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THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
HOBOKEN STORIES:
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

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LOCATION: 300 OBSERVER HIGHWAY,
HOBOKEN, NEW JERSEY

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Track #1

RF: What is your connection to Hoboken? How long have you lived in the city? Approximately where in the city do you live? Who, if anyone do you live with? And what is your profession?

JPP: I've lived at 1028 Hudson Street, for the last twelve years, with my wife, Mary. I used to live at 609 Grand Street in Hoboken, since 1981. So I've been in Hoboken since 1981. My connection is, I live here, I work here, and my best friends are here.

RF: And what is your profession?

JPP: I'm a photographer, graphic designer, and web designer. I also teach at the Hudson County School of Technology.

RF: Do you work in Hoboken?

JPP: Yes, I do have some clients in Hoboken. My business is here in Hoboken, though I free-lance quite a lot in New York City.

RF: And where is your studio located?

JPP: My studio is here at 300 Observer Highway, in the [Unclear] building.

RF: When did you first hear the words "Hurricane Sandy."

JPP: About a week before the storm, there was talk about it. People were getting ready. We saw in front of City Hall like a map, discussing what the flood areas could be, depending upon the severity of the storm. So it was about a week before the storm.

RF: What did you expect the storm to be like?

JPP: A lot of wind, a lot of rain, flooding -- not to the extent that it did happen, but that a number of areas would be flooded, at least a few inches in, like, Grand Street, for example, Monroe -- that sort of thing. When I first came to Hoboken in 1981, a good part of Hoboken was known as Venice-on-the-Hudson, because of the flooding issue that had existed.

RF: How did you prepare for the storm?

JPP: Here at the studio what I did was I moved my equipment against the farthest wall. I moved a temporary wall, which has box springs at the top, and moved it so that I basically created a sandwich room or a closet, a makeshift closet, and put all my electronic equipment there. Then I had seamless paper that I had suspended in front of the windows, and rolled it down with a curtain in front of that, expecting that if the glass shattered, it would be caught in the paper, and the trajectory would hit the floor before it hit that false wall, where that makeshift closet was. That's what I did here. At 1028

Hudson Street, what we did was -- I had put some sealant and foam core at the doors, to allow three feet of water to rise, because we had drains at the bottom of the basement of the building, where our boiler is, and hot water heaters and stuff. I figured if the water didn't go out fast enough it would rise, so to prevent the water from coming into the basement I put that there. I later learned that had the water risen to three feet, it would have just busted through; that what I had done was insignificant. I did also sandbag, as well, which wasn't as high as the foam core wall, if you will. I also used a caulking sealant in the wall, to prevent the water from leaking from around that foam core wall. But I'm sure it wouldn't have helped.

RF: What did you do on the Monday, during the day, before the storm hit?

JPP: Pretty much what I just mentioned, especially where the condo building that I'm in, in Hoboken, at 1020 Hudson Street -- it's an old, 110-year-old building, so it's railroad flats, condos. The work I was doing was mainly that -- and telling people, also, that they should move stuff out of their bins that they have in the basement, or raise it up at least, because I did expect

maybe a half-foot of water to a foot of water in the basement.

RF: Do you feel that you were prepared enough, heading into the storm?

JPP: I don't think one ever feels prepared enough, after the fact. I thought we were, because we had food. I had my homemade frozen soup in the freezer, and if we didn't have power, there was ice, so we could keep the freezer going for a few days, and make soup, as we say, [unclear]. So we had dry food and stuff like that, and we had enough emergency food for the cats. I did go get medication, so I had my medication prescription available to me. So that was a good thing; I felt I had enough medication.

RF: Where were you when the storm hit?

JPP: At my home, at 1028 Hudson Street. We're on the second floor. The ground level is actually half of the basement, so we're two stories and a half from the actual ground.

RF: Did you lose power?

JPP: No. What happened was, there was a click. You could see the power go off and on -- and not very much of it. It was very, very quick. So we had power. No, we didn't lose power.

RF: When did you first leave your home, to explore? Where did you go? What did you see? And what did you think?

JPP: Okay. After the curfew was lifted -- I don't know exactly what time it was -- it was actually in the afternoon -- we started walking around. First, I did a quick walk around the block, to see what the damage was, if any. I didn't notice any damage. I later learned from one of the owners that their front window busted in, there on the top floor. So I helped her friend -- because she was out of town -- seal the apartment (seal the window. Sorry), and we had to make a makeshift -- because I had some extra materials of the foam core and all that, and plastic bags. I was able to makeshift it so we reduced the amount of leakage. Also, I was able to help pick up the broken glass and the frame, and I photographed that so that if she

needed that for insurance purposes, she had it. She lost one piece of furniture, because the glass actually penetrated into the piece of furniture, a sofa -- not a sofa, a lounge chair.

RF: Was there any water in the vicinity of your block?

JPP: No. We were watching all night long. As a matter of fact, in the middle of the storm -- the street light was on, so we could see what was going on. At the highest of the wind, we saw the rain literally going horizontal. We looked at the street, and it was completely dry. The wind dried the water from the street before it hit the ground, it seemed to me. It was amazing. We kept looking at the distance of -- because our building faces the "S" -- Frank Sinatra Drive -- so the hill that comes up [unclear] -- we were watching to see if the water came up, and it did not. We didn't see any water, particularly, on the street at that time.

RF: So there was no water on your street, and you also continued to have power.

JPP: Right.

RF: Did you feel relieved?

JPP: I felt relieved that we didn't have water in the basement. We did not have heat because our boiler had some problems at the beginning, before the storm even became an issue -- or thought. So I called the plumber to restart the boiler, and the plumber could never get there. So I was concerned that we weren't going to have heat. What I later learned was that the sheriff's office would not allow -- the sheriff would not allow the plumbers to come into town. They would say, "We have a heating emergency," and the police said, "There's no electricity; get out of here." We had electricity. So a lot of misinformation was happening right away. I was finally able to call the plumber, he walked me through how to restart the boiler, and we had heat. So we had heat, hot water, and electric all through this period of time.

When we started to walk through town, on the afternoon after the storm, yes. Now we saw even more relief, because of the amount of damage we saw; the amount of flooding we saw.

RF: What did you think about, as you started to explore, and started to see the rest of Hoboken, and the state that it was in? Particularly consider your eye as an artist.

JPP: Well, it was very dark at the time we got in front of the -- I still call it St. Mary's Hospital. There we saw water, and I go, "That's an emergency center, and it's flooded." That means everybody had to be taken out, on the top floors. That was a problem. Then we saw the ambulance lost a few blocks further south, and that was like, "The water must have come really fast, it must have damaged things. It really must have been a really difficult time." So I started photographing the damage -- which is not necessarily my forte -- because it was pretty much overwhelming. How do you, in a small frame, photograph this mass event? You're really only photographing parts of the events, not the mass event. So it was difficult.

It was interesting to see a lot of people and how they were all photographing, with their phones, or videotaping, or whatever. That was happening. People were coming and looking, to see what it was like. Also, you could see people shopping, trying to get food -- because suddenly they realized they didn't have enough food; or

they thought, "Oh, this is worse. It's going to take a while before things get back to normal."

RF: How many photographs did you take?

JPP: About 150, maybe 200. A number of them were repetitive, or different angles of the same shot. This was over the four-day period. One of the things I remember is I photographed the Y, in front of -- in the south end of Hoboken, near the train station, a gasoline truck was there. It was provided, I understand, by a donor. There was a man pumping gas one container at a time, and I saw a friend of mine there, so I photographed him on line, then I photographed the line, and the truck and everything. I'm going, "This doesn't make any sense," because this gasoline truck -- but there were no cans. You would think they would have refilled the cans, and they would have traded can for can. The firemen had to shut it down because people were bringing water bottles to fill with gasoline. That's a very dangerous thing: the plastic is not designed to -- the gasoline could actually damage the tank and come out -- and the fire. So had there been a fire during the time, we would have lost a portion of the town. So unfortunately -- because they were trying to empty their basements from the

water, using sump pumps, the gasoline was definitely a danger, unless you had the proper tank and everything. Because you couldn't get gasoline from the gas station; they didn't have electricity to pump the gasoline up. In Florida, that's not an issue because all the gasoline stations have generators, to at least empty the tanks, so people can get gasoline. But here in New Jersey, we have never suffered this before, to this extent. So you had gas stations full of gasoline, and they couldn't get it out.

RF: And how did you pass the time in the days after the storm?

JPP: I did several different things. The first thing was, our neighbor in the neighboring building ran an extension cord out their window, and put out a table. People were charging their phones or computers. It was very cold, so if you sat on the steps, a little hypothermia is happening; you're losing body heat. And these people had cold apartments. So I went to our backyard, and we had chairs. I cleaned them off quickly, and brought them out so they would have chairs, and they wouldn't have to sit on the ground. My wife and I went around to look, and get food for someone because they were

stuck at the sixth floor, in a modern condominium, in my old neighborhood at Sixth and Grand. The husband couldn't walk out of the unit because he needed an elevator unit. And even if you could, there was chicken, restaurant grease fat, all over the lobby, because a restaurant that had a drum, a fifty-gallon drum of recycling grease, to be recycled, and dumped over and spilled, and polluted the entire area. So it was slippery, and no one could get kitty litter to put gravel or traction on there. So it was slippery to get there. This is what we found out, as we actually delivered the food.

So I went to the bodegas. The grocery stores were all closed. All the grocery stores shut down, the supermarkets, so the bodegas were open, that were in my neighborhood, so they sold everything, and they were selling out. There were some bodegas that still had canned goods available, so they were selling that. Their refrigerators were pretty much closed, and they had already dumped that stuff. So we would get canned food, and bring it to my friend, Rosilyn, and her husband, Frank, so they had that. The fire escapes, or the internal fire stairwells -- the emergency exits -- dark; pitch black, so we always had flashlights with us.

Another thing I did was I started to go on Facebook, giving people news and information of what was open. We also had a "mole-up" group, under the Google, so we were able to send information via that. I also created a flier, in very small type, with a color paper we didn't use, and I would run fifty or 100 sheets, and I called it the Hudson Street News. I handed out fliers to all the places where people were charging. So that was along Hudson Street, along 11th, and some places between 11th and 10th. Some buildings were on and off, because we're on a grid that's different from the rest of Hoboken. I handed out leaflets, and I did that about four or five times. The type was very small, and I only left two or three on the board. People had to share. Because I didn't know how long this was going to last. I didn't know how much paper I had left. I really didn't know how much ink I had left, and would I be able to get ink for the piece? My way of doing it was never to say what was closed; I only said what was open -- because by the time I handed out the sheet, maybe the store or business that was closed, was open.

So by doing that I was able to get out information. A lot of people learned that the marathon in New York was canceled, on my first run. I announced that I had just gotten that news. So I just mentioned that.

RF: When did you first visit your studio?

JPP: I think the third day, because it was so flooded. On the first day, when I photographed at Garden and 1st, it was all full of water. I was able to go up to City Hall at Bloomfield and look down on Newark Street, and I just saw water. So I knew my whole building [unclear] was flooded, and later learned, when I walked through the hallways on the first floor, there was water up to my knees. So the first floor received a lot of water. It was on the third day I came -- there was no heat and there was no electricity.

So we came in, Mary and I, had no damage. I had cracked windows from years and years ago, and the cracks didn't get bigger, and everything was fine. So what I did was I grabbed my computer equipment -- because I thought there was no security here now -- so I grabbed the stuff that I thought -- and brought it back home. I later learned that one of the people in charge of the building -- the real estate agent in charge of the building -- saw looters trying to get into the building. So he ran over to the National Guardsmen, and they parked the National Guard trucks around the entrances of Neumann Leather and that

ended the possibility of looting -- because they were going to break in all the doors, because now there were no alarms, and they figured they could break in and steal whatever they could find. So I was glad that I had removed at least what I thought -- I moved my equipment out of here, to do that.

That was like on the third day. Meanwhile, I was busy with the Hudson News and stuff like that. I later learned that some people weren't following Facebook, and I asked that person why. She said to me, "To conserve power." It was amazing. I'm a web designer, and in some ways the web could not handle it, because if people don't have power, they don't have a connection to the phone; they have no way to get emails or Twitter if the power's gone. So instead of setting up a website giving information, I said, "Well, how are people going to find the website? They're not going to search -- they're going to search what they know, they're not going to search what they don't know." So that's why I created the newsletter.

City Hall also handed out newsletters and taped them on light poles throughout the city. They would actually call out for teams, and whoever got there to do that. It's not that the internet didn't work, but the

internet, by itself, couldn't replace the old-fashioned flier, to get information out.

RF: And when were you able to resume working in your studio?

JPP: When the power returned. I'm going to guess that that was seven days later. I'm not 100% sure. But about seven days later to ten days, because even though power came back on, I had to get our equipment back in, and I had to walk the route to be sure that the roads weren't closed; that it was easy to get in; there were no lingering, large ponds of water, or stuff like that, where there was. Because there would be mud everywhere -- to do that. So that's what I did.

RF: And what have you done with the collection of photos that you took?

JPP: I gave the museum the right to exhibit them in their upcoming exhibit about Sandy. I've also shown my photographs -- the Fund for a Better Waterfront -- Ron Hines is the president, and he asked me to show some of the photographs for an exhibit about the flooding, and what

ideas we should start thinking about, to mitigate or prevent another flooding that happened.

RF: When you look at the photographs a year later, what do they make you think or feel?

JPP: Well, first, I don't think it's a year later. That's the first thing. It feels like just a few months ago. That it was an incredible amount of water; that Venice-on-the-Hudson actually became absolutely true. I never thought it would flood that far up, that much. That was quite amazing. I also thought that this -- the coming together of people -- reminded me of what happened after 9/11 in Hoboken. You did see a coming together, especially when they set up triage at the train station. There was a call for blood; there was a call to set up shelters. I was involved in that, on 9/11. And you would suddenly see people -- strangers -- coming in and volunteering, not knowing what they would do, but being there, available, to do whatever they could -- which is something that I've always liked about the town -- it did come together, to try to help people, and provide either shelter, food, camaraderie, in an urban environment -- which is not always easy.

RF: In what ways can artists commemorate the storm?

JPP: Hmmm. That's a very good question. Photographers document. The artist part would maybe be expressions of what they went through. Writers could write their emotions and feelings of this -- how they felt, and all that; what they had to go through. One of the things we have to realize is that many of us come from another part of the region. And since the entire region was affected, people were concerned about their parents -- or, vice versa, their kids -- who were other places, or their summer residence, or whatever. So this became a concern. I think people can also maybe create the imagery that talks about the experience. Some things that we take for granted now become prized possessions, because the grocery store's not open; the supermarket's not open.

RF: What did the people of Hoboken learn about themselves, after going through this storm?

JPP: I think the people did learn that the variety of people, people who have lived in Hoboken all

their life to people who've just arrived -- all share this square mile, and they can come to work together. I saw Stevens students help a full-time garbage man, who works for the city, actually pick up the piles of trash into the trucks -- because he couldn't do it on his own, and if he's working all twelve, fourteen, eighteen hours, the physical labor eventually gets to you. So the fact that he had help with these Stevens students was quite good.

I helped a friend of mine who watches over a building. He lives in Union City. So I was able to call him, and tell him what the situation was -- how much water was in the building and stuff like that. I would go to see him from time to time -- that was also something I did, to answer your question -- which was I went to visit friends, to see how they were doing. I couldn't reach everybody I knew. So that, and also -- our building was fine, but just because the power was on doesn't mean that the power would necessarily stay on, if there was such a great draw. Everything calmed down, and it seemed like, okay, everything was fine.

It was funny to see our building, full of power and light, and across the street, these modern condominiums, four times the value, had no power except for the garage door, and the hallway lights. They had no heat,

so most of the people had to evacuate. There was absolutely no light. Night after night we could see no light, not even flickering. And I'm going, "These are modern buildings, the most expensive buildings here, and they didn't think to put in a generation system to run the basic utilities necessary, so people could live in those units." Something is wrong with that.

RF: Do you feel that Hoboken has recovered? And if so, is there a moment that made you think, "Hoboken is back?"

JPP: Most of Hoboken is back. You can see. Because the routines have come back -- like we have a gallery that's new, after the storm, that's here at Neumann Leather, Pronto Gallery, and they've had several shows since the storm. So they were able to clear up the space. They opened after the storm, but they were to come in, clean up the space, prepare for shows, and go on. I've seen a number of new stores open right on 1st Street, where there were older businesses, which are gone. I've seen some restaurants that handed out food be able to come back, so there is a normalcy. However, there are people going through construction. I have a friend who owns a sign

business, and he's still trying to get his insurance paid. It's taking a long, long time, and the amount of paperwork -- well, if you're trying to run a business (and we established a business but there's all this paperwork), to do all the paperwork, you can't run the business; and to run the business, you can't do the paperwork. It seems like there has to be a better way. I tried to apply for unemployment, as a free-lancer (which I was told I could do), but I couldn't get online, and as soon as I answered the question, "Will I get some of my work from New York?" they said, "Oh, we're sorry. You have to call someone else." This was all pre-recorded; I never got to speak to anybody about it.

So that normalcy hasn't come back. People have lost money. People have lost possessions. Some of those possessions are family-type stuff. I saw the garbage. I saw art. I saw a lot of art being thrown out because there were residents that were flooded, because some of the residences are in the basements, and they were just being thrown out because you could see the water stains on them.

But for the most part, it has come back. People are renting spaces. I notice more new people coming in. Yes. I see it come back, but I think there's always that little nervousness. You kind of know if people -- in

the next storm, if people leave or not. Leaving is an important aspect -- evacuate. I cannot emphasize that amount. When Irene happened, there appeared to be more water in certain areas, and one of the things that people don't understand is, if you're in the buildings and you flush the toilet like you normally do, you add to the problem. If you get out, there's less normal usage, so now the storm can use that as a way out. There's talk about having "back checks," so the water will -- if you have a "back check," that means that anyone living in the building -- at the highest point of the storm, at the highest level of water, you flush the toilet, and it goes right into the basement, or even to the first floor, because it has to go somewhere, so it will come out through the toilets. So the best thing to do when a storm is "stated" is that people should evacuate, because they put less stress on the entire system. Because if you're stuck and surrounded by water, you have to be evacuated. You have to leave.

So I think we'll wonder if that [unclear] will really coming back, that people say, "Oh. I'd better get out of here. This is a flood zone."

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

JPP: Well, I saw a lot of the damage, like the floating docks at 13th, 14th Streets, where they were -- they rose up high, and they got hung up on their support columns, that kind of guide them up and down, from the tide, so they just hung there. I saw the famous sailboat that got up on 14th Street. Not 14th Street, I'm sorry -- that would be 18th -- even past 18th Street -- and the water had to be high enough that the boat was able to get above the rock shore, and land right on the sidewalk, the walking walkway, with its keel, which was at least three feet deep. I don't know how high the water above this walking promenade, if you will, was able to get, there, but it had to be high. I saw rocks moved -- a garden rock around the Lipton Tea building, known as the Tea Building, where the rocks came up; The Monroe Art Center, known as the "Levellor" [phonetic] Building, was shut down, and they had damage on the first floor. I saw just piles of garbage. The piles of garbage were higher than the water, at the end -- just piles where people had actually thrown out everything.

One thing I saw several days later was a supermarket -- King's. They would bring out what they call a "U-boat," which is their form of a dolly, loaded with food. It was all full of food. They would take a box

(frozen food); rip it open; the guy would count -- there was twelve -- he would pitch it into the garbage truck. He did that with every case, and someone was taking down the information. This was for the insurance. And I'm going, "You're doing it this way? This is going to take a long time. This is going to prevent the speed of opening up the place, the store." The A&P, which is near 6th and Grand, said they wouldn't open in a week, and in three days they got open. What they did was they put -- I forget whether it was plastic or paper -- but they basically sealed the freezer/refrigeration units, so no one could touch that, because they were waiting for the insurance adjustor, I presume. What they would do is -- everything else was on shelves, mostly canned goods, obviously, and sometimes they had fresh vegetables, and they were bringing in stuff. So they actually opened pretty fast, given the enormity of the storm. They were able to do that. I was able to do that. That's one of the things I did -- I walked around, found out what stores were open, and would write down the addresses, to indicate what was open, on the flier, so people could at least get some food and stuff like that.

One thing I saw wonderful was --

Track #2

JPP: There was "Amanda's," [phonetic] who was just handing out food, because it was going to spoil anyway, but they were handing out food. But they started to run out of plastic forks, so I collected plastic forks, had them washed in the dishwasher, and saved them for any event. So I grabbed all the plastic forks I had, and gave them to "Amanda's" so they could hand out more food easily, and stuff like that. I think that's where people helped.

I saw the bodegas -- they're open. It's hard to even get there, but they opened, sold what they had, and that was good. I saw the National Guard and the Verizon centers, where they would let people -- they had created a heated tent near City Hall, next to that gasoline tank truck that I talked about. He had a heated tank, and people could charge their phones, get information, and stuff like that. The Elks Club opened up, and they opened up their whole hall. They didn't have heat, but they had gas stoves and they have a full kitchen. So they were providing food, and their membership came out and provided food, in order to get the word out that they were providing meals for people, so they could have soup, or sandwiches, or whatever.

So that was something I saw, and that was a great thing to see -- people trying to help one another in a storm -- which is very chaotic, because it's not only that you want to help, but some people are not sure what to do. At first I wasn't sure what to do, because I wasn't as affected by, "Oh, I've got to get the heat coming on and the plumbers are not here yet," or, "Okay, I've got that done. Do we have enough food?" Then a friend of mine called, "Oh, I need food." "Oh, okay." So I went to get food for her. That type of thing. So it starts to become like you live -- now one of the things that happened was, my work didn't stop. My school closed. Actually, it closed for two weeks. My wife's school in New York City, they closed for a week. So we would just basically stay online, and help people out. We had friends come over to take a shower, get warmed up, and stuff like that. And people seemed very appreciative of that. They thought it was great.

RF: Thank you.

JPP: You're very welcome.