

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM  
HOBOKEN STORIES:  
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

INTERVIEWEE: MARIA TORRES  
INTERVIEWER: EILEEN LYNCH  
LOCATION: JUBILEE CENTER, HOBOKEN, NJ  
DATE: 30 AUGUST 2013

EL: This is Eileen Lynch. I am interviewing Maria Torres. It's August 30<sup>th</sup>. We're at the Jubilee Center. Maria, let me start by asking you, when did you first find out that it was going to be a pretty big storm?

MT: It was in my sister's house at that time. I was living in my house --

EL: -- at 560 [Unclear].

MT: Yes. But my sister said that the weather is going to be so bad, and I realized -- she said stay in the house. I live at 560, close to her house -- she lives at 540 -- and she said, "Let's be together, so you won't be alone in the house with your daughter." So me and her, we

are close sisters. So that day I went to her house, and stayed. It's the same [unclear], so I stayed at her house. We shared the food, put it together. We don't have no lights, for it's dark.

EL: Let me ask you a question. So you and your daughter went and stayed with your sister.

MT: Yes.

EL: Who was there with your sister? Does your sister live alone?

MT: No, my sister "was with my cousin." My sister is Carmen Torres, and my cousin is [Unclear], who was staying at the same place, and was me and my daughter and Merari my daughter, and it was only "four."

EL: Did you prepare together? Did you go out and get water together?

MT: Well, in the beginning -- this is a "weird" thing because I make the [unclear] food the day

before, and I have all the meat in there, all the food in there, and just --

EL: -- in the freezer.

MT: -- in the freezer. Everything. So I take the whole thing, putting [unclear], and try to close the refrigerator, so the things don't get --

EL: Oh, you took bags of ice, and you put it in the freezer.

MT: Yes. And put it in freezer, and nobody opened the freezer, because everything was frozen, so it's more easy to go in there and not be getting -- and all this day was cooking and doing stuff, like in the morning, lunch and dinner. We was doing that. My sister buy the candles, and I buy candles, too, so we was like -- and then some people give stuff to us.

EL: People came around with ice.

MT: Yes. Ice.

EL: And who was that, the Red Cross?

MT: The Red Cross was here. They helped us a lot -- even though I [unclear], it was right here, too. I think it was Chris --

EL: The governor.

MT: The governor, and the [unclear] --

EL: Carmelo Garcia.

MT: Carmelo was here, yes. He came to see us, outside, but people helped a lot to us, giving us blankets. At that time, it was cold. They brought us food, toothpaste, stuff, and a lot of things that we -- food, too, and ice water. We were walking to get water where the place -- I went to CVS to get water and stuff, and we passed all these things while we were [unclear] at that point.

EL: What floor were you on? What floor was your sister on?

MT: Third floor.

EL: So you could go up and down the stairs.

MT: People helped, you know? I mean, my neighbors -- I'd seen my neighbors, say hi and bye, but this time [unclear] we communicate. I feel like we communicate with the neighbors, because that's why [unclear]. My neighbor, "Ellen Sultana," [phonetic] went to my apartment and gave us stuff. She said, "Look, they're giving water in that place." I said, "Wait for me," and we go together, and help each other to move and put it back up, because there was not nobody to help us. We share -- like [unclear] neighbors, because, I swear to God, I didn't know my neighbors until that point. You get to meet somebody and help us. Sometimes guys that I knew -- because [unclear] my daughter said, "Can I help with the water to [unclear]." That day was difficult for us, for everybody who lives over here. I was walking around, there was water. I came over here with my boots, and there was water -- all these places, water.

EL: I was going to ask you, how high did you think -- ?

MT: Oh, my god, it was like --

EL: So about four feet. At least four feet.

MT: Because I have my boots over here [unclear] to see all that. I forgot to bring the camera, because I have pictures [unclear] from this side to see the Jubilee, and [unclear] it was high water. We could not go around, even to go that way, we could not wade from the water. All this time we stayed in the house.

EL: And how long were you in the house, for? With the water? How long did it take the water to recede?

MT: Because we think more is going to be "backlog" [unclear] buy water, I always buy water, so that's why I do the shopping before. I was doing the shopping, and I got water and stuff. I didn't think it was going to happen, but I got [unclear] in the house and we shared. My sister's neighbor upstairs, she came -- Laura -- she came down, and helped us, too. She'd bring food, too, and we'd cook together, and we do a lot for all we can then. We shared.

EL: Everybody got together and shared everything.

MT: Even the lights. We'd take emergency cord, like in the hallways, and put it all together so we could have light, and charge the phones to call everybody.

EL: Oh, so you did have a little bit of electric.

MT: Yes, but from the hallway. [Unclear]

EL: From the emergency lights in the hallway.

MT: Yes. We're not allowed but we did to see, so some kids -- the neighbor had kids in the apartment, they did that for the refrigerator. But we had only the light, and then come out. So we did that, and for a little while to hold the candles to be warm in the night. Then we played cards. It was boring.

EL: How old is your daughter?

MT: My daughter is sixteen.

EL: So she's not a real little kid. Because I was wondering what did you do with the little kids.

MT: [Unclear] two little kids that's not with me. That time they was with his father. But [unclear] with me, she helped me to carry the stuff, going with me, looking for ice. When the water went down, we were going, my sister and me, and Laura, and went to the local [unclear] ice, because sometimes we don't have ice. Every time we go upstairs in a store, the ice -- we'd bring big bags of ice. [Unclear] because they knew there was no ice, so trying to sell more expensive [unclear] upstairs [unclear] looking for ice, and sometimes they don't have ice. So we came back with bags and put it in the refrigerator, water, [unclear] whatever we had, and then [unclear] with the meat in the freezer, to hold down the meat.

EL: Or it would go bad. So you had gas. You could cook.

MT: Yes. We'd cook. We'd do the dishes. We'd clean whatever we needed, because we had water. The only thing we don't have is electricity.

EL: Could you flush your toilets?

MT: Yes.

EL: Okay. That's not bad. So are you in one of the big buildings?

MT: Yes.

EL: What about the people who were way up? What did they do?

MT: Probably some kids from --

EL: The elevators weren't working.

MT: They [unclear] up and down. Some kids, some people left the projects and go to families or friends in those times.

EL: So the elevators were working, or they weren't working?

MT: No. Everything was not working. They had to go up and down.

EL: Are they working now?

MT: Yes.

EL: And this went on for seven days -- six days, seven days.

MT: [Unclear] more. I don't know exactly the time. We passed through all that -- because sometimes -- because they [unclear] for the lights. After they put the lights, they need to take out the water, because it was [unclear] the light. They clean up real good.

EL: So after the lights came on -- about how long was it before they fixed the elevators?

MT: When the light come on, I think the elevator was working.

EL: Okay. That's good.

MT: But I live on the third floor, so I don't mind if I do the shopping. But that time they fixed [unclear] first they have to take out the water, [unclear] the light in each building. In each building they flooded in a couple buildings.

EL: Was that parking lot -- ?

MT: Yes. Everything. Everything. Everything. The two buildings probably -- I think [unclear] it was behind -- it was my building, my sister's building, because the water stopped raining, it stopped flooding, because it was beginning to flood in back, from the back side. You cannot see, but all that -- it was flooding, except my building.

EL: So were you looking out the window?  
Could you see water coming in?

MT: Yes, yes.

EL: Oh, my gosh. And where was it coming from? From here? From there?

MT: It was coming because my sister -- the window is from that side.

EL: It faces east.

MT: Yes. And then my building [unclear] --

EL: -- faces west.

MT: -- in the back, so my back, it was dry. Only the parking lot on that side --

EL: The north side.

MT: Yes. This building, all flooding in the back. It was all flooding. My building -- in the parking lot -- on one side of my building it was flooding. Only a little bit on my building, and my sister's building. It's closed off. Because people were putting cars in the top, moving the cars, to not get so flooding. But it was a lot.

EL: So you stayed with your sister the whole time.

MT: Yes. She didn't want me to go. My apartment was safe, but she didn't want me to -- every day I went to check my stuff and everything. Because I know putting ice -- if I need something I go and get it. Because she has stuff. My friend has -- her neighbor has some stuff, so we were trying not to open -- to be cold -- because it was frozen, and getting the ice in that. Some stuff I cannot -- I have to throw it out, because that was too longer. Yes.

EL: Does your sister have kids?

MT: They are big. But they were leaving.

EL: They went somewhere else.

MT: Yes. They weren't even around here. They were living over there, where my brother lives, in Jersey City.

EL: So how long was the water around? Two or three days? How long did the water stay in the street?

MT: Oh, my god. It was not easy. Probably four days, four or five days? It was probably more. Because it was getting out, everybody, and then the whole week everybody going out, because we need to wait when the water was coming down a little way, so we could walk -- because we could not walk. We need to walk like -- over here -- I don't come walking over here, I can't walk because it was so flooding. It was over here, so a couple days I had to wait for it to come this way.

EL: But you saw a lot of police.

MT: Yes.

EL: Did the governor come over here?

MT: Yes. Yes. Yes. I see the Army. The Army came to rescue people --

EL: -- people who were on the top floors.

MT: Yes, and old people -- they need more help than us. At least I'm [unclear], so I can help in some way. They could help -- they need more help than us. At least we trying to hold on, and the neighbors, we've got each other, but some people, they need more help than us, the [unclear] stuff they need to take it out. Some people were stuck, and they [unclear].

EL: Were you guys afraid?

MT: No, I was not afraid because I come from Puerto Rico, and yes, I'm used to hurricanes, water flow, or something like that. And what we do is each other calm each other, we're with the family. We are stuck in there, but we try to have fun and not scary, and help each other, what we need. That's what make us like that. We're used to doing that. So that's why I was not scared.

EL: I want to go back to Hurricane Irene. Did it flood back here in Hurricane Irene? I don't think it was as bad.

MT: It was not so bad, like the last thing that we had happen to us. It was not so bad. I know I was

right here at that time, but I believe that I never see something like that from this time.

EL: And it floods back here a lot.

MT: Yes. No, nothing like that. It was so bad in, like, what I see -- it was flooding in the park, it was flooding -- sometimes they flood, but this time the [unclear] I see we stuck in here -- no phone, no calls, no nothing. At least we had somebody to help us, and give us help in the beginning, because it was cold by that time, and everything was off. We had blankets.

EL: You didn't have any heat.

MT: No.

EL: Because it did get very cold.

MT: Yes. It was in the night getting cold, and we needed blankets. At least we were home, and what we had was [unclear] each other.

EL: You shared.

MT: Yes, and shared. And I was close to home, I could get like socks, and clothes and [unclear].

EL: So you got to know your neighbors a lot better?

MT: I think yes, and that's a good thing.

EL: People don't realize that. That's what you have; you have each other, and that's it.

MT: You have each other. That's it. Because in the beginning we don't have -- even saying -- sometimes I see my neighbor -- like one of sometimes, a couple of months, say six months, seven months -- I didn't see her, because she worked a lot. And I started -- and come here, and probably I'd go home [unclear] I'm here. So when I see my neighbor -- it's like in Christmas: "Oh, my god, how are you?" So that thing -- and then the beginning of that -- that's only [unclear] know each other. When I see her at that time, I just like know each other -- because I used to just go home and that's it. I open the door, I see somebody, I say hi and go inside. I didn't even know my

neighbors. So at that time, to see a girl, a young girl lived across [unclear] -- I know each other in that point, that we was close -- "How you doing? Where you going?" And walking to find our water and everything. Every time, if you know something tell me; if I know something.

EL: So you shared information?

MT: Yes. And we did that.

EL: So do you feel better about your neighbors now? Do you still talk to them?

MT: Well, I see her like, I think, Monday or Tuesday. I don't see her for a long time ago, because the way I said I come to my house. When I see her and say hi, and she said, "Hi, long time." [Laughs] Because she [unclear]. But I was glad to see her. We become more closer, because before it was like we'd say hi, and now when I see her it was like, "How you doing?" and we start talking in that point. And then, "Okay, I see you later." I may see her [unclear] too. At that point it was good. I'm glad. I need some part of that [unclear] good for us that meet the neighbors, because I realize at some point of

that, it's bad if you don't know neighbors, and you don't have close friends and close family. At least you know some neighbors who help each other and share, you know?

EL: That's a really good point. Yes, at that time, you really do need your neighbors.

MT: Yes. And we used to -- like, I come from Puerto Rico, and something would happen here, like [unclear] help and get close. I'm glad that my sister [unclear] my mother-in-law, she went in the other side, because they'd been living in the "four" projects. It was around water, so my sister living there, my mother-in-law live -- my sister-in-law live there, so they move there to

--

EL: -- Jersey City Heights.

MT: Yes -- when my brother leave, and they come back to my niece's house and stayed there and shared all the food together. Because it was cold for that time. They don't have milk. The kids don't have milk, and there are meals. So I have to -- I was going that way to bring meals for the kids.

EL: Up to Jersey City Heights.

MT: Yes. For the kids. And they gave them water, to the water thing. And we need to -- if I go over there I always call, "Do you need ice? Do you need meals for the kids?" And this and this, I always like, with my family, or share with [unclear] and neighbors. [Unclear] and we going in the car, with my sister's neighbor.

EL: Now up in Jersey City Heights -- did they have electric?

MT: In some place they have, in some place, don't have. Because I call my sister-in-law, she live in upstate, like [unclear], and she said, "Well, over here I have lights." I said, "Oh, my god, I don't have light." And then over here in Hoboken, when they put the light -- so [unclear] they had light, and some did not.

EL: Washington Street seems like it got it first.

MT: I think we were last. They put the line over here. It was like, "Oh, my god, we're stuck in here." [Laughter] Trying to hold on to get, but [unclear] survived.

EL: So your lights must have come on when? Sunday or Monday? You forget the dates.

MT: That's what I'm going to tell you [unclear] know what day was bad, because it was like everything changed in one -- open your eyes and you don't know what day was that, what day they come to fix everything. The lights in some place come in. The lights when I leave -- it was the last one. I didn't [unclear] the last one, because I went place and had light someplace, and don't have the light. I realized at that point I don't know what's happening. I mean somebody told me what day is today, and I said, "Huh uh. I'm here, but I don't [unclear]."

EL: Like the prisoners do. [Laughter]

MT: When they come back, I feel like that sometimes.

EL: So when the lights came on, you went back to your apartment.

MT: Yes. My sister know that everything survived, helped to clean all that, and fix everything. [Unclear] clean my [unclear], because it was like, oh, my god -- it was like throwing out whatever it is. It was throwing out. I take whatever I can, and the other one, I throw out.

EL: You can't take a chance.

MT: No. [Unclear]

EL: So what kind of food did you have? What kind of meals did you prepare?

MT: Chicken. [Laughter] [Unclear] and cook together. I do this, I share. I think we had fun, at least in that point, because we could have the meals together. Someone would do the dishes, someone cooked, someone helped cut and work in the kitchen. I did like chicken [unclear]

for breakfast, like eggs -- whatever we've got in there. We shared pasta [unclear].

EL: And there were four of you, right?

MT: Four in my family, and my sister and my cousin. My neighbor -- my sister's neighbor was Laura, with her daughter. She have two daughters and two boys.

EL: So you did have some little kids around.

MT: No, they are big. They are big. But we cooked together, and we shared the meal. She said, "Oh, Maria, you cook so fast." And I said, "I don't have time to think about it." I cook early. I could see the light.

EL: You had to cook when it was daylight.

MT: Yes. [Unclear] This was the time I cook, and clean everything. Everybody who came, eat, and they had warm food, and I had everything [unclear] breakfast, I would do breakfast and clean everything. My sister [unclear] so I go out. Sometimes my daughter helped me in

the kitchen, too, so at the time I went out I went to the Big Banner store, full of [unclear] water and --

EL: Oh, you went to Big Banner?

MT: Yes.

EL: Oh, my god, you're so nice.

MT: [Laughs] help for cleaning, and helping with all the food, putting it together, and throwing it out. It's sad, because my daughter, even when she was little, throwing the food out, because there are people who need more. Thank god we've got, but some people, they don't have. And I always tell my daughters, my kids, that [unclear] when some people don't have, we have something. Don't throw the food out. So it was sad to see all that in there. I went to help and stuff at the Big Banner. We get communication with friends and stuff, and I'm going every time that I go -- when I need some "milk," and he say, "Okay, Maria," because I was [unclear]. I think I realized that people care a lot, when we had that. It was difficult, because [unclear].

EL: Do you [unclear] in Spanish?

MT: {Speaks Spanish) But it's like when something happens, at least we have each other to share, and [unclear] no worse than someplace, some country have, like they have the [unclear] in water, in the [unclear] water, when they take everything in some place. So for me, that's worse. We have to think that we had "life," and we have neighbors, and we have what we've got. We don't have nothing but we have each other, like our families and stuff. I think that nothing compares, that people need more than us, and for me that's [unclear]. In my heart, I think about everything that I've got, for my kids.

EL: Maria, thank you so much.

MT: Thank you.

EL: Thank you so much for telling us that. I just want to ask you one last thing. So you [unclear] from Puerto Rico. Have you ever experienced anything like this in Puerto Rico?

MT: Yes. I got involved with Hugo. It was like mostly --

EL: Oh, you were in that.

MT: Yes. It was flooding. We don't have water. We don't have lights. We don't have [unclear]. Yes. [Unclear] And I think that experience made me [unclear] a family share -- family, friends, neighbors -- and we [unclear] each other -- stayed together. Everything -- if you pass through something like that, you never forget. [Unclear] I give it my best, like a person. I give it my best to help, because I think the life is more important than anything. One day you have it and one day you don't have it, but at least you have each other. Because that is more important than anything. I can see a [unclear] I can see nothing, like I just think of what we've got now.

EL: All right, Maria. Thank you. Thanks for sharing your story with us.