

HOW WE WEATHERED THE HURRICANE LIVING IN THE FLOOD ZONE

Recollections by McKevin Shaughnessy

Monday, OCTOBER 29, 2012

With PATH and all New York City's mass transit shut down the night before, and ferry service suspended until further notice, I have no means to get work that Monday morning October 29th. So, around 9:00 am, under overcast skies, my son and I walk to the waterfront to get a sense of what is coming. With Sandy's full fury still a good half day to the south, the Hudson River already scraps the bottom of Pier A. While several people tap off pictures of this on their cell phones, two blocks from the River, the local bagel shop buzzes with customers. It appears like the place has not made any emergency plans for what is surely coming.

Heading over to Washington Street, I notice only one or two stores have put up taped "Xs" on the windows. Yet, I feel a sense of nervous apprehension when I find myself, with several other people, getting last-minute marked-up items at City Paint and Hardware. I buy an LED flash light, the Sternos are sold out.

All through the day and into evening, the wind and rain increases, but nothing too severe. My wife tunes in every now and then to the TV reports occasionally switching stations. They all show the East Coast under Sandy's siege.

As the evening wears on, I remember Channel 7's meteorologist Lee Goldberg becoming more and more animated as he rattles off the totals to the storm surges: 11'-8," 11'-9," 11'-10,"...

Just before 9 pm, one on-the-scene reporter stops to interview a man who says the Hudson River has overtaken the west bank and is now flooding the East Village. Well, if it's flooding in Manhattan, could Hoboken be flooding, too?

We quickly open the front window that looks down on Second Street between Clinton and Grand just as an inch high layer of murky leaf-covered water edges on by. It soon overtakes the curb and spreads to the sidewalks then crests the stoop to the apartment building across the street and finally creeps slowly up the masonry walls.

Cars zoom by, not wanting to stall out. Their wakes send heavy waves against the garage door across the street. It isn't long before the bottom panel of the garage door buckles inward and the dirty river water rushes in.

Suddenly and silently, bright colored flashes light up the western sky in quick succession like the glow from distant fireworks. Purple-red-green-yellow.

— Then, black —

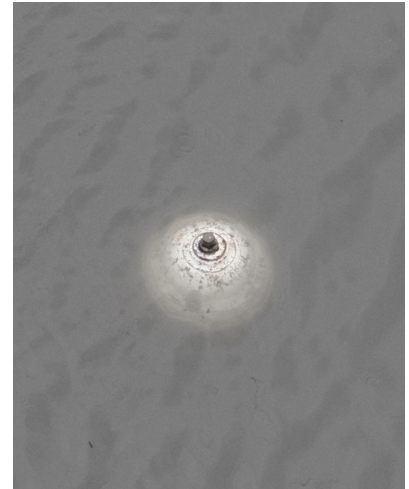
Now under water, Hoboken's western electrical substation that supplies power to numerous TVs, lights, street lamps, computers, appliances and more, shorts-out.

At the time, I didn't know it, but this view—the one looking down on Second Street—was going to be my window on the world for the next four days.

By flashlight, my wife and I load up two coolers placed on the kitchen floor with what ice and freezer packs we have and quickly put in the perishables from the fridge. Not wanting to waste candles during what will surely take several days to fix, we try to get some sleep. It takes a long time though, as the rain pounds against the windows and the flue to the roof howls with the wind.

Tuesday, OCTOBER 30, 2012

We awake to silence, but everything looks a whole lot worse in the morning. Anyone standing on the sidewalk below would have had water up to their pants pockets. Our foyer has 19" of black water right up to the top of the second step. The flooded streets outside are completely empty. Literally no cars anywhere. Except, and this is extraordinary, there in the middle of the street near the corner, an ambulance has been abandoned. They left in a hurry, too, with the passenger side door left wide open.



A cold and windy drizzle persists when I go out on the fire escape to take pictures looking west and east along Second Street. Hoboken resembles Venice, its streets now canals. Leo's Grandezvous Restaurant has water right up to the window line. The stop sign and parking signs look stunted. Down below, the ghostly cap of a fire hydrant can barely be seen about 4 inches under the gasoline-streaked surface.

We listen to 1010 Wins on a wind-up solar powered radio (using batteries) for brief updates and soon have our fill of bad news and turn it off to conserve the batteries.

Cooking and Heating

With both Gas and Electric out, making hot meals and heating a cold apartment becomes crucial. I create a make-shift cooking area on top of the stove by removing the metal pot stand and placing a large can of Sterno on the exposed gas manifold. By using the chaffing stand from an old Fondue set, I am able to get a rather hot flame.

My wife and I cook everything in one Creuset iron pot. With its heavy lid, the food can be brought to boiling giving enough time. We jump-start the water heating in the tea kettle then transfer it into the metal pot.

For Heat, we use our portable Webber BBQ Grill setting it up in the front room next to our now useless gas heater. I find that placing a can of Sterno below the grill where the charcaol goes and a large pot of water on top of the grill not only creates a temporary heating system, but also supplies hot water for washing and doing dishes that now pile up in the kitchen sink.

Wednesday, OCTOBER 31, 2012

Halloween is a bust, of course. Several weeks prior, I'd made a "Creeper" head from the game Minecraft for Ian, but that's as far as we got. Karna. Ian's friend from Jersey City, wants my son to come over for "Trick or Treating" in the highrise building where they live, but we still can't get out the front door. We play Monopoly instead. Ian wins.

Outside, just after lunch, a front loader carrying five stranded residents to higher ground drives past the still-unclaimed abandoned ambulance. We see a National Guard Army Truck turn south down Grand Street and later spy a FEMA volunteer with a dark blue shirt and white FEMA letters making his way west on foot.



Thursday, NOVEMBER 1, 2012

By late afternoon I can see actual pavement at the Second & Grand Street intersection. With boots lined with plastic bags, Ian and I head out to find provisions. At first, we head east on Second Street but the murky-cold water begins seeping into my boots almost immediately. So, we turn around to go west then south around the block on Grand Street. I am surprised to see that, though littered with debris and crusted with mud, that section of road is practically dry.

We head towards Jersey City, (as that township has power), but the A&P is closed! Next, we try the nearby Target just after 5:00pm, but it was closed, too. We flag down a security guard through the locked automatic glass doors who informs us (and four other disappointed people) that the Jersey City Police Department have ordered them to closed at 5pm. Street lights (and traffic lights, for that matter) are still out bordering Hoboken into Jersey City, so they may have deemed it necessary to keep traffic off the roads for safety reasons. It will soon be dark, so we head home empty handed.

Friday, NOVEMBER 2, 2012

In the morning, with large duffle bags, Ian and I trek all the way to the ShopRite near the Holland tunnel and load up with as many provisions as we can carry. The Gas lines for gasoline snake clear around the corner, so using our ¼ tank full car is not an option.

Citywide, cars return to the on-street parking and the sound of several gas-powered generators echo off the buildings as they pump water from flooded basements. Garbage bags and all manner of trash, portions of walls, shelving units, water-soiled furniture, destroyed LP records, books, etc. pile up on the sidewalks. The smell is unpleasant, to say the least. One welcomed sight, though: Public Service workers are on the scene.

After lunch, we walked to Washington Street where the National Guard has set up camp around City Hall. Men in army fatigues are everywhere. A huge tent near the Washington Street and the Observer Hwy Parking lot offers charging stations, hot coffee, bottled water, pre-packaged foods and plenty of tables staffed with FEMA workers to help you file claims.

They have free bags of ice, so we get two bags and head home. Along the way, we meet a man who gives us two rations of Ready-to-Eat meals in the light gray-green packets covered with instructions for use.

Ian finally gets picked up around 4:00 pm by Karna's Dad, for a sleepover. They bring us a case of 24 giant-size Sternos from BJ's as well as a box of long kitchen matches, a loaf of Wonder Bread, a gallon of water and a can of Beef Ravioli. We thank them profusely.

More Public Service workers and the word is promising for some utilities may be restored later that day. Late afternoon, PSEG workers go door-to-door lighting tenant's gas heaters. After two attempts to keep our flames lit, we finally have gas heat and hot water.

Saturday, NOVEMBER 2, 2012

Ian stays over a second night. No need to rush home as the electricity is still out.

Sunday, NOVEMBER 3, 2012

We hoped the electric would be restored on Saturday, but Sunday morning arrives with still no power. My wife picks up Ian by car and later that morning we take Ian's laptop to Panera's and find the only free plug available for customer use near the front part of the store. Everybody there is wired into some device: a phone, an iPod, or laptop. I send an email to my boss not knowing if I will get a reply. I had talked to the boss's son by cell phone earlier and the plan is to come in Monday morning, flashlight in hand, to see what we can do.

[The Terminal Building where I work at Twelveth Avenue and Twenty-Eighth Street in NYC, sustained extensive ground floor damage when the Hudson River overflowed its banks sending 10 ft of water into the basement areas and knocked out power to the entire block-long building.]

We stay at Panera's for another ½ hour so Ian can play Minecraft online. Having played it at Karna's house yesterday, he needs some routine again. That afternoon, electricity is restored in my building! After nearly a week, things start to get back to normalcy. Meanwhile, with each passing day, more and more discarded flood-damaged belongings make Hoboken a junk man's paradise.