat of Hurricane Sandy. The township here in Weehawken, in conjunction with the North Hudson Sewage Authority, has applied for, I think, a \$12 million grant to build a deployable wall, or a protection wall, around The Shades. But it's main purpose is to protect a water pump that belongs to the Sewage Authority, which is located just a block away from my house here in The Shades.

We were told by an engineer from the North Hudson Sewage Authority -- at one of the eight public meetings that have to be held in order to get this \$12 million, to get these walls -- that had the water gone up six inches higher it would have debilitated that water pump (which is located, as I said, a block from here), and it would have taken six months for us to have the sewage pump repair completed. That would mean we couldn't flush our toilets for six months. So that's really a top priority.

I feel that, by staying here, I have a position of authority to make sure my local representatives focus on putting up deployable fences or permanent walls to protect us back here, so that we will not have to go through what we just did from Hurricane Sandy, again.

