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## Ruins, Rumors, and Resilience in Rockaway

By Mark Jacobson



The boardwalk has been washed away in Rockaway.

A day after he cancelled the marathon, Mayor Bloomberg, still anxious to avoid being cast in the role of President Bush looking out the plane window at the Katrina devastation below, came to Far Rockaway. Throughout the city citizens were claiming to have been forgotten by Bloomberg, FEMA and God Himself. But Far Rock, the predominately African-American neighborhood at the extreme east end of the Rockaway peninsula, last stop on the A train, where many live in notoriously dangerous NYCHA projects and unemployment runs upwards of 25%, purports to be more forgotten than most. As it is said out here at the end of the line, they don't call the place Far Rockaway for nothing. The upshot of the Mayor's sojourn was predictable. Bloomberg wore the same Indiana Jones leather jacket he always does when venturing into the Conradian outer borough wilds, and people screamed at him. With all the bleeping on the New York 1 documentation of the event, it might as well have been a DMX video.

Fact was, at least to the naked eye, when it came to storm damage, Far Rock had gotten off relatively easy compared to the rest of the peninsula. Twelve miles west via Beach Channel Drive (but a light year psychologically) at Breezy Point, where the cops and firemen live in their gated workingman's paradise, fire had destroyed over one hundred homes. Four days after the storm, the smell was still in the air as dozens of emergency vehicles continued to file into the well-kept community. Engine company 239 from Park Slope was part of the procession. Asked why they were so far from home, one firefighter said, "to show our support to our brothers and sisters." Edging east, Neposit, Bell Harbor and Rockaway Park had taken the brunt of Sandy's surge. From 140th

Street on down to the 80's where the surfers hop off the A train with their boards, house after house had been flooded. Ruined possessions neatly shoved into black construction bags were piled high on lawns. The boardwalk, flung loose from its moorings, remained atop of flattened cars 100 yards down 94th Street. Rumor had it that the fire which had taken out a line of stores on Rockaway Beach Boulevard and 114th Street was started when owners of a pizza shop fled the storm and forgot to turn off the oven. Yet this community had been through disaster before. This is where American Airlines flight 587 came down, killing 265 people. That was only two months after 9/11, when so many locals had died trying to save people in the collapsed buildings. As many Belle Harbor residents gathered in front of St. Francis De Sales church on 129th Street, where trucks of donated food and clothing were lined up, the feeling was the community had survived that. They would survive this too.

"I heard about the damage in Breezy, those places up the beach. That's terrible. I will pray on it. But Far Rock is another country. A whole other deal. No power, no heat, no hot water just ain't the same thing for us as it is for them," said Ronald Williams, a "born and bred" resident of the so-called "Forty Projects" on Beach Channel Drive who in the midst of the storm had walked "through Hell and high water" to check on his elderly, disabled aunt who lives in an apartment on Mott Avenue, the area's downtrodden major shopping street. Along with a number of Far Rock locals, Thomas, a slight fiftyish man in a faded Knickerbocker cap, was spending the chilly afternoon inside the Platinum Plus Unisex Hair Care Salon. Calvin Thompson, manager of the venerable, narrow railroad style barbershop for the last 22 years, said "when I saw what was up, I bought this \$300 generator for \$1000 so people would have a place to go, charge up their phone, get a little warm. There is things more important than cutting hair, sometimes."

Much of the talk inside the Platinum Plus involved news of where donation centers had been set up for food and other aid. Jet Blue Airlines had trucked a couple thousand box lunches to be distributed at the Conch Playground near the Edgemere projects over on Beach 49th Street, but that was more than a mile away. Without gas, no one was going over there, especially since, as one woman (erroneously) reported, "a giant sinkhole" was right behind the sprawling public housing development. Reputed to be twenty feet deep, a couple people had supposedly drowned in the hole. As time wore on, however, there was the issue of nightfall. Olga Machado, 67, was anxious to get home to her Seagirt Boulevard apartment before dark. "It was like a horror movie," said Ms. Machado, speaking of the night of the storm. "The water came up. Like up to the windows. Eight, nine feet. Then the water went out, and there they were: the wolves. These people, they were just standing where the water was, looking for something to steal."

A few blocks away at the Redfern (known locally as the Deadfern) projects, it was more of the same. A man in his late 20's who referred to himself only as Todd said you couldn't compare post-Sandy life in Far Rock with what was happening "up the beach." The assumption was the people of Breezy and Belle Harbor, no matter how many houses had been wrecked, would take care of their own. "They got someone to call, who we gonna call?" Todd was sitting in the front seat of his Hyundai, which was parked on Redfern Avenue by the shuttered mini-mart. Sandy's surge had covered the four-year old vehicle, the salt water wrecking the machine's computer system. "I'm still making payments, and shit is done," said Todd, trying to turn the engine over for perhaps the hundredth time. He waved his arm down the street in the direction of dozens of other similarly affected cars. "Every car in the project is ruined," he said.

Still, Todd was not defeated. He had one thing most people, even the cops in Breezy, didn't: gas. He'd just filled up before the storm, had almost a full tank. Originally Todd thought of siphoning out the gas and selling it for \$30 a gallon on Craigslist. But this didn't feel right. Now he wanted to find a car and fill it up

so he could drive people around to polls for election day. "People got to vote," Todd said. "Ain't going to do no fucking good. But people got to vote."

Photo: Spencer Platt/2012 Getty Images

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