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THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
HOBOKEN STORIES:
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

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AS: What is your connection to Hoboken? How long have you lived here? Who do you live with? And what is your profession?

LC: I have been in Hoboken since 2001. I moved to Hoboken from Summit, New Jersey. I met my wife -- my future wife, I should say, at the time -- in 1995. She lived in Hoboken. Obviously, we started dating, and we purchased the house in 2001. Her name is Lisa Biase.

AS: And what is your profession?

LC: My profession is, I'm an auto physical damage adjustor for New Jersey Manufacturer's Insurance Company.

AS: And what is a CERT team?

LC: The Community Emergency Response Team is a group of individuals who are volunteers. It's a totally volunteer organization that helps the community out in times of disaster, when public safety is so far taxed that they need additional resources to help mitigate the problems that we have. We help support the police, the fire, EMS (Office of Emergency Management). There is just a whole variety of roles we play, to help everybody in the community out.

AS: And what sort of things do CERT teams do?

LC: We do almost anything. We can run emergency operation centers. We can answer call centers. We can run shelters. We can fix communication grids when they're down; as simplistic as providing security checkpoints for the Macy's fourth of July. We can run or establish pharmacy chains-of-command to help the community out. There are so many things that we do. We fall under the

umbrella of the Office of Emergency Management, but we do a lot of the grunt work.

AS: What kind of training do the volunteers get?

LC: It's an eight-week mandatory course of different aspects of all of the public-safety requirements. They have medical training. They have fire-suppression training. They have disaster psychology training. They have the CERT organization training. We have supplemental training on top of that, which is optional to them. They can learn as much as they want. We have Red Cross disaster shelter management training. We have weapons of mass destruction training. There is just so much.

AS: And how was the CERT team in Hoboken formed?

LC: The CERT team in Hoboken was formed in 2007. It was primarily a group that was made up of parking utility attendants who were CERT trained. Then in 2010 Mayor Zimmer actually -- what she did was, she made it available to the citizens -- which it should be. We started

off as a small team in 21010. I think we had fifteen graduates. We went through the blizzard of 2011 (I'll have to check on that). We went through Hurricane Irene; then when Irene hit, we really recognized that we needed a lot more people to help out, because if there was a hurricane, it would really be taxing on us. Then what we did was we put information out, and we graduated another class in 2012. We started our classes in 2012, a week before Hurricane Sandy hit.

AS: And how many volunteers were on the team when the hurricane hit?

LC: When the hurricane hit, there were fifteen volunteers who helped out. Actually, fifteen volunteers managed over 5,000 people.

AS: And what is your role on the team, and why did you join?

LC: My role right now is I'm the CERT coordinator for the city of Hoboken. I joined because I wanted to help the community out, and I found a need. There was a real void in emergency services. I'm not saying that

the paid services have issues; it's just that there are just so many -- they need a lot of help. There are just so little public safety officials, or public safety firefighters, that I felt that it might be beneficial to help out the community.

AS: Did you have any previous experience?

LC: I ran an emergency repair facility for nine years, where I repaired emergency vehicles. So not really, per se, in treating people or anything like that. But I had a feel for emergency services.

AS: And how does the Hoboken CERT team get its funding?

LC: Right now we get minimal funding from the city. We have a 501(c)3 under the Hoboken Emergency Response Team. That's our name. We primarily get it from private donors, and some corporations are starting to kick in right now. We're starting a program to educate corporations for a small donation.

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

LC: I first heard the words "Hurricane Sandy" a week prior to our deployment. I was teaching the first course of the new CERT team with Tom Molta, the president of the Hoboken Ambulance Corps, and I had on my Smart phone a warning, an alert come through from the Regional Operations Intelligence Center with the New Jersey State Police, saying, "Hurricane Warning." It was one of those warnings that came across that was very urgent, so I turned it over to Tom, and I said, "Look at this, Tom. We have an issue on our hands." And we had all these other CERT members who were not fully trained yet, but they actually played a vital role because we recruited them. It was sort of a baptism by fire. The twenty-seven people who were in the class actually helped out tremendously.

I should go back and say, technically, they weren't graduated, but we had about thirty-five CERT members working through Hurricane Sandy.

AS: Based on the warnings of the storm, what did you expect it to be like?

LC: Exactly what we encountered. I knew that people didn't take Irene seriously, but I knew from weather reports, and from our ham radio network of friends that we listened to, down South, that we were monitoring the situation on a real-time basis, and we were just hearing the devastation that was going on down South. We took it very seriously. The city took it very seriously, and we did. We were out very early, trying to get the word out to everybody.

AS: And what did the team do to prepare for the storm?

LC: The team prepared by deploying our CERT disaster trailer; getting the emergency operation center up and running; locking down frequencies on our ham repeater system, so we'd have communications; buying batteries. We put every contingency plan in place. We work under the system called the Incident Command System, and we started to apply that knowledge to our response. We had adequate time. We have five-six-seven days, and we also worked in concert with the mayor to get the word out. We were down at the Housing Authority, sending out fliers. Most importantly, our members became prepared before they had to

come out and help, and that's the whole thing about service. Make sure you have a plan, and make sure you're ready, your family is ready, before you can go out and help others. So what I did was I put an all-call out to all the members that Tuesday, and I said, "Listen, we have a hurricane, a possible hurricane coming down the pike. Get your families in order. This is going to be a doozy."

AS: And as the storm was hitting, where was the CERT team?

LC: The CERT team primarily, in the beginning, when the storm was hitting was in the emergency operation center, answering phone calls. That was one of the many tasks that we had that we deployed upon, but that was primarily where everybody was, because it was just not safe enough to go out. We did have some members going out, doing field checks and doing surveys around the city. Then it just became too dangerous for anybody to be out.

AS: After the storm broke -- what did the CERT team do immediately after that?

LC: After the storm broke, we started the recovery of everything. We repaired communications equipment for the fire department. We started a pharmacy chain of command because the senior citizens were trapped in these high-rise buildings. We did grid searches of every block. We knocked on every door, in conjunction with the volunteers who came through from Stevens. We distributed MREs (meals ready to eat). We set up the high school -- I called it the mother ship, the mother hub -- and we made that a major distribution center. Then what we did was we created points of distribution throughout the city, so we were able to drop food, water, diapers -- all the essential needs -- to each individual point of distribution, so that the citizens would be taken care of. We distributed lights. We had over 23,000 meals ready to eat that we distributed. It was a major, Herculean task. We would be here for three hours if I told you what we did.

AS: When did you first survey the damage?
Where did you go, and what was your initial reaction?

LC: I actually surveyed the damage -- I would go out -- in fact, it's a funny story -- with Tom Molta, the president of the Hoboken Ambulance Corps. The

only time we would see each other, because he was so busy and I was so busy, was when we did surveys. I remember the morning after the storm hit -- it's pitch dark; he's driving down the road; I'm driving down the road; his truck was tattered. The light was broken off of it, and we both didn't get any sleep. He goes, "How you doin'?" I said, "I'm doin' pretty good. How are you doing?" We were like two ships passing in the wind.

But that's when it was real to me, what really happened. Then after that I saw the damage, and we had to react immediately. I had to establish a plan for the team members, and, actually, in conjunction with the Office of Emergency Management. We had to get a plan ready immediately, to start the recovery of it.

AS: And what things did the CERT team do in the days after the storm?

LC: As I said before, we started a pharmacy chain of command. We did grid searchers. We went to each individual home. The pharmacy chain of command was a system in council chambers where I recruited doctors, pharmacists, nurse practitioners to establish this chain, so they could actually write prescriptions in council chambers. What I

did was I got permission from CVS Pharmacy for us to end runners up to these high-rise buildings, to fill prescriptions for seniors. They were going up to the top floor; they were getting the prescription bottle; bringing it down to council chambers; they were writing the prescription; they were bringing it to CVS; waiting for the prescription; and going back up to the senior buildings. And, like I said, the points of distribution -- fixing communication hubs. There was so much. In fact, if you read the thing I gave you, it goes into a lot more. We also ran and manned three shelters in the city, for almost thirteen days. So our deployment was really vital the day after the storm, and most of us didn't go home until thirteen days afterwards. The power went on in about ten days. We were responsible for setting up the emergency operation center, actually managing the emergency operations center, making tough calls on where fire trucks were going to go; where ambulances had to go; what was priority; what wasn't priority; what phone lines were down; giving general information out to the public, like if the commuter rails were up, when the power was going to go back on. We were interacting with FEMA, getting logistics, getting equipment for the city.

AS: What were some of the challenges that the CERT team faced, and among those, was there one that was most urgent?

LC: Communications. We didn't have the ability, really, to communicate too much. Probably, you could say this about everybody: Phones were down. We were fortunate enough to have two ham repeaters that were installed, and they worked flawlessly throughout the whole tour, the whole storm. But, for the most part, we didn't have enough handy-talkies to give out to everybody. Lack of equipment that we had: We didn't have the equipment we really needed. We're working on that now, to establish more equipment.

AS: And of that equipment, what does that contain? What sort of resources did you need, and did you feel like you had enough?

LC: No, we did not have enough. Still, to this day, we're not 100% up-to-snuff, but we're a lot better now than we were back pre-Sandy. We need cash. I hate to say it, but we need in-kind donations from communications companies, or whatever, or public donations,

to afford this equipment. It's kind of expensive. Well, in the grand scheme of things it's expensive to us, but to other people it may not be. It's somewhere along the lines of \$20-25,000 that we need to raise, to make us more viable.

AS: When did you consider the emergency phase of the storm to be over?

LC: The emergency phase was when the power went back on and people were starting to restore. That's very hard to say, because it was kind of a blur. I'm going to say nine days afterwards.

AS: Were there any unsung heroes, or people you would like to cite for their work during the storm?

LC: Absolutely. I would like to cite Maggie Shields, who's my captain. There are just so many that I cannot leave out, who were there throughout the whole storm. I would be here for an hour. Alison Atwater; Carlie Ringer; Rich Tremiditi. I can change this as I go -- right? -- in the future. That would be off the top of my head, immediately. There are going to be more.

AS: What did the CERT team learn from this storm and this experience?

LC: What did we learn? There's this big conception about "we are stronger than the storm." I think that's a great slogan, but I don't think it's truthful, by any means. I think the storms are stronger than us, and the problem is that we've become complacent. I think we really have to be educated on what could be coming down the road. We live in this fantasyland that, "Oh, it's a 100-year-storm," or whatever. But we have to be prepared, and we have to harden our infrastructure, and really think about what's going on. We have to think about it now, we can't think about it ten years from now.

AS: And how many members, or volunteers, does the team have now? Are you still looking for new volunteers? And how can one join?

LC: Okay. We have sixty-five members right now, which is outstanding. We had a huge influx of members through Hurricane Sandy. We are, right now, soliciting members for the new class. The new class starts in

November. We have forty-five applicants already signed up; our limit is sixty-five. I have probably twenty promises, but I don't have the applications in hand right now. We have a website. You can go to the city's website, look up Hoboken CERT -- Hoboken CERT.org -- and you can fill out an application and send it in, accordingly. The class, this time around, is probably going to be full, but look for future updates. You can go to our Facebook page. We have a Hoboken CERT Facebook page. We're working to update our website, to make it a little more professional.

AS: How did you balance your role as a CERT volunteer with also being a resident, who was also affected by the storm?

LC: Luckily, my power did not go out in my house, so my wife was very comfortable. It didn't go out the whole time. We're on the Union City grid, so that made it a lot easier. We even had our television working properly. So I felt that I was very fortunate that we had the necessities, and we were comfortable. My wife was helping out the community. I felt it was my duty to go out and help others who were trapped on the thirteenth floor, who had issues.

AS: Do you feel that Hoboken has recovered?
And if so, was there a moment when you thought "Hoboken is back?"

LC: Yes. I had a false sense of -- I can "false," because one can never be 100% that it's not going to happen again -- but when all the garbage was off the street -- because we saw terror for so many days, and we saw the destruction and everything -- when the parks started opening back up, and people were swinging on the swings -- the kids started to play again -- that kind of gave me a little bit of hope, I should say. As for us being ready -- we're more ready than we were last year, I can promise you that, but we still need a lot more education. We still need people. It's people's complacency. That's the problem. They don't fully understand it; they don't take the warnings. They just don't. It's hard to pound something into somebody's head. I hate to say it that way, but that's the truth.

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

LC: I would just say, if anybody can join the Community Emergency Response Team, do so. It's great for the community. We absolutely need more members. Get out; educate yourself; listen to people; if you get a flier in your hand that says, "Heed the warnings," or if you get a flier in your hand that says, "Be prepared and do this," read it, please. Don't throw it in the garbage. Listen to what the officials have to say, because it's very important. It could save your life some day.

AS: Okay. I think that's everything I have.

LC: Okay.