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How a Beach Community Became a Deathtrap

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Eugene Contrubis heard the many warnings about Hurricane Sandy but decided to ride it out in his drafty, one-story bungalow at 162 Kiswick Street, near the beach on Staten Island. Soft-spoken and frail, he was a retired Police Department clerk who wrote poetry, enjoyed chess and adored his nieces. When they were children, he hung a swing from a tree in his yard for them to play on.

Mr. Contrubis had lived alone since his mother's death a few years ago. He had outlasted storms before. This one would be no different.

As night fell on Monday, Oct. 29, Mr. Contrubis, 67, talked by phone with his brother-in-law. The wind had felled some branches, he reported, nothing more.

But around 6:45 p.m., water from Lower New York Bay breached the beachfront road and poured into Mr. Contrubis's neighborhood, knocking out power and eventually swallowing entire blocks.

At some point, Mr. Contrubis left a message on the voice mail of his sister, Christina Contrubis.

"The water's coming in," he said softly.

His body was found in his house the next day.

Mr. Contrubis was one of eight people who drowned during Hurricane Sandy in Midland Beach, a small, low-slung neighborhood of one-story bungalows and newer two- and three-story houses. The eight lived within about eight short blocks of one another — apparently the highest concentration of deaths in the United States attributable to the storm, which killed more than 100 people in this country.

One of the bodies was discovered only on Friday, nearly two weeks after the storm. The deaths have raised unsettling questions about why the victims were in their homes when the storm hit and whether the city bore some responsibility for their failure to evacuate. Relatives, friends and officials have replayed the events of that night, pondering whether

they should have done something different — and whether the city needs to improve its evacuation procedures for future storms.

Midland Beach is part of Zone A, a collection of neighborhoods in the city deemed most at risk of flooding. The city declared a mandatory evacuation of the zone before Hurricane Sandy.

Last year, in the days before Tropical Storm Irene, city workers visited the neighborhood, broadcasting evacuation warnings by loudspeaker, residents recalled.

This time, officials said, city workers were sent once again to Staten Island's evacuation zones to issue warnings, some using loudspeakers. But many residents of Midland Beach said they did not hear them.

Still, it is not at all certain that such a measure, or even the police's going door to door, would have made a difference. Like most of the neighborhood's residents, the victims ignored numerous orders to evacuate, a decision that underscores an independent streak that runs deep on Staten Island.

"I tried very hard," Ms. Contrubis said through sobs at her brother's funeral on Monday. "Before the storm I called him up and said, 'Gene, the storm, it looks bad!' And he said, 'Everybody's staying; nobody's leaving.' He just told me: 'I'm not going to leave. I'm not going to leave.'"

The eight victims were mostly elderly — the youngest was 59. Most lived alone, and one was legally blind, paraplegic and had cerebral palsy. On that night, the neighborhood turned into a lake that was more than nine feet deep in some places — nearly enough to fill the victims' homes.

Councilman James Oddo, a Republican who represents the area, said he was distressed that a cluster of such deaths could occur.

"It weighs heavily on me," Mr. Oddo said. "It means to a certain degree that we in government failed."

Lulled Into Complacency

Mr. Contrubis's parents bought the bungalow at 162 Kiswick Street in the 1960s as a summer cottage. At the time, they lived in Manhattan, but Mr. Contrubis's mother loved the beach and she eventually moved to Staten Island full time. When Mr. Contrubis returned home from the military after serving in the Vietnam War, he moved in.

People have long been drawn to Midland Beach for the quietude, affordable real estate and proximity to the water.

The neighborhood had once been largely Irish-American, but in the past few decades, it has grown more diverse, as Italian-Americans arrived, followed by Latinos and, most recently, an influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, some of whom had been priced out of Eastern European enclaves in southern Brooklyn.

For all its attractions, Midland Beach suffers a chronic problem: flooding.

Keri Mullen, whose family has lived for six generations in a house on Moreland Street, said she remembered when water reached her porch during a storm in the 1970s. Her parents and grandparents told her about flooding in the '50s and '60s.

In the late '70s, the city built a storm sewer system down Greeley Avenue, on the western side of the neighborhood, which helped relieve flooding during heavy rains. More recently, the city began work on a system of wetlands on the north side of the neighborhood to help address the problem.

But few residents had any memory of water rising high enough to threaten homes, let alone lives. Councilman Oddo said the last time bay water crossed the neighborhood's beachfront roadway, Father Capodanno Boulevard, was in 1992. But even then it caused relatively little damage.

As Hurricane Sandy approached, residents' thoughts turned to Tropical Storm Irene. In August 2011, many, including Mr. Contrubis, had been alarmed enough by the authorities' warnings to evacuate in advance of that storm, only to find afterward that their homes were unscathed.

As a result, many viewed evacuation as a waste of time.

"They've warned us so many times before and nothing happened," said Graceanna Paterno, 45, a lifelong resident.

John Prisinzano, 64, who has lived on Grimsby Street for 32 years, recalled the brief conversations he had with neighbors before Hurricane Sandy.

" 'Hey, how are you doing? Are you going to stay?' " someone would say.

" 'Yeah, we're going to stay,' " came the reply.

"I'm here 32 years, never had a flood," he explained.

And so as the wind picked up on the afternoon of Oct. 29, and a light rain began to fall, many residents went inside their homes, turned on computers and television sets, fired up video games and opened books, and waited for the storm to come and go.

Panic in the Dark

It was already dark when Laurajean Sammarco, 48, ventured to the doorstep of her house on Father Capodanno Boulevard.

She was startled to see a surge of bay water tumbling over a barrier near the beach and rushing toward her house.

“I said, ‘That can’t be water!’ ” she remembered. “It wasn’t like ‘Hawaii Five-o.’ It was like ‘The Blob.’ ”

She started calling relatives. “I’m screaming: ‘Get out! Get out!’ ” She jumped in her car with her husband, daughter and dog and raced through the neighborhood trying to pick up relatives and friends.

Panic began to seize household after household in Midland Beach as water pushed relentlessly into the neighborhood, slowly in some places, more quickly in others.

“Calls were coming in: somebody’s calling somebody, who’s calling somebody,” said Bill Owens, a retired police officer, whose family has lived in Midland Beach since 1928.

Residents reported water coming not just from the direction of the bay but, in some areas, from Hylan Boulevard to the west, or pushing south from the wetlands or north from Miller Field.

As water arrived on his street, Mr. Owens stepped outside to move his truck from a space on the corner.

But he never got there.

Within minutes, he was swimming frantically to get to the high stoop of a neighbor’s house.

Some residents who lived in two- and three-story houses grabbed children and pets and ran to upper floors. But for those in bungalows, higher ground was harder to reach.

“All these poor old-timers,” Mr. Owens said. “They must’ve been sleeping in their beds or watching TV.”

Two blocks east of Mr. Contrubis's bungalow, water began seeping into the one-story bungalow on Grimsby Street where Lucy Spagnuolo and her mother, Beatrice, 79, lived.

The elder Ms. Spagnuolo, a widow with a heart ailment, had moved to the neighborhood more than 40 years ago with her husband, a truck driver. She had raised four sons and two daughters in their small home.

The younger Ms. Spagnuolo went outside to start the car, but the water had risen so fast that the engine would not work. She got out and was in waist-deep, fast-rising water.

She waded up the block, desperately yelling for help in the darkness. "I panicked," she recalled.

Mr. Prisinzano and his wife, who live across the street, were fleeing in their sedan and saw Ms. Spagnuolo shouting.

But they kept going. They had no choice, they said.

"I just got to the corner and I couldn't make out what she was saying and the water was up to the windows," Mr. Prisinzano said. "We couldn't get back anyway. We just got out."

Within minutes, the water had topped the white fence in front of the Spagnuolos' home, and the younger Ms. Spagnuolo was unable to return to her mother.

Throughout the pitch-black neighborhood, people were fighting for their lives.

Once Ms. Sammarco warned her relatives of rising waters, two of her brothers, Angelo and Frankie Paterno, raced in their vehicles to rescue a cousin who lived alone in a bungalow on Nugent Avenue, a block west of Grimsby Street.

The cousin, John Paterno, 65, had cerebral palsy and, paralyzed from the waist down and legally blind, was largely bedridden.

He received regular visits from a home health aide, and for more than two decades, his cousins had been feeding him, washing him and, at various times, living with him.

But as floodwaters climbed, he was alone with his pet cockatoo and a pit bull named Bear.

Frankie Paterno said he was able to drive within a block of his cousin's house and dived into the water, ignoring the danger from a downed power line nearby. But the surging waves kept knocking him back, and he finally had to give up.

“He was our responsibility, and we couldn’t get him,” said Ms. Paterno, another cousin. “We tried. We really did. He died a horrible death. And we didn’t get the help for him.”

A block farther west, on Kiswick Street, a boat loaded with evacuees passed in front of the house of Mr. Contrubis, the 67-year-old former Police Department clerk.

He signaled to them, a neighbor later told his relatives, but the boat’s pilot told him there was no room and they would come back to get him.

They never did.

HUDDLED ON THE ROOFTOPS

After the storm surge, only a few small boats plied the flooded neighborhood.

The most substantial was an inflatable rescue boat with three firefighters. Other firefighters were in a rowboat commandeered in the neighborhood. Anthony Guida, one of the firefighters, said there were also civilians in boats, including two men in a canoe. Another man, he recalled, was piloting a bright yellow-and-blue craft that resembled “an inflatable pool toy.” He was using a plastic shovel as an oar.

“That’s all that was out there,” Firefighter Guida said.

He described a landscape of floating debris and families huddled on rooftops, the arcing beams of their flashlights slicing the dark. “There was nothing between us and Portugal, which was kind of daunting,” he said.

The firefighters heard cries for help from rooftops, though many of the stranded summoned help silently by waving flashlights.

“From nowhere, we’d get a beam of light and we’d have to track where that light was coming from,” Firefighter Guida, 52, said.

“Covering the entire Midland Beach area was impossible for one boat, or three,” he said. “It would have been impossible for 10 boats.”

On Kiswick Street, where Mr. Contrubis drowned, Firefighter Guida came across four members of a stranded family and their large dog.

“We couldn’t get them in the boat with the dog,” he said. “They made a heart-wrenching decision to stay with the dog, and they gave us their children.” (The parents survived.)

Firefighter Guida's unit worked in Midland Beach for five hours, making about 20 trips and rescuing scores of people. At 3 a.m., the unit had to relocate to the south for another emergency. Across the borough, the Fire Department rescued about 200 people over the course of the night, officials said.

Though the waters in Midland Beach began to recede in the early morning, they remained several feet high in parts of the neighborhood for much of Tuesday, the day after the storm.

Most residents were able to return to their homes by Wednesday, but even as late as Thursday, some roads remained impassable for cars.

As water retreated, a pattern of deaths emerged.

The bodies of Mr. Contrubis and the elder Ms. Spagnuolo were pulled from their bungalows on Tuesday. So was the body of Ms. Spagnuolo's next-door neighbor and friend, Anastasia Rispoli, 73.

One of John Paterno's nephews, using a small boat, reached his uncle's bungalow Tuesday morning and discovered Mr. Paterno's pit bull alive, on top of the cockatoo's bird cage. The bird died.

When the nephew emerged with the dog, neighbors still trapped in their homes — but watching the rescue from high stoops and upper-story windows — applauded.

The nephew saw no trace of Mr. Paterno inside, and the family assumed he had been evacuated.

In the afternoon, however, divers in scuba gear returned to the bungalow and found Mr. Paterno's submerged body beneath his overturned bed.

Daniel Walsh lives across the street, and spent the storm on the upper floors of his three-story house.

"We never heard anything, no cry for help," Mr. Walsh said. "The dog didn't bark at all."

On Wednesday, rescuers discovered the body of Patricia Bevan, 59, in her bungalow on Hunter Avenue. The storm surge had turned the interior into a jumble of furniture, kitchenware and mud.

Her next-door neighbor, Abner Santiago, 64, said Ms. Bevan moved onto the block last spring and would walk her Pekingese every day. He had last seen her about 4 p.m. on the day of the storm, standing in front of her home. She was not planning to evacuate.

“She said: ‘I have no place to go. I have no place to go,’ ” Mr. Santiago said.

The authorities are still searching for the next of kin of Ms. Bevan and Ms. Rispoli.

Evacuation Questions

Could the eight dead in Midland Beach have been saved?

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg ordered a mandatory evacuation of Zone A — which includes neighborhoods in all five boroughs — at 11:30 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 28, the day before the storm hit. About 375,000 people are believed to live in Zone A around the city, officials said.

In interviews, Bloomberg aides said the city had clearly succeeded in alerting the city’s residents to the storm’s dangers and offering safe passage to the most vulnerable.

For several years, the authorities have conducted a campaign to inform people in the most flood-prone areas about preparing for hurricanes. The effort included making presentations at community boards and senior centers, holding news conferences and distributing millions of pamphlets.

After Tropical Storm Irene, the city stepped up this program, according to Caswell F. Holloway, deputy mayor for operations.

“For the entire 14 months leading up to Hurricane Sandy, we were engaged in a continuous effort aimed at people who live in Zone A,” Mr. Holloway said in an interview.

Before Hurricane Sandy’s arrival, Mr. Bloomberg held news conferences and the city sent alerts via text message, e-mail and social media to residents in flood-prone areas.

The city also deployed police officers, as well as groups of volunteers known as Community Emergency Response Teams, to inform people about the evacuation. One of these groups passed through Midland Beach, officials said, with the mission of knocking on doors and warning people in the streets.

But the campaigns in residential neighborhoods appear to have been more modest than those in the city’s public housing projects in Zone A, where Housing Authority workers knocked on every apartment door and made repeat visits to the homes of the most infirm, city officials said.

Linda Gibbs, the deputy mayor for health and human services, said the city works with nonprofit groups to coordinate the evacuation of homebound older residents. But if people are not in facilities like hospitals, she said, getting them to evacuate can be challenging.

“If a person does not want to leave their own home, we cannot force them,” she said.

In the end, only about half of the residents in Zone A around the city evacuated, officials estimated. In Midland Beach, residents said they believed that an even smaller percentage left their neighborhood.

Refusal to obey a mandatory evacuation order is a misdemeanor, punishable by up to 90 days in jail. Yet the authorities rarely make arrests in such cases.

Officials now say they plan to conduct a thorough review of the Hurricane Sandy evacuation.

“We are going to look at people who left and people who didn’t, and we’re going to talk to them about why,” Mr. Holloway said.

Asked if the deaths in Midland Beach reflected a failure of the city’s evacuation efforts, he responded that the term “failure” might apply “if the city didn’t have a plan and this came upon us and we were going on the fly.” But he added: “A hurricane is a foreseeable thing.”

“We have a plan for that,” he said, “and we’ve done it.”

Decisions to Be Made

Since the storm passed, residents have re-entered their homes and sorted through their mud-caked belongings. They have hauled sodden possessions — furniture, appliances, clothes, heirlooms, photo albums — to the curb for the sanitation trucks to cart away.

Many are vowing to rebuild. Others, even those whose families have lived in Midland Beach for generations, are considering moving.

“This is the first time water has ever come into the house,” Mr. Owens, the retired police officer, said.

He was standing in front of the two homes his great-grandfather, an immigrant from France, built on Olympia Boulevard. He and family members were tearing down the walls and gutting the first floor of the two structures.

“Eighty-four years we’ve been here,” he said. He shook his head: “Now, I’ve got to stop and think about it.”

Ms. Sammarco, who sounded the early warning on Father Capodanno Boulevard, said she might abandon not only the waterfront blocks, but also the neighborhood entirely.

“For the first time in my life, it crossed my mind,” she said. “Am I going to be all right? With every rainstorm, are we going to panic?”

The trauma has only deepened as more discoveries have been made.

Nearly four days after the storm, police officers emerged from a bungalow on Olympia Boulevard carrying two corpses in body bags. Officials were trying to confirm the victims’ full names, but their landlord said they were siblings. The brother, David, was 65, and the sister, Charlotte, was in her mid-70s.

They had died with their dogs, cats, birds, a rabbit and a hamster. If they were unable to evacuate their entire menagerie, they had told the landlord, they were going to stay home.

On Friday, long after the floodwaters had drained, police officers on patrol were flagged down and asked to check on a bungalow on Mapleton Avenue.

Building inspectors had already come by, but they had apparently not gone inside. When the officers did, they found the body of a 64-year-old man.

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