

Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

Transcript translated to English

Participant: Grisel Amador, 59 years old, female (SPP_AG63)

Interviewer: Tania Goicoechea (NYU T.G.)

Interview conducted in Spanish on 10/13/22

Site: United Senior Center of Sunset Park

NYU T.G.: Well, as I mentioned before, this is an interview to understand how people experienced Hurricane Sandy – Superstorm Sandy – in 2012. And we want to understand what experiences of people in Sunset Park were like and learn from that so we can better know a little bit better what people would need in a next storm or another weather event. Let's start by situating ourselves... Where in Sunset Park do you live? What part of the neighborhood? You don't have to tell me your exact address, but you can describe what it looks like... What is your block like? What is your building like? What level of the building do you live on? And maybe if you can describe to us a little bit about where the Senior Center is located as well. And we go from there, you tell me whatever you want about each one.

SPP_AG63: Okay. I live in the Sunset Park area. I have lived in [the same] building since I came from Puerto Rico, since '81, although I lived in a little room here when I first arrived. In '81, I moved into that building, 4th floor. I live near the park, what they call Sunset Park. I live in that area.

NYU T.G.: And that's where you've lived since you came from Puerto Rico?

SPP_AG63: When I came from Puerto Rico, I actually lived across the street from this building (United Senior Center) in a room. We stayed there for a month and a half and from there we moved to where I live now, which was in the same year, '81.

NYU T.G.: Wow! I mean you have been here...

SPP_AG63: My children and my grandchildren were born there. I'm a product of [Sunset Park].

I can walk from where I live to where I work. Lately I've been using the bus to get here if I don't have the strength to walk, because when I started working here, at this center, I was 26 years old. I am now 59 and will turn 60 in two months, so there is a difference of almost 40 years... And yes, yes, there is a difference, even though sometimes I say there isn't and pretend like it's all the same. I always try to stay positive, but that's the way it is, and there is a difference. Just as there's been a difference over all these years, you can definitely notice the difference, even in climate change. [...] We have an organization called Uprose here in this community. We are familiar with that organization, because it has been in charge of informing the community about these changes in the climate. Its director, Elizabeth Yiampierre, is an excellent human being and very concerned about the whole community and everything that may happen in the future. She has been in charge of bringing information to this center [and] inviting us to participate in activities within her climate change work.

I, Grisel Amador, and being under the responsibility of a program called the CERT Program (we were United Senior Center CERT—CERT: Community Emergency Response Team—when I say 'we were,' I mean in the sense that the OEM office, the Office of Emergency Management of the City of New York, did a reorganization of names, and we, United Senior Center CERT, came to fall under what they call Region Two. These are codes, things like that, but that's what it's called.) [...] we had our own team, our own staff. Now all of that has become part of the Region Two program within the CERT Program. And there we had elderly people, older adults, people almost reaching 90 years old, who were trained, educated, together with people younger than them, and the community came together—people from the community, people from United Senior Center, the staff, and also members of the center. They were all trained and certified to...

NYU_TG: to be emergency...

SPP_AG63: To carry out this program (CERT). In this program, there was very important guidance and direction on what to do: before, during, and after any emergency. This is where the climate, climate change, and hurricanes come in. What I, Grisel Amador, remember about Sandy (and I can tell you that maybe it could have been Storm Pedro or Storm Pablo), but as far as I, Grisel Amador, am concerned, I'm going to tell you what I remember about that storm.

NYU_TG: Okay, yes, yes.

SPP_AG63: Well, based on that, here's what I want to tell you. Do you understand? If I talk to you about something else, something from a different storm, you can tell them, 'She's dealt with 200 storms, and it's not that she wants to give incorrect information.'

NYU_TG: Yes, yes. And that's what this is about, and that's why it's oral history, right? It's about what each person experienced and remembers....

SPP_AG63: Based on that, when this storm arrives [...] we're already trained. And what happens? We begin to give information to the members of this center who are people over 60 years old, [...] many of whom live alone, many live with family, many have a disability, whether they use a walker, a cane, or a wheelchair. We start to guide them: 'Prepare with a flashlight,' 'It's important not to use candles for lighting due to the danger, but if you use candles [...] it's important to put them inside a bucket of water, [...] not near curtains.' We inform them. Explaining to them how important it is for them as older people to protect themselves, to protect their loved ones, to protect their neighbors as well. Because if they drop a candle and it is near the window and there is a fire, then they die not from the storm, but from the fire. After guiding them on what things they should have during such emergencies, we move on to how to prepare their bags with their medications; with information about what medications they take and the milligrams, and to have a small amount of those medications in bags [...]. Nothing that is [...] heavy [...]. After they are guided, and told that the bag should be by the door, and that it's important for them to have their food, water, and all those kinds of things, then comes the other stage, when the storm arrives...

NYU_TG: May I? Do you remember, for Sandy in particular, how many days before? Or how did you find out about the storm?

SPP_AG63: From the news.

NYU_TG: Okay. And did you know how strong it was going to be?

SPP_AG63: I'll tell you. I watch news on channels 41 and 47, which are in Spanish. But what happens? The Department for the Aging has alerts, and those alerts inform me so that I can inform them. [...] The OEM office also handles that [...]. They are responsible for sending alerts [and] they already had our phone numbers to have that ready. Con Edison also provided information. If the power goes out, what to do, what not to do. As soon as I start receiving those alarms, I immediately start informing my coworkers and then we go to the seniors: 'Rain is expected, this is expected, that is expected. We will provide emergency food.' So we go to the kitchen, prepare the staff, and tell the staff: 'We need to prepare lunches so that they can eat here and take them, with everything that involves a lunch, all its nutritional value.' After [...] OEM informs us, and Con Edison, all these companies make calls to let us know, and we need to respond whether we received them or not.

The moment arrives, the commotion, the noise passes. The next day, we start to hear what happened, where it went through. We then check our list of seniors, those who are disabled and we know can't walk. We have a program called telephone insurance, [for] people who are bedridden or in conditions where they need someone to check on them. We verify, check, call.

Now I move on to the next stage: The next stage is to see where the first aid will be organized, to see what is needed in the community. That's where United Senior Center CERT comes in, and that's where I come in. I go to a school called... I won't give the number to avoid being mistaken, but I'll give you the address: the school on 60th Street and Third Avenue. [...] We go there, and there the Office of Emergency Management, or the mayor, or someone had set up an office to collect items for the hurricane victims. When I went there, I saw that it wasn't what I expected. And with that, I was able to find information about other places that also had that type of need,

places where people could go to help. Another place was in Bay Ridge. It was in a church in Bay Ridge. I'm not sure if it was near Senator, between 5th Avenue, on the corner, in a church. There would be the OEM office, which was where I felt more familiar with the CERT program. And from that office, we worked, and decided to go there. The CERT group from here also went to work there. We have our own shirts that were from the CERT, and on the back, they said Community Emergency Response Team. [...] And from there, we started. There were different organizations there. As victims arrived, there were tables set up for this, tables for that. Since we were United Senior Center and additionally United Senior Center CERT, because I made sure we were covered by both organizations I represented, we set up our own table. As elderly people arrived, that was our focus: 'What do you need? How can we help you? Where can we refer you at this moment when there is a great need?' That's when I learned that the Bay Ridge area had been one of the most affected areas. In that Bay Ridge area, many trees had fallen, and there were still areas without power. In the Sunset Park area, where I am... Because Bay Ridge, first of all, is separated by a street. For example, this street here is Sunset Park, and if you cross where that black car is going, that street going down is called Bay Ridge...

NYU_TG: Oh yeah? So at 53rd is where the border is.

SPP_AG63: That's where the division is. At first, I was alarmed and worried about why so many organizations always focused on 53rd Street and 5th Avenue, in front of the center, at United. But it wasn't the center; once I put it all together, it was that the center was a location point for them. And besides, 53rd Street was an important point. Why? Because it divided the two neighborhoods.

NYU_TG: What did you see were the issues that affected Sunset Park residents the most? Because clearly we're in like a... Sunset Park is at high [ground].

SPP_AG63: I'll tell you. There were fallen trees, rain. [For] a lot of the buildings, the complaints or the reports they were giving was that they were flooded, that they even had feces coming out from the inside. It was coming from the pipes somewhere and people, including older people,

that lived in basements, had to go upstairs or somewhere else because they couldn't live in the basements. It was horrible. In the building...

NYU_TG: Sorry. And those people...

SPP_AG63: The Red Cross took it upon themselves to help them, to give them help and provide service.

NYU_TG: And those people were never... That wasn't an area that needed to be evacuated? I mean, those people never got a notice that they had to evacuate?

SPP_AG63: In the area of 8th Avenue and 42nd Street, there's a restaurant on the corner. The building next to it was completely flooded with all the sewage coming out of it, in the area where I live. And the girl who lived there has a child with autism [...]. God knows how He does things because thanks to that, the city found her an apartment and moved her out of there. She lived with her husband, it wasn't very good, but the husband was there. The thing is, the husband was undocumented, but [he was] a very intelligent man, and she was too. She always took care of her son, her son, her son, and the man was the child's father. [...] They both managed to leave and I have bumped into her since. She lives very happily over there. Thank God. Yes, thank God. Those were nice things that came from the storm. Others were not as lucky as they were. Do you understand? No, it wasn't easy. Including in Sunset Park itself. In Sunset Park itself, in the park itself. Remember, I live in that area. I got to see many things.

NYU_TG: And the electricity?

SPP_AG63: Look, as far as I remember, I had electricity. Here at the center the electricity never went out. We were always prepared. We prepared with what we had: a flashlight that was there, always a radio, I always keep it in a white bag, you can see it there. And behind it, that bag is new; I put it there because we bought new flashlights and some new things the other day. The old flashlight from back then, I still have it, yellow, I have it. I look at it and I say: You never know, maybe that's the one that will work. You never know, but I always have to have things at hand.

That's how it came about that we had walkie talkies and that's how I ended up taking a walkie talkie to my apartment and each one of the [staff members] too, so that we could put it into practice. To see how far the distance was [for the walkie talkie to work]. Then we all came back and that's when we knew, this one didn't get it, this one got it and we went from there.

NYU_TG: And you got it?

SPP_AG63: Yes it reached me, but not very clear, not very clear. But what happens is that based on that, I took a training at the OEM office. This is a certified training on how to use the radios that the police use, that the firefighters use, that the emergency management offices use, and every Monday we had a practice session. There was a fixed time, you identified yourself, and you said your location. There was no need to give an address. Based on that, the Office of Emergency Management gave us some radios [...]. Everything was based on all the things that were happening, so it all served as experience. And that's how it came about that no one, at least from the CERT program, can present themselves to any emergency area unless authorized by the Office of Emergency Management. Whether it's a fire, or whatever it is. I, Grisel Amador, can't go saying, 'I'm from CERT. I'm here to help.' No, it doesn't work like that. It doesn't work that way.

NYU_TG: And that was after Sandy?

SPP_AG63: No, they were always very strict because they wanted to ensure that we were [secure]. As they said, 'First, it's you [and] your family. Make sure you're okay so you can help and serve others.' That's where the emphasis was, that was the difference. Because you want to help, that's what you want to do. It's not that I want to be nosy or see what's going on. No, it's not like that. You want to help, but if you're helping and the office doesn't know you're there, they can't send help if something really happens. What do they know? They don't know anything. The idea is for you to be safe so you can ensure others are safe. They always have a reason for things. Likewise, when we were interviewed for television, I didn't give information if there was a representative from the Office of Emergency Management. That's not my role; it's

theirs. Now, if they wanted to interview United Senior Center of Sunset Park, I'm the representative. There's a difference. There's a line of respect, and none of us cross it. None of us.

After that, we started to hear that other communities had also experienced disastrous situations, especially communities near the sea. That's where Sunset Park, United Senior Center, and United Senior Center CERT came in again to organize collections. 'Bring donations. Bring this. No money, but bring clothing.' At that time, [...] I was also collecting clothes. I remember that Félix Ortiz was involved. He was our assembly member at that time, and Félix and I joined forces. Well, his organization and my organization, United Senior Center, collected clothing, and he committed to taking that clothing to Red Hook because Red Hook was heavily affected. And also to take it and see who could deliver it to Rockaway, which was also a heavily affected area. Why was I interested in both areas? Because I had seniors in both areas.

NYU_TG: There are people who come here from Rockaway?

SPP_AG63: She passed away. The lady died, but she had people from Rockaway that came here and her mother-in-law came here, she lives on 49th... and in March of 2020, both her and her son, mother and son died from COVID. He had a girlfriend in Rockaway with a baby, and the mother lived here. And the lady who cared for her lived here in Sunset Park. That's why it was all so familiar. From Red Hook, I have members of the Senior Center going there and coming here. Very mixed, very intertwined, without any problem... And we had our seniors from the community here who, if they couldn't buy things, had items to share from what they had at home and bring. 'I can't buy a roll of toilet paper, but I brought you two from my own shopping. I don't need anything, one is enough for now.' And we gathered them together and the clothing..."

NYU_TG: And the seniors were still coming here? Was the center still operating or?

SPP_AG63: The center always operated. The center was not...

NYU_TG: It became like an Emergency [center]? Ah, the center was still open for them to come...

SPP_AG63: It was still open and we were ready, always on standby. We had emergency water, we had clothing stored for emergencies, we had emergency food that was separate from what the center had. And we also had, for example, if children came, coloring books, because they needed something to keep them entertained. We had logistics for how to manage: how many young people, how many women, how many men, how many from here, how many from there... After that, the Office of Emergency Management also opened another site at the Dewey School, on 4th Avenue and 41st Street. I already had my own, so what I did was simply: 'This is my presence, I'm here to help.' We called the CERT office, and let them know: 'Look, we're at this location, this is how it is, from this time to that time.' And we followed through.

NYU_TG: And the things that people were bringing here, were you taking them to specific people? Or let's say was another facility in the Red Hook Community?

SPP_AG63: In the Red Hook community, there was what they call a sort of meeting point. Ecuadorians use a word... I forgot what the word is. We used it during a situation with them as well... Center of...

NYU_TG: Collection center?

SPP_AG63: That's the word I was looking for: collection center. We had to act as a collection center for Ecuador and other countries, but in this case, we were not a collection center for any other country, but for ourselves. The communities of Sunset Park, Red Hook, Bay Ridge, and Rockaway were heavily affected, including our seniors. Thank God people helped each other. The politicians were indeed concerned and involved. I repeat, Félix Ortiz gathered the boxes and took them to Red Hook. He delivered them there, and they took care of where they were going... to whom they would be given. Here in Sunset Park, as far as I remember, I don't recall giving anything to any of the seniors here. On the contrary, I remember them bringing things.

But what has happened to me is that I've had events, like Thanksgiving, where an organization might say they're going to give me, for example, 40 turkeys. And I say, I can't just give them

out; I have to raffle them off because I don't want anyone to think I have preferences. But there are exceptions for some seniors whose financial situation I know. So, I set those turkeys aside... When that happens, I let them know: 'I'm going to set your turkey aside, but I need to take a photo of you.' Why do I take the photo? To track where that turkey went. It's very important. I don't eat turkey, or if it were pork, depending on the part, then I might take some, but I know it's not for me. Do you understand? It's for my seniors. So we raffle them off. We take a photo so that they know and we let them know. We have a release form for taking photos, but I also like them to hear it. No one has to know. The photo isn't displayed if it's just for that purpose. Do you understand? Why? No one needs to know that. And it has happened that I discreetly include them in the group photo so that they appear in the photo, but the person and I know that they didn't have to participate in the raffle. You know what I mean? The same thing happened with the clothing. If someone had needed it, I would have set it aside. Like if someone needed detergent or something. 'I need this to clean because there's a bad smell or something.' I would have noted it, of course. There wasn't that need with us.

NYU_TG: So, to a certain extent, the seniors in Sunset Park, I imagine, due to the nature of the neighborhood, weren't as affected. Instead, they were more likely the ones who could help other seniors who were indeed affected.

SPP_AG63: They helped in different ways. My seniors, who are part of the CERT program, worked. They work at another level because they have the training, the time, and they themselves said, 'Yes, no problem. Uniform is ready. Today's office. Do you know how many there are?' All of that. We have always kept things in reserve for emergencies. And the most important thing is that we always provide guidance on what to do before, during, and after. Even though we guide them before, during, and after any emergency, when the time comes, some people still forget everything. 'No problem, you forgot. Let's see how we can solve it. How can we help you?' That's all we can do. There's nothing more. We've told them a lot about changing phone numbers. We've told them it's important to have a family member's phone number outside of New York State because, in an emergency, New York City might not have power or phone service. But if there's a way to use a phone, for example, to Chicago, maybe the one in Chicago can communicate with the one living here on 40th Street and the one living on 41st Street. Look

at how life is, a block divides them here, but they can't communicate, yet Chicago makes the connection with both of them. So, we try to explain all those types of details that are so important.

We were very surprised to find out that, thanks to God, since Sunset Park is located in a slightly elevated area, like a small hill, we didn't have as much fear that the sea would overflow and reach here. Flooding could have happened, for example, on First Avenue.

The Lutheran Medical Center at that time, which is now NYU Langone, also developed a program for emergency situations, and I remember they invited us, and we went. As soon as we knew that a storm was coming, that there would be bad weather with Storm Sandy and other emergencies, [...] we went to the other senior center and provided information. We went to two or three centers, no more than that, because then the center had to continue running everything else. So we went to give guidance here and to give guidance at [...], which is the other senior center. We were called to Lutheran. I will tell you where it is, what is the name of that center? 9000 of [...] it's up there, but it's closer to the sea. We also went there for those who called us about emergencies and storms, including Sandy, including everything that [...] could come in the future. We also went, shared, talked, and gave our experience that we had gone through.

The rain, thank God, did not cause leaks at this center, but there were buildings that did experience leaks, which affected them in one way or another. There were stores that had leaks. Look, you have it on the first floor, and the leak is from above, and somehow it affected them. It's not clear if it was the same as the building that had flooding from below, but it did affect them. The Center for Family Life, I remember, was always willing to help, and so was the Salvation Army. The thing is, when we knew of help from one organization and another, we would join forces and call: 'Look what happened with this? Look, we have this, look over there... This is not possible right now. I heard that this organization is dealing with this.'

NYU_TG: So you have a network of communication in the neighborhood that helps.

SPP_AG63: And it really does, it helps a lot.

NYU_TG: And you've had that since before Sandy?

SPP_AG63: What happened is that it was emphasized more, it was given more importance. For example, the Department of Aging has always had an emergency plan. In this emergency plan, they want to know what your emergency plan is. "But do me a favor, Grisel, give your plan, with your phone number and everything, to two different organizations, so that these two organizations also know what to do." We work very closely with Community Board Seven—I am a member of Community Board Seven. And how do we do it? In an emergency, I call Community Board Seven, and they have their contact list as well. From there, they developed their CERT program. —I already had it; we were first. I was part of their pilot program. Thank God we received the funding, so I could implement it here with my seniors. —Community Board Seven managed to create its program; it's an excellent program for them too. We worked together in everything, coming together and working. Today, Community Board Seven and United Senior Center have merged to become Region 2 because they wanted to unify the regions. I am satisfied because a name doesn't do everything; what matters is that we can provide for the community, especially for my seniors.

Every month, I hold the meeting as if we were the United Senior Center CERT, documented and all. Everyone who wants to come is welcome. We practice fire drills every month because an emergency could be a last-minute storm that might not be heard, and everyone needs to know how to navigate, how to orient themselves, which side of the street to take. According to the storms and all those types of climate changes, we prepare ourselves better each day, orient ourselves, or try to, by watching the news and setting alerts on our phones. The Department for the Aging, the OEM office, Con Edison, they want or suggest that we have all those applications on our phones. Why? Because if there's an emergency, at least we know who to call or where to go.

So we remain active, thank God. The years have passed and have served as experience for us to prepare. It has been an experience that today allows us to help other countries and islands. A few weeks ago, we had the situation with Puerto Rico, with Santo Domingo, and other areas... United

Senior Center focused on Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo, collecting items. We always emphasize, especially this time: "no money" [...] and for a while now, "no clothing," because I have no place to store it, "but bring everything else." Look, I have them here because I need to document them. This was two or three weeks ago during the last hurricane. This is what we collected. This is how we help them help others. With things like this, the program immediately steps in as help...

NYU_TG: Yeah I see things like detergents...

SPP_AG63: There are detergents, adult diapers, all kinds of personal hygiene assistance... What happens is that we also have a program with the FBI, being the FBI liaison in this Sunset Park community. They provided us with literature. I went and got it. I also used their T-shirt so they could see, and we appeared on the FBI's website offering help to Puerto Rico, offering help to Santo Domingo, with the seniors cooperating. Another agency came and brought us small bags, which are also useful for any emergency [...]. We can put any little emergency items in them and go.

NYU_TG: Well, and in general, how do you feel that the storm changed the way you thought about or changed the neighborhood itself?

SPP_AG63: Well, I'm going to tell you something, and I repeat, with Sandy or without Sandy, [...] I'm speaking from the heart, I never thought that... because it was like a movie, that the sea would overflow into Rockaway, that the sea would walk through the streets. I just couldn't believe it. That the water would overflow in Red Hook, which is so close to Sunset Park. It's something I can't even fathom. That it would affect us so much in Sunset Park and even come up through all the pipes... and in the buildings where I live so close on 42nd and 8th... No, it's something that... Look, honey, not even in Puerto Rico. I never, ever... But that it would happen here? In Sunset Park, in America, where we have everything so easy, no...

NYU_TG: Yes, the vulnerability of the city...

SPP_AG63: Truly... that both Sunset Park and Bay Ridge and other areas – in this case, we're also talking about Rockaway and Red Hook – would say “we have emergencies, we need help.” And we need help from Con Edison, from the phones, from everything, because it was a general situation, even food, because a lot of food was spoiled, a lot of food. But I also saw that there were charitable souls available to help. You understand? That you can see in this storm, and in other storms, that you say “oh my god, people really help. But look, they were also affected by the storm.” But there was also help and it came together. This one was affected and this one... We hope it doesn't happen again, but that's what was hoped for Puerto Rico after Maria, and look how terrible. Florida, Florida was flooded. If I tell you, you wouldn't believe it. Look, that black bag you see there, it was just brought to me today. I have a bag of clothes for a three-year-old with autism that was requested from Florida. From Florida? We need clothes from Sunset Park for this Florida, you know. I told them: “look, I'm going to pack the clothes and have everything ready.”

The way to help even a little is by preparing before something happens and before it happens... I have three little sheds, and if you go outside, you'll see them at the front. And those three little sheds have things inside for emergencies, from water, pull-ups, and diapers for seniors. Everything I can, I keep there. We rotate the supplies so they don't expire. Likewise with the food, we have rotating food and everything. We were able to use it now during the Cooling Center, which is also an emergency...

NYU_TG: Of course, it's also climate change...

SPP_AG63: ...because emergencies are not only hurricanes, but also very intense heat or very intense cold, even if there is no rain. There are different events, but we have prepared ourselves, thank God, for all that. If something happens and we forget that we have things in there, that's another story, but if I forget, I have coworkers to remind me.

If we buy cookie packages, which are [...] small tins or plastic, I prefer them to be individually wrapped. They come with four individual cookies. "Take your package. No one touched it, no one did anything to it."

NYU_TG: So you are as prepared as possible for whatever comes....

SPP_AG63: As prepared as possible. Hoping nothing happens, and if it does, we always let them know. We have a code if something happens. When our center was closed due to COVID, the seniors were already prepared, based on what had happened with the weather changes. Letting them know: “If an emergency occurs and the center closes, the only way you will know when it reopens is when you see yellow and red tablecloths out the window.”

NYU_TG: And that was because you had been through crises like this before?

SPP_AG63: This is what we do. We made contact with Karen, who was the director of Sunset Park at that time. Thanks to the Community Board Seven, we coordinated and agreed: “Karen, if any emergency happens, I can tell my seniors that we will meet at Sunset Park, in the park.” The park is full of trees. In an emergency, it’s full of trees, but it has a large area inside with big rooms—I’ve been to 20,000 events there. And the seniors already knew: “if an emergency happens, go to Sunset Park, we will be at Sunset Park.” And then there would be sheets and beds—I have all that stored... not beds, but sheets so you can at least lie down. Where did I get the sheets? The Salvation Army gave them to me. We kept them for an emergency. Thanks to the CERT program that trained us and guided us, we know: “take this, you need to have this stored, check the expiration date, because we won’t give out anything expired. Have coloring books, activities for kids, that kind of stuff.” We decided that we will all go to Sunset Park in an emergency. I live nearby, so it works perfectly for me.

When the center opened, they were looking at the windows to see if the tablecloths were there. As soon as they saw the tablecloths, they started coming.

NYU_TG: Wow, that’s so great.

SPP_AG63: Wellness calls were made to check on how people were doing, what happened... We reminded them: “don’t forget that when you see the red and yellow tablecloths through the

window, this center is open.” Because you can call at least 20 or 30 people daily, but you can’t call nearly 2000 people. It’s not possible, but we have to have a code for doing so. For example, let me show you something. We have codes for entering the center with the keys. Everyone who works here has to have the green key. This is the main entrance. From there, you go to number two, which is the other entrance. And here is the third floor key. And here is the bathroom key, and these are the two doors where we put new locks. And since I’m meticulous, I don’t leave any confidential information and I also never use the same lock... I never leave the same one. I change it from day to day.

According to how these keys are organized, that’s how we handle everything, because it’s the only way to maintain control. I can throw this key, which has happened to me, to the fire department from my house. We talk on the phone: “Okay, I’ll open the window. I’ll throw the key down. Okay. What color? Wait, use this key which is this color and this...” And they already know when they come, they come straight to open the door, because there’s no time to start searching through all that mess of keys.

Everything is based on things that have happened, whether it's climate change, hurricanes, or snowstorms. We try to keep everything as simple as possible. And what’s simpler than using colored rags? Because these colors identify us. Whenever I say, 'use the yellow key,' any senior can find it. There's no need to search extensively. It makes life easier for us, because it's not easy, but at least it makes it easier.

NYU_TG: Yes, and in an emergency you can't think.

SPP_AG63: [In an emergency] I throw you the key, you pick it up. That's the one. Go in with that key. And we'll go from there.

NYU_TG: Is there anything else you want to tell me that you haven't told me?

SPP_AG63: To get to Bay Ridge, I remember we used public buses because sometimes we had money for car services, but sometimes we didn't, so we took the public bus. I also remember that

when we went to the Community Board Seven meetings, it was emphasized that the school did provide a collection center. United Senior Center was assigned to work at the Bay Ridge collection center, which was essentially the same as working in Sunset Park. Most of our staff are from Sunset Park, and our center is located in both Sunset Park and Bay Ridge. We have many seniors from Bay Ridge, and our Bay Ridge neighbors were indeed affected. Sunset Park was also affected, but thankfully the sea did not flood the area. We had power; at least I did, both at the center and in my apartment. I don't have a house; I live in an apartment.

NYU_TG: And your family was ok? Everybody was fine?

SPP_AG63: Thank God, everyone is fine. The information I've given you comes from the bottom of my heart, with everything I can say is the truth from my recollection. And as I mentioned at the beginning, it could be Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Juan, Pedro... you know? But that was my experience.

NYU_TG: No, no, I mean, thank you so much, because I feel that this is a... Your experience of being not only a member of the community but also part of the emergency team and the support network for these neighborhoods is really what we want... to understand how we can be better prepared for the next storm....

SPP_AG63: And we hope it doesn't happen...

NYU_TG: Of course...

SPP_AG63: Let's hope it doesn't happen...