

Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

English Translation

Participant: Australia Garcia, 72 years old, female (SPP_GA50)

Interviewer: Tania Goicoechea (NYU T.G.)

Interview conducted in Spanish on 9/23/22

Site: United Senior Center of Sunset Park

NYU T.G.: [00:00:01] We are recording. As I told you, this is a research project where we are collecting stories to better understand the experience of people in Sunset Park with Superstorm Sandy in 2012. Before we even talk about the storm, maybe you can tell me a little bit about where you live. Where in the neighborhood do you live? How is your block? How is your building? What floor do you live on? Whatever you want to tell me about where you live.

SPP_GA50: [00:00:39] Very well. I reside at [...] in Sunset Park, New York, area code 11220, Brooklyn, New York. I have to tell you, this neighborhood has changed quite a bit since Sandy. What I had as an experience was a little too exciting, I would say, because I was working at 59th and 5th in Sunset Park and I asked the man to close the store because it was getting ugly [outside]. The wind started out calm and picked up little by little. At around 7:00 p.m., a very fine rain began, very fine, fine as smoke. My friend Denise, who lived at 75 and around 3rd Avenue in Bay Ridge, invited me to go to her house. She said that she wanted to celebrate by making “habichuela con dulce” and [having] wine. I said, what are we celebrating? She says, well, one more day. The owner, the lady of the house, offered me a glass of wine and I don’t know why I hadn’t paid much attention, but I didn’t know what was going to happen. Around 10:30 p.m., I felt like the trees were dancing, moving very strongly. I was driving my car. I told Denise I wanted to go home because it was going to get worse. When I got to 40th and 9th Avenue, where I live, all the trees started [moving].

There's a cemetery over there on 7th Avenue and up to 9th, near 9th Avenue. So over there, all the trees were on the ground. They were all on the floor. There was no one, nothing, but me. And if I don't hold on to a lightpost, the wind would have taken me away. And from there, I just did

what I could to get to my house. I locked myself in and around 03:00 it sounded as if there was a noise "rrrrr" and it was the sign of a warehouse that had fallen off. I [didn't get up to go] see because I felt very sad. In the morning, we found out that my sister-in-law's car was damaged with the sign that had fallen on it, which was like plastic, like metal. Before I continue with [Sandy], another very strong hurricane also struck [a year before]... but that wasn't as strong as Sandy. [That time] I didn't go anywhere. I stayed at home praying, praying...

When Christmas came around, I went to Coney Island to Nathan's, which is very famous for hot dogs. It was all destroyed. The McDonald's there near the train station was full, like a fish tank.

NYU T.G.: [00:04:14] This was for Sandy or for the previous one?

SPP_GA50: [00:04:16] No, no, [this was] for Sandy. The other [storm] wasn't as strong as that. To emphasize my Sandy story, Coney Island was full, full, full of water, and that was something I didn't really expect was going to happen. But after that, I can say that the whole of New York has become new. It was very sad because many people were electrocuted in their own homes. They lost their belongings. Where I worked, people went to ask for help, for clothes... and I bought clothes because I was working and had a little money (I also had a lot of new clothes I had never worn). I don't give money because I don't really think it's good to give money, but I gave them clothes and food. And since then, New York and Brooklyn have changed. On the one hand, it has been [a] good [change], but I think it was disastrous what happened in that Hurricane Sandy.

NYU T.G.: [00:05:41] So you do feel that after Superstorm Sandy Brooklyn [has] changed a lot.

SPP_GA50: [00:05:48] The whole of New York. Yes, yes, yes.

NYU T.G.: [00:05:51] How do you feel that it has changed specifically?

SPP_GA50: [00:05:57] Commercially? I would say it changed for the better. But there were many people who were left poor and without a home. And for me, it was very emotional to see people asking for things ... to be able to survive with their family.

NYU T.G.: [00:06:23] Do you remember how you found out about the storm?

SPP_GA50: [00:06:31] No, not really.

NYU T.G.: [00:06:33] Do you remember how you felt? How did you prepare or did you not prepare?

SPP_GA50: [00:06:37] I did not prepare at all, because that [storm] was something that surprised everyone in Brooklyn. I don't really watch the news. What I hear is the radio and the radio didn't report anything either. We just thought it was going to be a heavy rain, and it became a pretty strong hurricane. But here we are.

NYU T.G.: [00:07:02] Do you remember the days after the storm hit? What did Sunset Park look like?

SPP_GA50: [00:07:24] Yes. I live at my brother's house, but I have my own apartment, so I stayed very calm there. I thought it was going to continue and the truth is that I didn't go anywhere because I was afraid it would keep going. People stayed at home a lot, because we did feel afraid, very afraid that it would continue.

NYU T.G.: [00:07:48] And how long did it take you to be able to return to work? In other words, how long was your place of work closed?

SPP_GA50: [00:07:57] It took us about a week to be able to return to work. I was with the family [trying] to give them a little support. I even went out to a park and I found something like a leather wallet that had a key. The person [who lost it] was from Massachusetts, I still have it... I handed it over to the police because I didn't know if it was a master key for a school or [something like that], and it actually touched me a lot, because I have a very large family and I am a daughter. I come from a family of 11 children.

NYU T.G.: [00:08:57] Do you remember who was aiding the people who needed help? I mean, did an organization come? Was it the government? People from the neighborhood? Also, what kind of damages did you see? I don't know if parts of Sunset Park flooded or... I know it's kind of on a hill, so I don't know if it was more like the wind.

SPP_GA50: [00:09:25] No, there was not much damage in Sunset Park. Where there was damage was on the islands: Staten Island, Long Island, New Jersey (I used to live in New

Jersey). But here in Brooklyn almost nothing happened; nothing but the wind and a lot [of damage to the] trees. The trees hit the cars and people lost them, but that's why it was more material [damage], not human.

NYU T.G.: [00:09:53] Did anything happen to your building?

SPP_GA50: [00:09:57] No, no, no!

NYU T.G.: [00:10:04] And how do you feel now, after you lived through the storm? I don't know if you feel like something changed in how you get information about other storms or your perspective of the city changed in any way after that experience.

SPP_GA50: [00:10:28] Actually, I feel like things have been quiet after that [storm], and people like... think more about anything that happens, like they are more afraid that there will be another similar hurricane.

NYU T.G.: [00:10:48] Do you feel like we are prepared for that?

SPP_GA50: [00:10:53] I am prepared, but not for that kind of storm and loss of life.

NYU T.G.: [00:10:59] Do you think the city is prepared?

SPP_GA50: [00:11:03] I think so. Yes, yes, yes, because I see a lot of security. Many, many buildings have been repaired, and I see a lot of security.

NYU T.G.: [00:11:16] Is there something else you want to tell me about Sandy. Anything else you remember that I haven't asked you...

SPP_GA50: [00:11:24] I don't think so, there is not much more to say. Because like I said, in Brooklyn not much happened.

NYU T.G.: [00:11:34] What was the most impactful thing for you?

SPP_GA50: [00:11:40] [Hearing about] the people who besides losing their house, were electrocuted in their own basement. That's a bit. Yeah...

NYU T.G.: [00:11:56] Well thank you very much for your time... If there is something else that comes up for you, that you want to tell me, we can talk about that, otherwise we can finish [here].

SPP_GA50: [00:12:11] No, no, I covered everything, because I covered my work, the lady who invited me over for lunch. I think those were the most important things.

NYU T.G.: [00:12:22] Perfect.