

Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

Transcript translated to English

Participant: Maria Rivera, 77 years old, female (SPP_RM)

Interviewer: Tania Goicoechea (NYU T.G.)

Interview conducted in Spanish on 09/21/22

Site: United Senior Center of Sunset Park

NYU T.G.: So, as I was telling you, this is to understand the experiences of different people -- of course everyone had a different experience in this city -- in 2012 with Superstorm Sandy. And what we want is to ask you some specific questions, but also if you want to tell me something that I'm not asking, you can just tell me. We want to know what you want to tell us about your experience. To begin, I want to start with where you live and how long you have lived there.

SPP_RM: Okay, I live at [...] in Red Hook, apartment 5E on the 5th floor. What else?

NYU T.G.: Can you describe your street or the building to me?

SPP_RM: The building has six floors. I live on the 5th floor. When the storm started, there was a lot of water, [everything] was flooding. My sister's car was outside, it hit a bus and a car and [the water] took it down the street and [it] crashed down there. We couldn't go down [to the street] because there was no light and I wanted to go down, but I can't go down the stairs. You know, I can't, my leg hurts a lot, so I can't go downstairs. I live there by myself. My sister lives like two blocks [away] and it was difficult because there was no food. So a person, I don't know who, if he was from the city or someone, brought our food up a rope.

NYU T.G.: A rope like... I mean, how?

SPP_RM: I don't know how someone got on the roof.

NYU T.G.: So they put like something...

SPP_RM: ...something and they pulled it and brought us breakfast and lunch. Then there was no water, there was no water, everything was flooded up to the second floor. I couldn't... Well, a lot of people went down, but I couldn't go down. So that makes me sad, because it made me want to cry, you know, because I was alone... and the windows started moving.

NYU T.G.: With the wind.

SPP_RM: Because of the wind and the rain. So I was, well, I was desperate. I wanted everything to end so I could leave. I wanted to leave and I couldn't do anything. I would throw myself on the bed to cry and wait for someone to come, but no one came, only the same ones who lived there. We took care of each other.

NYU T.G.: It was the community who...

SPP_RM: If they gave me a lot of food, then I shared it with the lady on the third floor, whose name is Ana, who has lived there for about 40 years.

NYU T.G.: And how long have you been living there?

SPP_RM: Like 12 or 13 years. Yeah, and it's not as bad a place as people say. Sometimes you get good people there too. So the neighbors were the good ones.

NYU T.G.: So when Hurricane Sandy hit, you had just gotten there.

SPP_RM: Yes, I had just arrived.

NYU T.G.: And your sister lived nearby?

SPP_RM: Yes, my sister lived two blocks from there.

NYU T.G.: Well that's good.

SPP_RM: At 75 and... What is the name of this street? My God, I forget. I'm a little bit off. What else can I tell you?

NYU T.G.: So the hurricane came, and you felt the wind and everything...

SPP_RM: Yes, you could feel the wind, the rain. Downstairs there was a lot of water.

NYU T.G.: And did [someone] tell you that this was going to happen or was it a surprise [for you]?

SPP_RM: Well, there was like a thing on TV. You know, like a warning that you shouldn't go outside, that there was danger because something could fall and all that, but I don't know, it didn't give much time for anything.

NYU T.G.: And did someone from the city come to tell you that you had to evacuate or not?

SPP_RM: No, someone came and they explained to us that the elevator could not be used because it was dangerous to use the elevator and that the water below was very high. That we shouldn't try to go out, because the wind could knock things over and they could hit us. But I didn't go down because I couldn't, my legs hurt and I couldn't go down from the 5th floor. I can't go down.

NYU T.G.: If we go back to the days before the storm, do you remember how you prepared for it? Do you remember being warned and knowing it was coming?

SPP_RM: Well, they were giving the warning on television that a storm was coming, but nobody came to the house to tell us.

NYU T.G.: Not even to tell you that you had to evacuate.

SPP_RM: No, no, no. I only think [they told] the ones on the first floor, because the water reached the second floor, so I'm not sure if they took the ones on the first floor. All I know is that Mrs. Ana from the third floor, she came to my house and was crying and so we sat down for a while and talked and all that, but we couldn't do much because there was no light. There was no water. We made some coffee, but it didn't taste like much. So then she left. I told her she could stay, but she has a son with asthma, so she went downstairs. After that I didn't see her for about a week and a half, until everything was over and they opened. So the restaurant... There's a

restaurant about two blocks away. They tried to send us food, they brought it up with one... I don't know what that is called.

NYU T.G.: I know what you mean... What is that called?

SPP_RM: Yes, they pulled it with a bucket and put the food in it and...

NYU T.G.: Yes, they pulled it up with a rope...

SPP_RM: ...they pulled it with the rope and that's how we got it, but it wasn't pleasant at all.

NYU T.G.: And how did you get water?

SPP_RM: We bought bottles of water. Three or four days before [the storm] happened, we went to the store and bought [water] bottles, bread and other things.

NYU T.G.: Do you remember the first time you found out that a storm was coming... How did you feel? Did you feel scared or did you say like "this isn't going to be so bad"?

SPP_RM: Scared. Of course, I was scared. But I didn't think it was going to be that strong. I just said "it's going to rain". You know how you say "oh, if it's going to rain, well that's ok. It's going to rain and maybe [there will be] a little bit of wind". But when it started coming hard, then it did scare me, I was panicked. I went to the doctor and they gave me panic pills, for panic attacks.

NYU T.G.: Before the storm or after?

SPP_RM: No, after the storm, and I'm still... to tell you the truth I'm not well. I have a lot of diseases. I suffer from high blood pressure, panic attacks, and I have diabetes. But whatever God wants... I'm still here, 77 years old. Thank God.

NYU T.G.: Yes that makes sense, I think that at the end of the day these experiences are traumatic.

SPP_RM: Every time I hear... or now that they said that a storm was going to Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo, I'm nervous.

NYU T.G.: Of course.

SPP_RM: Yes, because I start to think of all the things that can happen and well, it already gives me chills.

NYU T.G.: Yes, these experiences are very...

SPP_RM: They are hard.

NYU T.G.: very hard...

SPP_RM: ...and especially for the elderly

NYU T.G.: Of course. Part of the reason we're doing this [project] and why we want to have stories from people like you, and people who come here to the Center, is to understand the story of people who, at the end of the day, often don't have a chance to talk about their experiences. Many times, the stories that are collected are from people who were perhaps in a different situation.

SPP_RM: And I think that nobody wants to go through [what we went through]. It's very difficult, especially when you're older and alone like that. No, I hope to God something like this doesn't happen again. I can't tell you anything else, because that's what I remember the most and there are days I don't want to remember. When they speak about a storm coming to Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo, my nerves get bad quickly ...

SPP_RM: I want to thank you for telling us your story, because I truly feel that this is very important. Hopefully we will be able to share these stories we are collecting with the people in charge, in order to better prepare the response to these things because...

SPP_RM: ...you are never ready. There is no way to tell you... they tell you that a storm is coming, but they don't tell you that the storm is going to hit so hard. And not just because it's strong, but because of one's state of mind, like it hurts one's nerves or something. Yes, that bothered me a lot and it still bothers me. I don't want to know more about storms. I wish it would never happen again. When there is one... what is that called? Not a storm, but when it shakes...

NYU T.G.: an earthquake.

SPP_RM: An earthquake. When the television says [there was one] in Mexico [or] in Spain, I get really nervous. I don't want to hear the news, because all of that goes back, and sometimes one dreams of things like you're in it. Sometimes the house falls down, you know. I don't know. Another time, I dreamed that my apartment was gone. That my apartment went down, that it fell down. You know? One dreams things. I dreamt that I was home, and suddenly a hole opened in the middle of the apartment and it fell.

NYU T.G.: Yes, a nightmare.

SPP_RM: Oh yes, nightmare. And I woke up feeling awful.

NYU T.G.: Yes, of course

SPP_RM: I had that same dream about five times. That happened to me and sometimes I would get nauseous. Or I would get nervous and get a headache and nausea.

NYU T.G.: And that was after you had been through the storm and all that?

SPP_RM: Yes, after that, but thank God I'm fine now. With God's help, one pushes forward.

NYU T.G.: That's true. How do you feel this changed the way you see your neighborhood, Red Hook?

SPP_RM: It change it completely

NYU T.G.: How long were you trapped in that situation?

SPP_RM: A week and a half.

NYU T.G.: And then the water went down...

SPP_RM: The water went down and we could... The electricity and the water came back, and we were able to start doing little things again. My sister lost two cars; a bus and a car. The water took them away and crashed them and they were left there full of water.

NYU T.G: And that is lost?

SPP_RM: Yes, that is lost. That never... I think they still haven't even paid her. They say that it was nature and you cannot get insurance for nature.

NYU T.G.: And who came to clean up the neighborhood [when it was over]?

SPP_RM: NYCHA workers came and removed all the mud, soil and water. And they came to clean. They cleaned the building and everything. Recently, they came and painted the halls and fixed the elevator.

NYU T.G.: Do you feel like the neighborhood still needs help?

SPP_RM: A lot of help. A lot.

NYU T.G.: Because of the aftermath of the storm?

SPP_RM: Yes, yes. Many things were damaged and some people need mental [health] help. But some people... I tell my friend Ana, who lives on the third floor... now she is locked in a room, she does not come out, she is afraid. And I tell her she has to go to the doctor, because she could... She is very depressed, she needs help, but she doesn't want to go, you know? You can't force someone to go to a doctor if they don't want to go.

NYU T.G.: That's true... Is there anything else you want to tell me? Something you might like to say.

SPP_RM: I would like... I would like them to be more prepared in the future. [I would like there to be] more communication between the people in charge, the big ones, and us, the poor who live there. That if they know anything [they can say] "look, get ready, this is coming, that is coming". But sometimes there is no communication, there's no communication. We feel like... I think there should be more communication. Not only with the people who live there, the poor

people who live there, but also with the whole community. They must also have education centers to educate one's mind, what you can do, because if something else like this happens, you are already nervous and don't know what to do. [...] Communication and education. Teach people how to act when disaster strikes.

NYU T.G.: Would you have liked, let's say, if you had been told you had to evacuate and that you had to go to a shelter somewhere?

SPP_RM: I would have gone to my children's place. My children live in Pennsylvania and nothing happened there. Here our street floods because we are near the water, so [the storm came with] all the force and dragged everything towards us.

NYU T.G.: And have they done anything in Red Hook so that it doesn't flood again or is it still the same?

SPP_RM: I don't think so! I'm not sure. I know they are fixing some things, putting up some up buildings, but I don't know what they are for. I don't know whether it is to supply water or electricity or something. But they are making buildings, lots of buildings. And they are also building co-ops and they're very expensive.

NYU T.G.: Yes, it's changed a lot, right?

SPP_RM: Yes! Well, I couldn't buy one of those.

NYU T.G.: Has there been a lot of new people coming in after Sandy?

SPP_RM: Oh yes, a lot of people have come. The Americans with money who come to build big buildings. There are lots of children too, lots of children. They should have a center so that we can go there when there is danger, or before, so that they give us an education. [Teach us] how to help each other and how they can help us.

NYU T.G.: Ok, thank you very much. I want to thank you for re-living many of these things to tell us your story. I know it is not easy.

SPP_RM: It's not easy. It's sad to think of everything you lose, even though you don't really lose anything, because material things come and go. But your state of mind, [your] peace. Sometimes I still have bad dreams.

NYU T.G.: Thank you very much. Our hope is that your story helps others too, so they don't feel alone.

SPP_RM: And may [the authorities] help us educate ourselves [about] how to prevent so many tragedies