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THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
HOBOKEN STORIES:
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

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INTERVIEWER: BOB FOSTER
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HOBOKEN, NEW JERSEY
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BF: We're sitting inside the Independence conference room. The date is August 30th, and it's about 2:00. I'm sitting here with April Harris, and the purpose of our interview is to discuss Storm Sandy, and that amazing, incredible, horrible, wonderful week. April, could you start by telling us a little bit about your background? Maybe where you grew up in Hoboken, and anything to set us up, of who you are.

AH: I'm a lifelong Hoboken resident. I grew up in a housing authority on Jackson Street. I left for a number of years for marriage and other things, and returned to begin a ministry to the poor, of which Hoboken had a high percentage at the time, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I [unclear] with the Hoboken Clergy Coalition during the arson crisis that we had. We began a ministry, which

still exists for the past thirty-two years, providing aid to people in the way of food, clothes, educational support, and many different ways.

So it was in existence in the basement of Our Lady of Grace Church, a historic church in Hoboken. It's below sea level -- and I guess I set it up.

BF: You certainly did.

And the storm itself, did you -- ?

AH: Well, we had to do a lot of preparation the year before, for Hurricane Irene, and we were expecting flooding in below-sea-level places. And since I get a couple of inches of water, in the right combination, in that basement ministry space, when the tide is high, when the rain comes down fast, when the water table is high, I'll always get a couple of inches. So I would need to be a little prepared for some high flooding for Hurricane Irene. For Hurricane Irene, I did a lot of preparation but I couldn't get everything upstairs. I found that I went waist-high for preparation for Hurricane Irene, so I did the same thing for Hurricane Sandy -- and I didn't bring anything to an upper floor, much to my shock, disappointment, and trauma, when Hurricane Sandy rolled in.

You want me to talk about what it was like for me? I prepared everything that I best could, put everything waist high, and went home. I expected to have a similar experience to Hurricane Irene, which wasn't too bad. While the storm came in, we were able to watch everything on the news. During Hurricane Irene we didn't lose our electricity, so I really kind of believed -- because I'm located, personally, in residence, on Eighth and Park, which is on a high point of Hoboken. I parked my car on Eighth and Park; I didn't take it out of town like I did for Hurricane Irene. I just sat tight, and got food for four days, water for four days, batteries and what not, to prepare for a couple of days of disruption in our lives. Around 10:00, on the night the storm was raging, suddenly we were in darkness.

Once you're cut off from all communication, it's a very unnerving experience. You just have to sit tight. I was personally on the third floor, and I just kept worrying about what was going on in the basement of Our Lady of Grace -- which is center in town, so it's right at the point where you start in an elevation. I just kept hoping and hoping that everything would be okay. There was no way for me to know. And we were supposed to stay indoors. I did have a son who was out in that storm, in a

jeep, a four-[unclear]jeep (he had monster "tires" and he was out pulling people's cars out, and doing good stuff), giving me text pictures, and he sent me a picture of Fourteenth Street (he said it was Fourteenth Street), it looked like the river had come all the way down. Then he told me, "Mom, the cars, when I was coming down the viaduct," which is on Fourteenth Street, "the water is up to the top of the buses that were parked over there." I said, "Oh, get out of here. Not for real."

So this gave me an inclination that Hoboken was getting submerged by water, that I would not even expect. I know the people in the housing authority, during Hurricane Irene, were blocked into their buildings, the water coming up to all the staircases, and they had to wait like two days. So from my perspective, as an emergency service, knowing that there were going to be poor people who were impacted -- electricity and stuff -- I began to worry about me being able to respond to them, should the ministry site that I had get hit.

In my ministry space, I had thirty years of archival records; all the financial records; all my computer; my copy machines; everything that the poor needed -- all the clothing; all the projects that I did; all the educational equipment; children's programming; toys. I

can't tell you how much stuff was there, at risk. It looked like I wasn't going to get away unscathed; if not personally, the ministry space might have submerged.

So I couldn't wait to get out there, the minute we could go outside. I found myself walking through almost a landscape I didn't recognize. Water was all the way up between Willow and Park Avenue, and it went straight down to the base of the hill. Now since I knew that Our Lady of Grace was between Clinton and Willow, on Fourth -- and I had heard, or somebody told me as I was walking toward the church -- that the hospital had been evacuated; that people couldn't access that -- I said, "Is that what happened to the basement of Our Lady of Grace?" There was still no electricity, and I was kind of -- I don't know, hopeful mode? -- trying to say maybe it wouldn't be so bad; maybe it would be under the waist. When I actually got to the church, I could see that the water had already swept through the park and left debris. I saw overturned things, puddling, and still water in places. So I went to the top of the stairs of the basement, and the janitorial staff -- Gustavo shook his head and he said, "No, Miss April, you can't go down there. The water's up over the stairs." I didn't believe it; I was going to go down. I was going to go down and see if anything was left. But when I opened the

door and stood at the top of the stairs leading down to the basement, the water was only below the first step, and I was told that the water had come out of the basement to the street level. So it was totally submerged.

So I went into almost shock, because thirty years of doing work for the poor, and everything was wiped out. All I could think about was the emergency level of the people in the projects who might come to the ministry, looking for help, while the city was in a crisis -- or they were in a crisis -- but I knew they were still actually blocked into their apartments. Actually, you may want to stop this tape, because my story of the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy has a lot of details to it, and I want to make sure I give you what you want.

BF: Sure. I maybe missed the point, but you're continuing fine.

AH: Well, I just thought that there's so much that happened, and so many levels, to me -- because I, as the emergency service to the poor of Hoboken, was a hurricane victim myself. I needed to find out, when all communications were down -- because we're talking the second day after. The city is still in shock, and we're all

on our emergency reserves in our own houses. Eventually, because this went on for nine days, of no electricity and disrupted services, everybody ran out of food in the whole city. The whole city was in a different emergency, but on that day I just -- we still had our own food, our batteries, everything, in our own house. I was traumatized by losing the ministry.

So I walked back home in a shocked state. I went upstairs and told my husband, "It's gone. The whole thing is just gone, and I don't know what this means. Does this mean I'm no longer going to have the ministry to the poor? I can't do anything." I prayed, and I felt an inward direction. I said to my husband, "I feel like God just wants me to at least go to the space, and stay in the chapel upstairs. So if anybody comes looking for help, I can tell them I can help them." So at least, if people look for me -- I know this isn't a religious interview, but basically the Bible verse I heard was, "Be still, and know that I am God."

I couldn't do anything, so I went to the chapel the next day, and the water had receded to knee-level. You'd better believe that, with a flashlight, I had boots on, I had on pedal-pushers, and I went down there to see what was going on. And this is what I saw. All the

freezers and refrigerators were turned upside down. All my desk and everything was sopping wet. Everything was ruined. Everything. There was nothing that could be retrieved -- except, floating on the water was the box of membership cards, hard copy, that I had painstakingly put together for all the poor who were active in the ministry, with all their children's names, addresses, and phone numbers -- floating, perfectly dry, still alphabetical. [Laughter] I know. It turned out, to me, that nothing was worth retrieving anyway except that, because if I needed to organize an emergency response to the poor, that would have been the best thing. I didn't even know how we were going to pump out the water. Actually, I was just in such a startled state.

So we stayed up in the chapel. It was a little chilly, I know everything was dark, and we were just waiting there. The next thing that happened was this organization, a chain-reaction of one of the volunteers from the Hoboken Synagogue -- her name was Bette Birnbaum, and she had recently moved to Hoboken and become involved in the ministry. She happened to have a connection with an organization called Nechama, which was Hebrew for comfort. They were a Jewish response to disaster. She contacted them in Minnesota, and asked them to come and rescue the

interfaith food pantry. That's how Nechama came to Hoboken. It came at the request of this woman, and through the Hoboken Synagogue.

It was Friday by that point, I think, or something, because when the head of Nechama came and said he needed me to sign an okay that they could clear out everything -- they were going to clear out all the debris, and treat everything for mold, and do it all for free. They would mobilize all their own volunteers and everything. They just needed to go to the city of Hoboken, to ask where they could put the debris. Well, when the city of Hoboken met them, they begged them to save the moldy service center, and other places in Hoboken. [Laughs] So they actually ended up being a major part of some of the rescue in Hoboken, but they did clear out the ministry.

BF: How many people involved from -- ?

AH: Oh, gosh. First of all, what it was like in those days -- they're a major organization. The go across the country for wind and water damage -- tornadoes and stuff -- and they're experts. They were so kind and good and understanding of what it was like for people to be traumatized, losing their belongings. Now I thought that

that was all that was going to happen; that they were going to clear out the space.

By the way, the church didn't get that service. Only In Jesus' Name basement, and I didn't even know if the priest would want me to go back there again, because I was only there on their good will. But it was the beginning of a lot.

Because they started work at 8:00 A.M. in the morning, I had to get up and go there at 8:00 A.M. in the morning and be there, because the whole building was unsecured. I was in that chapel -- "Be still and know that I am God" -- while this army of people came and just cleared out -- they mobilized all these volunteers. Then all of a sudden, from everywhere it seemed, me staying there -- oh, I forgot to tell you. I really should go back to -- before they came, when I heard the water had subsided enough for the people from the housing authority, to get out, I figured they were going to come looking for emergency food. So let me just say that I'm walking back, stunned, on the second day, knowing I still have water, but asked permission if I could use the upper floor to at least bring some food in case people came. I had no food.

Coincidentally, one of the churches had taken up a food collection and a money collection -- I

usually don't accept money, but they handed me, before this happened, \$400 in cash. I prefer a check, for accounting purposes. But it turned out to be for emergency purposes, so this was perfect. Because I had that. That was the only resources I had access to, since we still had no electricity and everything. I went to the A&P -- which was in its own devastation. It's on Sixth and Clinton. You come to your town and you see National Guard trucks; you know in talking and listening to the emergency channel -- which I happened to be listening to, because my son left his -- he's an EMT person -- he left his two-way thing, and I heard all the different emergencies that were going on in the city. I didn't have radio, but this was very informative, because they would be saying things like, "There's a woman in such-and-such a place who needs oxygen. Can you get to that?" They were coordinating real responses to the vulnerable.

Anyway, I remember giving the National Guard guys the thumbs-up. They were bringing water. I heard through that grapevine of things that people were having to be evacuated from the housing projects through second-story windows, and that they had set up two emergency shelters in Hoboken for people who were stuck in their house and stuff. There was all this stuff going on, but in my little world

the only thing going on was what was I going to do about the fact that *used to be* the emergency response, and now the whole city was in an emergency response need, including me. [Laughs]

On my way to the food pantry, I went in and the A&P was dark. Their cash registers didn't work. They were throwing out all their food from the freezers and everything. I asked the manager could I please get whatever I could to stock my food pantry, in the off-chance that people were hoping to get food from me, until I found out where the other food responses might be. He was nice enough to let me run through there like Supermarket Sweep, and they added everything up on a hand calculator. I paid them, and I took that to the food pantry, and that's when I waited.

As it turned out, the city was doing a great response. Everybody was putting food somewhere else, and people didn't need emergency food from me. We all needed emergency food, in every possible way. I was marooned in the ministry while everything was going on. Me and my husband -- luckily, he had been laid off from his job very recently, and he was available to help me work at "St. Lucy's" Shelter with the homeless. So he was available to stay with me in there. I actually feel that that week was

so incredible. The kindnesses of people from outside the community was overwhelming. The fact that I had a ministry to the poor attracted all kinds of donations and stuff. So as quickly as Nechama was throwing everything out of the basement, donations were throwing in through the top. I had no space to put it, and people weren't quite paying attention to that part, so I had to rent storage.

My favorite, most treasured -- well, I have a couple of treasured moments -- but one, personally, as a ministry, and as a missionary to the poor, was that World Vision came into Hoboken. They did their evaluation by going through the town. And since we had no communications, no phones and all of that, nobody could find each other unless it was serendipity/synchronicity stuff. They came and met me, and chose the In Jesus' Name Charity Ministry to do their distribution of their resources to the vulnerable in the community, because I already had that type of focus. Their resources and their responses are always to the poor and the vulnerable in the world. They're a worldwide organization. I used to want to be a missionary with them, so I got to be one during Hurricane Sandy. I have pictures of me. [Laughs] They said that when we did the day of distribution -- which I was able to mobilize the poor to come to Our Lady of Grace School Hall, which wasn't

destroyed, for all the stuff that was collected, and stuff from World Vision. We did that on November 6th, by sending out -- I had all the addresses and phone numbers, and I created an on-foot response. I generated that; gave them my business card to refer their neighbors -- because if they weren't pre-registered to the ministry, it didn't mean they weren't in need at that moment of these items that we distributed. That was really special to me.

One of the most amazing synchronicities that I saw was -- cellphones we were able to charge in various and sundry ways -- trucks coming in and letting people charge their phones, and different generators and stuff. So I would get phone calls from some of the poor, in some of the senior buildings and stuff, saying, "April, we have no food." I said I couldn't do anything, I'm like, well -- and telling me what was going on. In 221 Jackson there was this very -- she's in a wheelchair and she has celiac disease. She was trying to cook for other people and she ran out of her own resources. She said some of the poor couldn't come down all the way, when the National Guard was distributing stuff, and she was concerned. But she didn't have paper plates. One of the things I got at the A&P that day was some paper plates.

So I said, "I have some paper plates, and could you use some pasta and this and that? And do you want to cook for some more people?" I was afraid to ask her what she was eating, because she couldn't eat anything, because of her disease. I was so touched by her compassion. My husband and I packed some stuff together, got the paper plates, walked in and met her husband, who took the packages to us. Then she called me so happy: "Oh, April, thank you so much. I was able to feed like twenty-six people, and I couldn't make it today." I didn't even want to know how she was eating. The next day, me at the chapel [unclear]. I am standing at the head of the stairs. Electricity was coming on some places a little bit, and this woman, well-dressed woman, just walked in, and she had two bags with her. Donations had been pouring in, so I said, "Thank you." She said, "No, no, wait a minute. I have celiac disease, and I brought all this wheat-free, gluten-free stuff, because I thought to myself, 'What if there's some poor person who's stuck in the midst of this whole thing, and they can't get the right food that's being distributed on an emergency basis.'" I said, "As a matter of fact, I do know somebody. Let me give you her phone number, her address, and her apartment, and if you could get it to her -- what are the odds? What are the phenomenal

odds of that woman receiving her emergency food through a chain-reaction. It's almost enough to make you definitely believe in God. I already believe in God, so it doesn't surprise me in the least.

But I always that those type of things -- like the cards surviving; the impossible odds; the fact that you always receive what you need when you need it, and you don't always know what you don't need. And if there's one thing that I found out from Hurricane Sandy is what you don't need. A lot can get lost; yet, through many other chain-reactions you get the minimum of what you do need.

I'm still in the dark, and the building's electrical grids were under water, so even when the rest of the city came back on, and the furnace was destroyed and everything, I still had to stay with no lights and no electricity for almost the whole month of November, until everything came back on -- and stay there twelve to fourteen hours a day, because nobody was really communicating what I could and couldn't do, and what I could and couldn't need. So anything could happen. Anything. People were coming in, bringing donations. I had to stop trucks from coming to me, thinking that I had the means to distribute it. I was just overwhelmed by people's goodness, by their donations. I considered it was two

hurricanes. First there was the Hurricane Sandy; then there was the hurricane of good will -- [laughs] that people thought I had the capacity to do. I did everything I could, but it was not possible.

How did I eat and how did I survive, personally? Well, thank god for -- I was so busy coordinating my emergency response, and the clearing, and the hundreds of volunteers coming and going. It was like a madhouse. God might have said, "Be still and know that I am God," but boy, [laughs] I'll tell you, it was like a whirlwind of stuff that I had to coordinate, and match, and deal with. I was constantly having to do it all on my feet. The way I ate was the goodness of people who brought these trucks into Hoboken. They were these people -- they were like town criers. They would come around with notes from the city, and information on where all the food caches were; where food was being distributed; where you could get your cellphones charged. They would have to do it all on foot and bicycle. I would get these notices -- somebody, John Carey -- the most amazing person, and his wife, Sandra, stuck by my side through this. He was out and about, doing all kinds of connections, and bringing me this information. His wife was helping. We were at the "admin" of all this stuff. He also helped me set up my makeshift

headquarters upstairs. We just turned everything around, and borrowed furniture from the church that they didn't know they were lending us [laughs], just to set up everything. He was amazing.

So there were these food trucks that somebody -- I heard it was a retired cop, or a cop who came back to Hoboken -- and they were just constantly cooking. My husband would go out -- there was one by the park. One of the stations was by the park, so when we got hungry my husband would get on the line, and come back with whatever it was going to be for the day. I didn't get to see what was going on in the rest of the city, because I was stuck in my spot, in the unsecured building, with all this goodwill going on, all these donations. I had a guard in watch, and freezing, and going home to a totally dark house. I was already frozen for nine days, waiting and waiting for my block to get the electricity.

One night we had this store open on Sixth and Park. It was my first cold soda for days, and days, and days. [Laughs] And there was this other guy who, when he took his first sip and I took my first sip, we just looked at each other and said, "Yes!" I never thought I'd feel warmth [unclear] cold soda. You like cold soda. But when you're addicted to soda like I am (I'm drinking it right

now, Bob), that was really -- to run out of food completely -- because we did. We only had four days of food -- and be dependent, totally, on the coordination of all of this -- I don't know how to say anything else about that, except that they had the Frankenstein storm, the triple play -- a nor'easter, the high-tide, and the hurricane, and then I had the triple: I had the hurricane aftermath, followed by Thanksgiving and Christmas, in helping all the -- we ended up helping more people than we normally did .

But I didn't really have to -- In Jesus' Name has now recovered completely. Because of the donations of people, their goodwill and all, we were able to rebuild everything. I'm shortening that. I gave you the first week -- because that's what you wanted. Right?

BF: No, no, it's great. But I was going to ask you, are you, would you say, back to normal? Is your facility -- you have the freezers working, and you have electricity, and computers, and -- ?

AH: Everything was replaced. People's donations in cash, or money so I could purchase stuff -- I'm used to building everything and doing everything for everybody's donated castoffs. So, actually, when I actually

had to decide how the place should be rebuilt, and decide what to buy and all that, I found it actually hard. But, yes, I got everything. I got everything back, and more. We didn't rebuild the same structure down in the basement. We left the walls just white-washed cement. The church did, through the FEMA insurance and the archdiocese, they put the furnace back; the electrical; we redid the lighting. The church hired a contractor to put a few of the walls back so I'd have my office space, and Party With a Purpose bought me my contents. I bought all-metal cabinets on wheels [laughs], all-metal shelving -- just on the off-chance we flood again. But they actually put French drains and dealt with the fact -- now I don't think the basement is even going to catch the low-level flooding it used to.

I kept operating the ministry on the upper floor, makeshift. I rented storage places in public storage, and slowly drained all the donations back by priority impact to the hurricane, if it was hurricane-donated, and kept the ministry going, food-wise, at least, and clothing distributions. [Unclear] everything. I found that I'm not space-dependent. I'm kindness-dependent; that goodwill can go on without space, if you're connected.

BF: And obviously there's still a need for the service you're providing in Hoboken.

AH: Yes. I thought that went without saying. I'm back up to my normal visitation rate of 200 households a month. And what I did throughout the aftermath and the recovery was so varied, into so many different levels and people, that there's no way to categorize it. We had the hurricane response, and then we had the food-impact response, then we had who-needed-coats, who still needed to celebrate Thanksgiving. But what I found, too, was that the city did a great job in all the different -- everybody was poor during the hurricane. Every baby might be without formula. I think it was an eye-opener for me to find everybody in the same economic crisis, so we leveled back up again afterwards. And what people's impact was, and how it impacted the poor would be different than the different basements that were lost and stuff.

A nice response was somebody who coordinated a gift registry, so that the poor families who lost everything, in the [unclear] housing buildings, and the people who In Jesus' Name already knew, in their files, who actually [unclear] apartments were flooded -- we replaced all their contents. Not their big furniture, but all the

small things that are hard to replace -- because they would never have the money; whereas, people on other levels, who had jobs, and bank accounts, and credit cards would find it -- and different types of insurance -- would find it easier to replace.

So we did that. It was hard work. I'm glad it's over. [Laughs]

BF: And I hate to ask -- if there is a storm again, do you feel the ministry is better prepared?

AH: Oh, it would depend on what degree of storm. I could say that how I'm prepared is forewarned is forearmed. I would never put all my data in one place again. [Laughs] If it wasn't for the miraculous survival of the floating cards, I don't know -- my ability to respond to people couldn't have occurred. To not put as much wood down there and stuff. I don't want to believe there will ever be another storm like that. I really want to believe it's a once-in-a-hundred-year confluence of events. But we are prone to flooding. I've prepared by having metal, and not putting all my eggs in one basket. I'm still retaining storage units. But you know what the biggest thing I have faith in now? The civic community sense of responsibility

and care. I don't know what other people have said, but I felt that under the circumstances, they did above and beyond an amazing thing. You had a way to get what you needed. I didn't go hungry because of all those trucks. All kinds of goodwill things going on. I was only one. I was stuck in my location, and when you're blocked with -- for the first time I put a Facebook up, because I figured I had to tell people what not to bring me. [Laughs]

BF: Sure. What was the wildest thing that someone brought you?

AH: Evening gowns. As a matter of fact, I think I was losing my mind at that point. I had a white satin thing, and a very fancy -- it looked like -- and I thought -- I took it across to the parish's pastor associate and said -- oh, yes, that was the most wild thing. But I want to just say, from out of my prior relationship, I felt sort of -- I don't know how to explain it -- but convicted that -- how did I not know -- just like the gluten-free woman -- that there wasn't a woman who had a special occasion, among the more affluent in town, whose gown was lost. How I would find her, I don't know. But the thing is -- I was a little critical of that. But it may not

have been appropriate for somebody who had an important occasion, but it didn't get to them. I think I might still have it. Isn't that a good place to end? [Laughter]