

## Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

Transcript translated to English

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**Participant: Luz Perez, 39 years old, female (SPP\_PL83)**

Interviewer: Tania Goicoechea (NYU T.G.)

Interview conducted in Spanish on 6/15/23

Site: NYU Langone (230 60<sup>th</sup> St, Brooklyn, NY)

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NYU T.G.: As I was telling you, this interview is to learn more about the stories of the people who lived through Superstorm Sandy in Sunset Park. We want to better understand what people experienced, how people are experiencing certain weather events [now], and with their story, and the other participants' stories, start to understand what we can do as a community and as a city and as really, I don't know, neighbors, to support each other better the next time this happens. So let's start a little bit by situating ourselves. Tell me where you were living in 2012 and maybe describe your block, your building, and a little bit about the place where you lived.

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, I was living here in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. I lived in a three story building. There were six families. I was living on the second floor and it's one block from... It was here on 58th, between Second and Third [Avenue]. The pier is on 58th, between Second and First Avenue, so it was very close to the water. But it's a block that goes up, it's not flat... I remember that the news was warning us, [telling us] to be prepared with water in case the power went out and I had my small children and of course we started to buy water and canned goods, just in case it was worse than anticipated.

NYU T.G.: And this part of Sunset Park where.... Do you still live there or not?

SPP\_PL83: No, I live in Staten Island now. Where I used to live is a building among other buildings.

NYU T.G.: And how long did you live there?

SPP\_PL83: 18 years. Yes.

NYU T.G.: Were there a lot of residential [buildings] in that area or was it industrial as well?

SPP\_PL83: It's both. But the block where I lived was mostly industrial, compared to the residential [streets] there.

NYU T.G.: And you knew your neighbors?

SPP\_PL83: Yes, yes,

NYU T.G.: People who lived there for a long time as well?

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, right.

NYU T.G.: So let's go back to when you started hearing about the storm. Do you remember how you heard about it? I mean, the first time you heard that the storm was coming.

SPP\_PL83: Well, I... The first time I remember hearing [about it] was about two days before the storm came, but they weren't anticipating that it was going to be [of] the magnitude that it was. Because everybody says... No, it wasn't anticipated. First of all, [this] had never happened in New York. Nothing like this had ever happened, so they weren't anticipating something... They were telling us to get ready, but I think because a lot of people have lived here [for] so many years, they didn't take it as seriously as people in Florida. You know what I mean? Because something like that has almost never happened [here].

NYU T.G.: And so you weren't that worried, or were you?

SPP\_PL83: I really wasn't. My husband was. Yeah, him and [his] family, they're pretty anxious. So, of course, they were nervous and they were panicking. But me... Not me.

NYU T.G.: Okay. And do you remember how you prepared? What kind of stuff did you buy when you went to the supermarket?

SPP\_PL83: Okay, so the day before [the storm], the winds started because it was already coming. That day my father in law — My father-in-law doesn't live very far, they live at 55 between Second and Third, just blocks [away] — that day he called everybody, he called his children and all that, including my husband. [He said] to buy more water, wood to cover the windows, because that's what they were saying to be more prepared. I think they were preparing my mother-in-law's house, because my husband's aunt, my mother-in-law's sister, lived in Red Hook and I think that was the area that was flooded the most. So people were going to come over [to their home]. So they were preparing for, I don't know, more than 15 people.

NYU T.G.: More than 15 people?

SPP\_PL83: About 15.

NYU T.G.: At your in-laws' house...

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, yeah, it was like 15, because just between my husband and the three sisters, it's 12 [people]. So yeah, Uh-huh.

NYU T.G.: Yeah, that's a lot. And you guys stayed in your house?

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, because we saw that his aunt was going to come with the grandchildren, so my husband said no, we better stay here, because there's going to be a lot of people. And since we had small children, it was better to stay at home. And yes, better to stay home.

NYU T.G.: How young were your children?

SPP\_PL83: Well, wow, I would have to do the math, because I don't really remember. That was in 2012, right? So the... My oldest son. Let me see, 2012. My oldest had... My oldest was... Well, he wasn't that little: twelve years old. Okay, the middle one was maybe ten, because yes, because they're two years apart. So, if the oldest was 12, the other one was ten and the other one was eight.

NYU T.G.: Well, yeah. Maybe better [that you stayed in your] house.

SPP\_PL83: Right. Yes and I had my dogs too, so then it was better. Yes.

NYU T.G.: And your job and the schools, all that started to close. Did you guys anticipate that they were going to close or? I don't know what you remember about that part.

SPP\_PL83: Well, I don't remember what job I had at that time, but the school I do. Yes, of course, they gave us advance notice that they were going to close.

NYU T.G.: And had they told you for how long? Or was it just like let's see what happens?

SPP\_PL83: Those details I don't remember very well.

NYU T.G.: Anything else about the preparation that you remember or do we move on to [the storm]?

SPP\_PL83: Well, the preparation, like I told you, was mostly covering the windows and [buying] food and water. And also lots of flashlights and candles because they were saying the lights might go out.

NYU T.G.: Okay, so you were ready and you stayed in your apartment. What do you remember about the storm itself?

SPP\_PL83: Well, I remember it started out with a lot of rain and wind, but it didn't look like what they were describing on the news. That's why I was less worried, because I didn't see anything. It was the next day when we went out driving that we saw so much... How do you say that? So much destruction. So many things and the [fallen] trees too. My mom lived in Staten Island, so we went to Staten Island to the beach side. That was like a desert, all the sand [had come] out, into the street. I remember we didn't see anybody and there were all sorts of things... cars in the street, in the middle of the street. It was like it was deserted, like it was abandoned. The whole area there...

NYU T.G.: So when you left your house and got in the car, what did you see outside your house?

SPP\_PL83: Well, the street where we lived was more industrial, so there were no trees. When you looked around, you couldn't see anything. It was when we left our block and we went more towards the parks, like in Owl's Head in Bay Ridge. When we went to Staten Island. When we visited my mom and went to the beach. That's where you saw the most damage.

NYU T.G.: And what kind of things were you seeing? Wind damage or more like flooding?

SPP\_PL83: I was seeing more like wind damage because you were seeing trees uprooted and houses, especially in Staten Island by the beach, houses with no roof. So I say those are more like wind damage than water damage. But, of course, I think it was also water damage because the sand that was on the road, I would guess that was the combination of both water and wind.

NYU T.G.: And your building was not damaged?

SPP\_PL83: Nothing, nothing. Even though we lived very close to the water, nothing flooded. A lot of people also thought that the Army Terminal was going to flood because it's so deep, but it didn't.

NYU T.G.: And no water got in there anywhere?

SPP\_PL83: No, no. What I know is that there was a lot of flooding in Brooklyn, in Red Hook and the most damaging was also Staten Island, and also in Coney Island. That's where my sister-in-law lived. Yes, but she, as I tell you, everybody came to my mother-in-law's...

NYU T.G.: Everybody came to Sunset Park.... And the ones that came, the ones from Red Hook and from Coney Island, were they evacuated [from their homes]? Or [did they come] because your in-laws told them to come?

SPP\_PL83: No, well, my sister-in-law came from Coney Island because she knows that over there the streets flood when it rains, so she didn't want the car to get damaged or anything, so she came here. Everybody also felt much safer coming here, because if there was any kind of emergency, the hospital is very close, there's ambulances, there's police, so that's why they felt safer coming here.

NYU T.G.: And did the power or water go out?

SPP\_PL83: No, not in our area no, but I know that where my husband's aunt lives the power went out for a few days, until they put in a generator to help with the lights.

NYU T.G.: Anything else you remember from the day of the storm?

SPP\_PL83: Yes, on the day of the storm. I'm remembering now that it didn't start out that strong. My husband and I and two of the kids, we went to Bay Ridge to a pier. I lived here on 58th and there's a pier here off of 58<sup>th</sup>, but we went to 69th and there you could see it. We went to the pier and, of course, you're by the water and you could see the garbage because it was already bringing all the.... I don't know, I think the ocean was picking up [debris] and you could see a lot of garbage. The waves were hitting the gates and it was coming up against the rock wall, so you could see it was picking up strength.

NYU T.G.: And that was the day after the storm or when?

SPP\_PL83: No, that was the day [of the storm].

NYU T.G.: You went there to see what was going on.

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And you could clearly see it, the clouds looked all gray, and the sea was choppy. Those waves... the waves were rising and they were coming up over the wall a bit.

NYU T.G.: And did that scare you?

SPP\_PL83: I wasn't so much afraid, it was more that it was something we had never seen. As long as one is cautious... When we saw that the wind was picking up and the waves were getting big like that, we left.

NYU T.G.: Yeah, I mean, you guys kind of went to see what was going on with the storm. To witness it.

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, yeah, yeah, like Storm Catchers.

NYU T.G.: That's very brave. Okay, so after the storm, do you remember how many days you spent [at home]? How many days were your kids out of school?

SPP\_PL83: No, I don't know exactly how many days, but I do know that it was at least 2 to 3 days. There were schools that were being used as a shelter for people whose houses were flooded and so on, so I know that there was a little bit of a delay for the schools [to open]. Yes.

NYU T.G.: And did you and your husband go to work? Do you remember how long you stayed [at home]?

SPP\_PL83: I don't even remember what job I had at that time. I don't know, I don't remember that. But my husband did. He did go to work. I think two days later, something like that, yes.

NYU T.G.: And do you remember if your husband had to work somewhere far away or [did he work] in the neighborhood?

SPP\_PL83: I think he was working with a contractor to fix things and things like that. He was going everywhere, from the places around here, to the five... [everywhere] in The Tri State. He worked, but mostly in Manhattan. So he did work [those days].

NYU T.G.: And was he fixing some of the damages caused by Sandy?

SPP\_PL83: No, no, no, because he worked for a contractor. He only fixed damages to, let's say, to apartments that had leaks, things like that... superficial things. They didn't do that, because I think for storm damage the contractors have to have a special license, because [the storm damage] was mostly mold and things like that, and for that you needed another type of license.

NYU T.G.: And do you remember if your husband or you or your children had to use the subway or were you mostly driving? What kind of obstacles did you have on those days?

SPP\_PL83: During those days, [we] mostly [used] the car. At least with the boys, the school was local, so it was just walking a few blocks. My husband was the one who used the car, and he used it for the places where he had to go to work. We didn't, because the boys have always gone to school nearby.

NYU T.G.: And how long did all the people that were at your in-laws' house stay for?

SPP\_PL83: Well, the aunt and my sister-in-law stayed there for two days. For two days they stayed there.

NYU T.G.: And then they went back to their homes?

SPP\_PL83: Yes, correct.

NYU T.G.: And what did they come back to in Red Hook and Coney Island? How was it?

SPP\_PL83: My sister-in-law went back, but I think there was still a lot of water where she lived, so she just went to pick up more stuff and go back [to my in-laws']. The aunt did go back because she doesn't like to be with a lot of people and there were a lot of people [in the apartment], so she left two days later. And the reason she [was able to leave] was because they were going to put in a generator. So that's why she went. She felt comfortable to go back, because at least she was going to be able to cook and so on.

NYU T.G.: And who was going to [put in] the generator? The city?

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, because she lives in housing. Yeah, in the projects over there.

NYU T.G.: Ok that makes sense. Do you still think about Superstorm Sandy?

SPP\_PL83: I do now when they talk about storms. We already know it can happen. So, yeah. One thinks of what happened with that storm.

NYU T.G.: Has affected your way of thinking?

SPP\_PL83: Yes, I think so. Because now you can take it more seriously and especially now that I moved to Staten Island. I bought a house and now I live on the second floor. I'm a landlord now, so one has to think about things like if something like that happens, how do you prepare. Yes, of course.

NYU T.G.: How would you prepare?

SPP\_PL83: Well, my husband, because it was just recently, just a few months [ago] that we moved, so we're still doing other things around the house. But he always keeps saying to have something in the garage already allocated [for an emergency], like flashlights, batteries, chargers. He is also going to buy a generator and store at least water, but we haven't had [time to prepare] like to buy food in cans, so we haven't done as much preparation to that extreme yet. But we do always keep water and anything extra I can store for a long time, I do keep it, yes.

NYU T.G.: And how do you feel? I mean, talking a little bit more about Sunset Park in general, do you feel like it was a neighborhood that was affected a lot by Hurricane Sandy or not so much?

SPP\_PL83: Well, the area here in Sunset Park, I didn't really see that much damage... one or two poles or signs that fell. But I didn't really see as much damage as I saw in Bay Ridge, Red Hook or Staten Island, those were the areas where we saw [damage].

NYU T.G.: And your neighbors had a similar experience as you?

SPP\_PL83: Yeah, because it was a block, a street that's sloped, so the water just went down. So really the neighbors didn't either... The windows didn't break or anything like that. We didn't suffer any damage directly caused by the storm.

NYU T.G.: Do you think the city is prepared for the next Superstorm Sandy?

SPP\_PL83: From what I've seen with these other rains, there are times it rains a lot and then it doesn't. For example, after [Sandy] happened, the Belt Parkway was almost destroyed by the storm. And I remember before the storm, every time it rained, that Belt Parkway was always flooded. So when that storm passed and they rebuilt all that, now I don't see as much flooding on the Belt Parkway as before. So I do think they are preparing because the main problem they were talking about was the sewers and the drains, the way they had them and the maintenance of them was not so good, but I think that now after [Sandy], I think they have improved.

NYU T.G.: And in Staten Island do you feel that things have changed as well?

SPP\_PL83: Well, from what I've seen, maybe it has, because over there by the beach side, where there was so much damage. Now I see that when there is going to be a big storm they start to move the sand as if to block the water from coming in.

NYU T.G.: Is there anything else that I haven't asked you, that you want to tell me or any stories that come to mind?



SPP\_PL83: No, no, that was it.

NYU T.G.: Oh, one more thing. Who came to help the people who were affected by the storm? Was it the other neighbors or some local organizations or the government? I don't know if you had any experience seeing.... I don't know if it was more of a situation where someone needed food and the neighbors took it [to them] or if there were more organized programs.

SPP\_PL83: Well, I know that a lot of the schools started collecting food for the other families that were more affected. So I think it was... what I saw first-hand, was the community itself helping others.

NYU T.G.: The Sunset Park people themselves? Or [Sunset Park] helping the other communities?

SPP\_PL83: Well, the schools were helping the people that were able to come. I don't know if the people were coming from other places or they were the same people from the community. I don't know, but the only thing that I experienced and witnessed was the same community helping each other during that time.

NYU T.G.: Ok. If you don't have anything else you want to tell me, that would be the end [of the interview]. Thank you very much for participating. We are grateful to be able to hear all these stories and learn from the people who experienced [the storm] first-hand, and to be able to do our part to help people the next time this happens... and hopefully it doesn't.

SPP\_PL83: Ok, thank you.