

Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

English Translation

Participant: Biyu Dong, female

Interviewer: Jing Zhu (NYU)

Interview conducted in Chinese on 4/24/22

Site: Participant's home

Amy: Today is April 24, 2022. We are here to talk about your experience during Superstorm Sandy, which took place in Oct. 22-29, 2012

Biyu: I was renting a house at the place where I used to live. That place was at the back of the main street, so the storm didn't have a significant impact on me.

Amy: So, at that time, you were living in a different location.

Biyu: Yes, I was living on [...]. I lived in a house at the back. The wind was strong in the front, and some tree branches were blown down.

Amy: So, the place you lived in was not directly facing the main street; it was at the back, with another building in front?

Biyu: Yes, it's like this place. The front is the street, and I lived at the back.

Amy: Oh, so the building is in the front, and you lived at the back, not directly facing the street, but there's another street behind?

Biyu: No, there's a piece of land at the back. It's the same for the street on that side; there's a piece of land at the back too. 7th Avenue and 6th Avenue have higher elevations. Water won't come in; only low-lying areas will experience flooding. Our place didn't have any water; the wind was strong, and some windows were broken by the wind. Tree branches were blown down, and then they fell. There were big trees in the front, and their branches were all blown down. But since we lived at the back, the impact wasn't significant.

Amy: Did you move to this area because of Sandy?

Biyu: No, we moved here just last year.

Amy: You lived there for many years, right?

Biyu: Yes, I lived there for a whole ten years.

Amy: During those ten years, you experienced only one storm, which was Sandy, right?

Biyu: Yes.

Amy: Before Sandy came, did you know that it was coming?

Biyu: Yes, I knew from the weather forecast.

Amy: So, it was the weather forecast that informed you.

Biyu: Yes.

Amy: About how long before the storm did the weather forecast start reporting on Sandy?

Biyu: About a week or so.

Amy: So, the weather forecast said that there would be a storm coming soon.

Biyu: Yes, they mentioned there would be strong winds.

Amy: Did the weather forecast only mention strong winds or did it also warn about floods?

Biyu: They mentioned floods, but our area was at a higher elevation, so we wouldn't have flooding. Places with lower elevation in Sunset Park got severely flooded.

Amy: But did the weather forecast remind you about floods?

Biyu: Yes, they did, but there was no flooding in our area.

Amy: Did the weather forecast mention how much rain and how strong the winds would be?

Biyu: I'm not sure about that; I didn't pay attention.

Amy: Did you not pay attention because you hadn't experienced such a storm before?

Biyu: Yes, I hadn't encountered it before.

Amy: After hearing the news, did you prepare anything?

Biyu: Yes, I was afraid of power outages and water disruptions, so I bought bottled water to keep at home, and I also prepared flashlights and candles.

Amy: Did you prepare food as well?

Biyu: Yes, we did.

Amy: Did you also prepare medicines?

Biyu: Yes, we did.

Amy: The weather forecast reminded you to prepare these things, or did you know by yourself that you needed to prepare them?

Biyu: The weather forecast reminded us to prepare water, flashlights, and such. Older people always have medicines at home; they are always there.

Amy: Besides the weather forecast, were there other ways for you to know about the storm coming?

Biyu: Yes, my daughter told me; she was in New Jersey. The wind was very strong there. The trees were blown down and pressed against houses.

Amy: So, the storm reached her area first and then came to New York.

Biyu: She called us and said, "Mom and Dad, you need to be careful; the wind is very strong this time." She lives on top of a hill in New Jersey, and the wind was strong. Water wouldn't come in, but the wind was strong.

Amy: So, they called to remind you.

Biyu: Yes.

Amy: What about your community?

Biyu: My landlord also told me. He said, "You need to be careful today; the wind will be very strong."

Amy: Did your landlord remind you on the day the storm came?

Biyu: Yes.

Amy: So, you knew about it a week before, and you had time to prepare.

Biyu: Yes, that's right.

Amy: That's good. Did you talk about the storm with your friends or people in the community after hearing about it from the weather forecast?

Biyu: Yes, when we were at the senior center, we chatted about it. Everyone would say, "Be careful; this time, we need to be cautious."

Amy: That's great. Did they all listen to the weather forecast as well?

Biyu: Yes, they did.

Amy: You have many friends, and you exchange experiences with each other.

Biyu: Yes, we have a lot of friends, and we exchange experiences.

Amy: That's good. In case someone missed the weather forecast, you could communicate with each other.

Biyu: Also, our landlord is very good; he often reminds us and frequently comes by to ask if we need anything. Our landlord is very good.

Amy: When the storm came, how many days did it last? Do you remember?

Biyu: I don't remember.

Amy: Do you remember the situation on that day?

Biyu: Yes, I remember it was severe that day.

Amy: We can hear the wind and rain outside during normal rainy days at home. How strong was the wind and rain on that day?

Biyu: In the United States, when it's windy, you can hear the wind howling if you are outside. But I didn't go out that day, so I didn't hear it very clearly. Sometimes, when it's windy and rainy and I go out, the wind is so strong that I can't even hold an umbrella. I can't walk properly

because of the wind; it's like the wind is screaming. It's like that sometimes when it's windy and rainy, but I didn't go out that day.

Amy: Did you feel that the wind on that day was stronger than usual?

Biyu: Yes, it was stronger, but we were at home, living at the back and on the ground floor, so we didn't feel it very strongly.

Amy: How did you know that tree branches were blown off, or that they fell?

Biyu: We could see it from the front; there were trees in the front, and their branches were blown off.

Amy: Oh, so you saw it when you went out later.

Biyu: Yes, I saw it when I went out later.

Amy: Did big tree branches fall?

Biyu: Not very big; the trees in our area weren't large, so only small branches fell.

Amy: Did they block the road?

Biyu: No, they didn't.

Amy: On that day, did it rain heavily?

Biyu: Yes, it rained heavily.

Amy: How long did it rain, approximately?

Biyu: It rained for quite a while, but I don't remember exactly how long.

Amy: Oh, you don't remember. For example, did it rain all night?

Biyu: It rained all night.

Amy: So, when you went out later, was the water on the street already drained, or did it take some time?

Biyu: Our area is at a higher elevation, so there was no water on the street; it was all drained.

Amy: When did you go out? Did you go out on the second day?

Biyu: I didn't go out on the second day.

Amy: So, when did you go out?

Biyu: I think I went out about two days later.

Amy: By that time, the water on the street had been drained.

Biyu: Yes, it was drained.

Amy: You lived at the back, so did the front houses have water coming in?

Biyu: No, they didn't.

Amy: Was it because your area was at a higher elevation?

Biyu: Yes, because of the higher elevation.

Amy: Do you know if any of your friends' homes were flooded?

Biyu: It seems like none of my friends' homes were flooded. I didn't hear about anyone's house being flooded. None of us lived in low-lying areas. Some of my friends lived in basements, but their homes weren't flooded either. The main reason was that 7th Avenue and 6th Avenue are at higher elevations.

Amy: Which areas had lower elevations?

Biyu: Places near 1st Avenue and the beach are relatively low.

Amy: Oh, the areas closer to the beach. So, your street didn't have any problems during the storm.

Biyu: That's right. The place I live now is also at a high elevation.

Amy: I'm not very familiar with the geography of Sunset Park. Are there areas with higher and lower elevations in the neighborhood?

Biyu: Yes, there are both.

Amy: The place where you used to live, was it an entire residential area?

Biyu: Yes, it was.

Amy: During the storm, did none of the residents in that area go outside?

Biyu: That's right.

Amy: Does the senior center help you prepare for storms, do they remind you when a storm is coming?

Biyu: The senior center reminded us, but they didn't help us prepare. They just reminded us to get ready for the storm at home.

Amy: Did Sandy have any negative impact on you? Did you experience any losses?

Biyu: We didn't have any significant losses, but of course, there was a psychological impact. It left a bit of a shadow in our minds. The strong winds outside caused others' houses to be flooded, which definitely had an effect on us. However, we didn't experience any physical losses; it was only the psychological impact.

Amy: After Sandy, were you particularly careful when choosing a new house?

Biyu: Yes, we pay attention to selecting places with higher elevations.

Amy: When you went out two days later, did you see any broken car windows?

Biyu: I heard about it, but I didn't see any. My friend's son had a tree fall behind his car, but luckily, he had already driven past when the tree fell; otherwise, it would have crushed his car.

Amy: Where did this happen?

Biyu: It happened in Shunchang where his son lives.

Amy: Did he still drive outside during those days?

Biyu: He drove to work to earn money.

Amy: So, the tree fell while he was driving.

Biyu: Yes, the tree fell, and it nearly hit his car. That's what my friend told me.

Amy: That's very dangerous.

Biyu: Yes, it was indeed very dangerous.

Amy: The wind was indeed strong that day; it could blow down trees.

Biyu: Yes, the wind was strong. Trees fell near my daughter's house, and they damaged her house, so repairs are needed.

Amy: Oh, I see. We know that during storms, there are two main types of damage: trees falling and damaging houses, and flooding. Especially for lower areas, the first floor or basements might get flooded, causing a lot of trouble and danger. Fortunately, neither you nor your friends experienced these situations.

Biyu: Yes, none of us encountered those problems. We all live nearby and not by the beach.

Amy: If water were to flood into your homes, do you know how to handle it?

Biyu: Even if water entered our homes, it would only flood the basement, not the first floor. The water wouldn't be that deep; it wouldn't reach the first floor.

Amy: Did the senior center tell you how to deal with such situations in case water flooded into your homes.

Biyu: If the basement flooded, we should run upstairs. We should also move our belongings to higher places.

Amy: Do you have an emergency bag or anything similar prepared, so you can grab it and go in case of an emergency?

Biyu: Yes, we have that.

Amy: Did the senior center organize a lecture for you about this?

Biyu: Yes, they did.

Amy: Oh, they provide such lectures at the senior center.

Biyu: Yes, they do. The senior center is very good; they care a lot about the elderly.

Amy: After going through Sandy, if the senior center organized more comprehensive lectures, telling you how to handle such situations or teaching you to read flood maps and storm maps, would you be willing to attend those lectures?

Biyu: Yes, we would. During the current pandemic, we stay at home, and the senior center often holds such lectures. We all participate.

Amy: Do you have to go to the senior center to attend those lectures?

Biyu: No, we listen to the lectures at home. They inform us about the schedule of the lectures, and then we can join through Zoom.

Amy: Are there many participants?

Biyu: Yes, there are many.

Amy: Sandy didn't cause a particularly significant impact on you, but after experiencing it, do you make any special preparations at home?

Biyu: Yes, we make some preparations.

Amy: For example?

Biyu: For example, the senior center at Chinese-American Planning Council organizes lectures, and they provide us with water, flashlights, and compressed biscuits. They give these items to us.

Amy: Did they distribute these items after Sandy or before it?

Biyu: After. They held the lectures after the storm and gave us these items during the lectures.

Amy: That's really good. Do you still have these items at home now?

Biyu: I think we still have the water and flashlights.

Amy: After attending those lectures, if you encounter a similar situation again, you will know what to do, right?

Biyu: Yes, that's right.

Amy: After Sandy, did you go far away from home?

Biyu: No, not at all. Even during the current pandemic, I haven't gone far from home. I only go out if there's something to do or to buy groceries. I go to the senior center if there's something there, but otherwise, I stay at home and rarely go out.

Amy: What about during the time of Sandy?

Biyu: During that time, when the senior center was open, we would go there to sing and attend classes. Other than that, we only went out to buy groceries and didn't go out much.

Amy: When you went out to buy groceries or go to the senior center after Sandy, did you walk there?

Biyu: Yes, we walked; we always walk.

Amy: Was the road okay then?

Biyu: Yes, it was.

Amy: Do you have friends who need to take public transportation? Were public transportation services still running during that time?

Biyu: My friends all live around here, so we all walk. I'm not sure about the public transportation; it seems like it was still available.

Amy: So, everything was normal on the roads?

Biyu: Yes, everything was normal.

Amy: During those days, did you have enough food prepared at home?

Biyu: Yes, we did.

Amy: Did you prepare it before Sandy?

Biyu: Yes, we prepared it before Sandy.

Amy: During those days, did you experience any power outages?

Biyu: No, we didn't have any power outages or water disruptions in our area. Our area is pretty good.

Amy: Did you hear about other places experiencing power outages and water disruptions?

Biyu: Yes, there were. Moreover, that day, the cellphone signal wasn't good; there was no cellphone signal.

Amy: Oh, there was no cellphone signal?

Biyu: No, there was no cellphone signal.

Amy: When did the cellphone signal start to disappear?

Biyu: The cellphone signal disappeared as soon as the strong wind started blowing. I couldn't make phone calls, and it lasted for about a day.

Amy: Was it only for one day?

Biyu: Yes, it was only one day.

Amy: Was the signal restored on the second day?

Biyu: Yes, it was restored on the second day.

Amy: Did you completely lose all signals, or did some signals still work?

Biyu: All signals were lost.

Amy: What about the TV signal?

Biyu: There was no TV signal.

Amy: What about the internet? Did you use the internet?

Biyu: We didn't have internet at that time.

Amy: So, at that time, you didn't have wireless internet installed.

Biyu: No, we didn't.

Amy: So, you mainly use your phone to make calls.

Biyu: Yes, we use our phone to make calls.

Amy: So, at that time, you couldn't make phone calls even with the phone.

Biyu: That day, I couldn't make phone calls.

Amy: During that time, could you also not use WeChat?

Biyu: No, we couldn't use it.

Amy: That must have been troublesome, as you couldn't even send a message to your daughter.

Biyu: We had to wait until the phone signal was restored and everything became normal.

Amy: After the signal was restored the next day, it remained normal all along?

Biyu: Yes, it stayed normal from then on.

Amy: Do you usually experience signal loss during windy or rainy weather?

Biyu: No, we don't.

Amy: So, during regular windy or rainy days, you have a signal, but there was only that one time when the signal was lost.

Biyu: Yes, we couldn't make calls at that time.

Amy: Was the TV signal also restored the next day?"

Biyu: Yes, it was.

Amy: Two or three days later when you went to the supermarket to buy food, were the supplies back to normal, or were they all sold out?

Biyu: Even if they were sold out, everything returned to normal in two to three days.

Amy: What about before Sandy?

Biyu: Before Sandy, everyone was preparing, so naturally, the supermarkets didn't have as much stock.

Amy: Information you provided is very useful, thank you.

Biyu: I've forgotten many things.

Amy: If you encounter such a situation again, do you think there are any ways the community can help you?

Biyu: If we face such a situation again, they can inform us in advance and organize some lectures to tell us what to do and how to prepare. This way, we can be mentally prepared and have everything ready. For example, what should we do if water enters our homes and we have no electricity or water?

Amy: How long in advance do you think would be suitable to inform you?

Biyu: It would be best to inform us two to three days in advance, so we can be well prepared.

Amy: After experiencing Sandy, did your thoughts change in any way?

Biyu: Not really. The psychological impact was also minor. The negative effects were mostly what we heard from others.

Amy: Have you heard of any cases where people suffered significant losses at home?

Biyu: My friends didn't experience any significant losses. However, there was an elderly person in the Chinese community, living in Staten Island. She said her house was flooded with water, and everything inside was damaged. The insurance company compensated her, and she later bought another house. Her original house was uninhabitable due to the flooding.

Amy: Oh, that's severe.

Biyu: Yes, her situation was serious. She lived in a low-lying area near the beach in Staten Island. The insurance company compensated her, and she bought another house afterward.

Amy: Did you have insurance for the house you previously lived in?

Biyu: That was the landlord's concern.

Amy: Oh yea you were renting the house at that time.

Biyu: Yes, it was a rental, and it was the landlord's concern. We didn't know about it.

Amy: Is the current house also a rental for you?

Biyu: No, this house was purchased by my son and daughter.

Amy: Did they buy insurance for it?

Biyu: Yes, they did buy insurance.

Amy: Did they buy flood insurance as well?

Biyu: Yes, they bought both fire and flood insurance.

Amy: Was it because of experiencing Sandy that they specifically bought such insurance?

Biyu: When you buy a house, you usually get insurance. I don't know if they specifically bought flood insurance or not; it was arranged by my son and daughter. I know they bought fire insurance, but I'm not sure about flood insurance.

Amy: I see. Is there anything else I haven't asked that you would like to share with me?

Biyu: You've covered everything pretty much.

Amy: If you remember anything else you'd like to share later, you can let me know.

Amy: At that time, did you live with your son and daughter?

Biyu: No, it was just my husband and me. My son and daughter live in other states. It was only the two of us, elderly people, living in New York.

Amy: During that time, both you and your husband didn't go out?

Biyu: We didn't go out.

Amy: Are you living with your son and daughter now?

Biyu: No, we don't live together. They bought the house, but we don't live together.

Amy: During those two days, your son and daughter must have been very worried about you.

Biyu: Yes, they were.

Amy: Did they try to contact you through your neighbors?

Biyu: They didn't know our neighbors' contact information either.

Amy: I see that you are using an iPad now. Do you have wireless internet installed?

Biyu: Yes, we do.

Amy: That's good. At least you have another channel for communication.

Biyu: Yes, that's right.

Amy: Thank you for sharing your experiences.