

Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

English Translation

Participant: Shunyan Ye, female

Interviewer: Jing Zhu (NYU)

Interview conducted in Chinese on 5/29/22

Site: Participant's home

Amy: Today is May 29, 2022. We're here to talk about your experience during Superstorm Sandy, which took place in Oct 2012. Did you experience it at the location where you lived at that time?

Shunyan: Yes, I did.

Amy: Could you please tell me your address at that time?

Shunyan: I lived at [...] during Sandy in 2012.

Amy: On which floor did you live?

Shunyan: I lived on the second floor in Brooklyn, New York, 11220.

Amy: 11220. Feel free to speak in Chinese. How long did you live there?

Shunyan: I lived there for about 7 or 8 years.

Amy: From which year to which year?

Shunyan: I moved there in 2010, and we lived there for a long time until we had to move since the landlord needed to rebuild the house.

Amy: What kind of street did you live on? Was it all residential?

Shunyan: Yes, the horizontal avenues were for commercial stores, like 8th Ave. The vertical streets were residential areas.

Amy: You lived on the second floor?

Shunyan: Yes, that's right.

Amy: Was the terrain high or low?

Shunyan: Where we lived was quite high. My place was [...], so it was not in a low-lying area.

Amy: Were the houses all connected townhouses?

Shunyan: No, they were not connected. It was a house with several families living in it, and then there would be another house. Houses in the 8th Ave Brooklyn area are mostly like that.

Amy: Were there basements in the houses?

Shunyan: I didn't go to the basements, but I think there were some.

Amy: So when you entered the house, you went directly upstairs.

Shunyan: Yes, that's right. We are older people, so we didn't walk around much. But I recall there being basement windows, quite low. I don't think people were allowed to live in the basements.

Amy: I see. So the first and second floors were for people to live in.

Shunyan: Yes, we lived on the second floor.

Amy: And then the third floor?

Shunyan: No, we were on the top floor.

Amy: Did you know that Sandy was coming before it hit?

Shunyan: Yes, it was very tense at that time. I was working as a babysitter in downtown Manhattan, and the mom of the kids I cared for told me about it.

Amy: Oh, you heard about it from her.

Shunyan: Yes, and she also mentioned a government website where you could check if your home address would be flooded. She was very nervous because her mom's house might be flooded.

Amy: I see. Do you know how she found out about that website?

Shunyan: She must know. She is a school teacher, so she probably has access to more information.

Amy: Was she a high school, middle school, or elementary school teacher?

Shunyan: She was an elementary school teacher.

Amy: Did you check your address on that website after you came home?

Shunyan: Yes, I did. It showed that my place would not be flooded, but we were still very nervous.

Amy: I can imagine.

Shunyan: The government took it seriously, so it must have been intense.

Amy: Yes, right. Did you hear about Sandy from any other sources apart from her?

Shunyan: Yes, I heard about it from some young people as well. I have a young friend who was working, and she knew there would be a power outage. She also knew that we didn't have emergency lights, and she couldn't find any candles as they were all sold out in the supermarket.

Amy: How long before Sandy did she tell you about this?

Shunyan: It was either a day before or on the day itself. She gave me a big bag of small candles that foreigners usually use. She said there were no candles available, so she bought some for us, along with a lighter. She told us that if the power went out, my husband, Mr. Gu, and I could use these temporarily.

Amy: Oh, she was very thoughtful.

Shunyan: Yes, she took care of us. I was very touched. I didn't throw that bag away even after we moved, but I couldn't find it after a few moves. It meant a lot to us.

Amy: Yes yes.

Shunyan: That also shows how the information about Sandy created a very tense atmosphere.

Amy: When did the elementary school teacher tell you about the website?

Shunyan: It was about a day before Sandy.

Amy: Could you tell me if the young friend is from the Chinese-American Planning Council organization?

Shunyan: No, I didn't join any organization at that time.

Amy: I see.

Shunyan: When I came to New York for study, I went to learn English, and I kept in touch with 1 or 2 classmates.

Amy: That's great. How about TV news? Did you hear about Sandy from TV news?

Shunyan: I had a small place at that time, and I don't recall if we had a TV. Later on, we bought a small TV and put it in the corner.

Amy: Did you use WeChat or the internet?

Shunyan: No, there were no such things at that time. The phone I had was like this.

Amy: Ah, the flip phone.

Shunyan: Yes, haha.

Amy: So you heard about Sandy from your young friend and your employer.

Shunyan: Yes, but not just them, my neighbors were also talking about it. Everyone was nervous and went to the supermarket to buy things.

Amy: Were there still things in stock at the supermarkets?

Shunyan: No, they were all empty. People were buying everything, and the supermarket couldn't supply enough in time. When I went there, there wasn't much left. Many things were sold out, like water. We also bought water, and I even filled my bathroom tub with water. Hahaha.

Amy: You were concerned about water and electricity.

Shunyan: Yes, exactly. I remember I went straight to the supermarket after leaving the child's place. I bought whatever was available. In the end, Sandy wasn't as bad as expected, but it was good to be prepared. It's better to have more supplies.

Amy: Yes, that's true.

Shunyan: It would be troublesome if you needed something and didn't have it.

Amy: Absolutely. So, you prepared those things before Sandy arrived.

Shunyan: Yes.

Amy: Did you buy anything else besides food?

Shunyan: We bought food, candles from my friend, water, and bottles filled with water. That was all we could do at that time. We weren't capable of doing much more.

Amy: Did you discuss this with your friends?

Shunyan: Yes, we talked about it and asked each other if we had prepared certain things.

Amy: That's really good. It can remind you of things you didn't think of. So, on the day Sandy arrived, how did you know it had started?

Shunyan: It was really windy.

Amy: Do you remember when the wind started?

Shunyan: I can't recall the exact time, but it was really windy. The next day, when we went outside, we saw that trees had fallen down. There are trees on 59th street, and some of them fell down.

Amy: How big were the trees that fell?

Shunyan: They weren't too big. The trees on 59th street were not as large as some others.

Amy: Did any of the fallen trees hit houses?

Shunyan: Not on 59th street, but I did see a tree fall on a house in other places.

Amy: Was your house okay?

Shunyan: Yes, my place was okay. It wasn't too close to the trees.

Amy: Besides the wind, was there anything else?

Shunyan: Yes, besides the wind, there was also heavy rain.

Amy: Did water leak into your place during Sandy?

Shunyan: There was water blowing in from the window.

Amy: Did you try closing the window?

Shunyan: Yes, we closed the window, but water still came in. So we used cloth to stop the water because the rain was very heavy, and even with the window closed, it wasn't fully sealed.

Amy: Ah, so the water still managed to leak in.

Shunyan: Yes, the rain leaked in, and the cloth helped seal the window better.

Amy: How long did the storm last?

Shunyan: Sandy lasted for quite a while, but it's been ten years, and I don't remember the exact duration. It took some time for the wind and rain to stop.

Amy: Did the storm last for two days?

Shunyan: It felt like it, but it calmed down later.

Amy: Did you go out during the storm?

Shunyan: No, I stayed indoors for one to two days. We were well-prepared, so there was no need to worry.

Amy: That's good to hear.

Shunyan: Our house was made of brick, so we weren't afraid that it would collapse.

Amy: Did you experience any power outages?

Shunyan: I don't think so. I don't recall using those candles my friend gave me. So, there was probably no power outage.

Amy: Did anything else unusual happen at home during those days?

Shunyan: At home, everything was fine. The only significant impact was my husband being unable to work for more than half a month.

Amy: Why couldn't he work?

Shunyan: He worked in a restaurant, and the basement was flooded. He couldn't go to work. I remember that clearly. Later on his employer asked them to go back to work to clean up the mud and dirt. You see Sandy caused a lot of problems to nyc.

Amy: Was the restaurant in Brooklyn?

Shunyan: I don't know. But all the dirt went down to lower place. You can imagine how big the flood was. It took them 2 days to clean out the dirt and mud in the basement.

Amy: Wow. So the mud and dirt were all flushed into the basement.

Shunyan: Yes. They can only start working again after they cleaned it and organized it. The bad impact caused by Sandy was huge.

Amy: Yea. Do you remember approximately where the restaurant was?

Shunyan: I don't remember.

Amy: Was is in Brooklyn?

Shunyan: Probably not. I think it wasn't in Brooklyn because he had to take the subway to get there.

Amy: Oh, I see. So he didn't work for about half a month.

Shunyan: Yes, that's right. In the end, they were told to go and clean up the mud.

Amy: I see. But your place was okay? And you didn't go out much during the storm?

Shunyan: I did go out for two days, but we also had basement, which we suspected might have been flooded.

Amy: Oh, I see. So you weren't aware of the basement condition at the time?

Shunyan: That's correct. I hadn't been to the basement before, and I didn't discuss it with others when I lived there.

Amy: When Sandy happened, did you see water rising from your window?

Shunyan: Yes.

Amy: To what height?

Shunyan: Not too high. The street had a slight height and slope, but due to the heavy rain, some water still accumulated. Water was not drained in time

Amy: How long did it last?

Shunyan: I didn't keep track of the duration. I just recall the strong wind and heavy rain during that time.

Amy: During the storm, did you contact your family, children, or friends to check if they were okay?

Shunyan: I should have.

Amy: On that day?

Shunyan: Yes. We worried about each that day.

Amy: I understand. Luckily, your place remained relatively safe.

Shunyan: Yes, we were fortunate that our house was not heavily affected, and it wasn't close to any trees.

Amy: That's good to hear. After Sandy ended, when did you go outside?

Shunyan: We were younger back then, so when the sun came out, we couldn't resist going out to see the aftermath. There were fallen tree branches and debris everywhere, making walking hazardous. Some commercial posters had fallen, and objects from stores had been displaced due to the strong winds.

Amy: Did you notice tree branches on cars parked on the street?

Shunyan: There weren't many cars parked on the street since it wasn't very wide.

Amy: I see. After Sandy, did you hear your neighbors talking about what happened? Was there any water leakage on the first floor?

Shunyan: Looking back, I believe there was water in the basement.

Amy: There's water coming in to the basement?

Shunyan: Water entered through the basement window.

Amy: Did you hear anyone talking about that?

Shunyan: Yes.

Amy: Okay, water entered through the basement window.

Shunyan: Yes, exactly. The basement window was quite low so water could enter through.

Amy: Were there any injuries?

Shunyan: No one was living in the basement.

Amy: That's good to know. Were there people who offered help or assistance during or after sandy, for example, provide you with anything, or ask you if you were okay?

Shunyan: We were okay at that time, as my husband and I were both working. I was doing **dare** care. **Oh not I** was a babysitter at that time. I did day care afterwards. Not much from others. But the parents of the child did ask.

Amy: Were you feeling scared or anxious during and after Sandy?

Shunyan: Yes, the atmosphere was intense before the storm, and afterward, although my place was okay, places around ours were damaged pretty badly. There were big trees fallen to houses. In Sunset Park, there were really big trees fallen.

Amy: Did Sandy bring about any changes to your daily life?

Shunyan: Not much changed. Although it felt scary before Sandy, our place wasn't directly damaged. So mentally, we were fine.

Amy: How did it affect your daily routines?

Shunyan: My husband didn't have work for almost a month. So we had no income.

Amy: Oh I see. After seeing the wind, rain, fallen trees, and water leaks, did you start preparing for such situations?

Shunyan: Yes, we bought flashlights and batteries to be ready for power outages.

Amy: Did you prepare anything else besides the flashlight?

Shunyan: We have a bag with flashlights and other emergency items. Additionally, the government provided us with an emergency bag after Sandy.

Amy: Okay, an emergency bag.

Shunyan: We were not sure what to prepare since some of the things have expiration date. If we prepare, they would expire over time. But I think the bag from the government is pretty good. It has a small radio, and water. But it's been a while, I don't really remember.

Amy: When did the government give it to you?

Shunyan: Not long after Sandy occurred.

Amy: Did they distribute it to every home?

Shunyan: No. A friend told me we could pick it up from a specific location, and that's how we got ours. There was also a compressed biscuit inside.

Amy: Okay I see.

Shunyan: That reminded us that we should prepare these at home. There was also a small medical box inside with things like bandaid and cold pack.

Amy: Okay. So if such a storm comes again, do you know what to prepare?

Shunyan: Yes. The place we used to live was small, so we can't prepare too many things. Now we are lucky that we live in a bigger place, we can store more emergency supplies.

Amy: I see, so the government's emergency bag gave you an idea on what to prepare?

Shunyan: Yes, we learnt from it.

Amy: Does the Chinese-American Planning Council offer seminars or talks on emergency preparedness?

Shunyan: Yes, we are fortunate. The Chinese-American Planning Council truly cares for older adults like us. They organize various talks and seminars that are tailored to our mental and physical well-being, and we've gained valuable insights from attending those events.

Amy: Were there seminars specifically focused on extreme weather conditions?

Shunyan: Yes, there were. They also educated us on how to avoid unsafe situations during such events.

Amy: Those seminars sound very beneficial.

Shunyan: Indeed, they were. Additionally, they conducted seminars on safeguarding our information from theft, which is crucial for us as older individuals who may not always be cautious. So we know how to protect ourselves.

Amy: That's wonderful. One thing we're curious about is how you usually receive information about extreme weather conditions. For example, during Sandy, you learned about it from your employer and friends. Do you now use TV or the internet for such news?

Shunyan: Nowadays, the situation has improved. We use WeChat to receive notifications about sudden incidents, and then we watch the news on TV for more detailed updates.

Amy: Do you mostly watch Chinese TV channels?

Shunyan: No, we don't often watch Chinese TV channels. We watch English channels for news, while my husband enjoys watching sports.

Amy: Oh, all English channels?

Shunyan: Yes, we like those channels. Nowadays, if there's a sudden incident or extreme weather condition, we quickly turn on the TV for more detailed reports. We've developed a habit of checking the weather forecast app before going out, especially since many of our activities are still in the 8th Ave area, such as shopping, doctor appointment, going to bank, despite having moved away from there. Then we know the weather, we then know how we should dress, do we need to bring an umbrella, etc.

Amy: That's a good habit to stay informed.

Shunyan: I must thank my husband for that. He's attentive to these things, unlike me sometimes. I am careless sometimes and I often rely on my feelings to make decisions. He checks the weather carefully to decide how we should dress and whether we need to bring an umbrella. If there's an event like Sandy coming now, we will know the time before it arrives.

Amy: Yes, then you will prepare for it.

Shunyan: Yes, we will prepare well for it.

Amy: There's another concern we have. There's no major water leakage at your home during Sandy. However, if there's a major water leakage or flooding in your home next time, how would you prepare?

Shunyan: In such a situation, we would prioritize food preparation. And since our power system is in the basement, which would be the first place to flood, we'd need to have lighting equipment, food, water.

Amy: Medicine?

Shunyan: Yes, and medicine.

Amy: And keep the communication open.

Shunyan: Yes.

Amy: Great you are aware of what are the things to prepare.

Shunyan: Haha no no no, we are old.

Amy: Your experience during sandy would help. Besides, the communication is more convenient and faster now. And you mentioned you will keep the communication open.

Shunyan: Yes.

Amy: We have the concern if people can get the alert in time. For example, people who don't often watch news from tv or internet may not know the information about such events. Then they can not prepare well.

Shunyan: It's an informational world now, with WeChat and all. For example, we had planned to go to Costco yesterday, thinking you wouldn't come that day. Then, we saw some information stating there would be a storm yesterday, but it turned out to be fake news. So we decided to go today. It was a sunny day yesterday.

Amy: Yeah, the weather forecast isn't always accurate, but being prepared is still a good practice.

Shunyan: Yes, I think people have better awareness of preventing and protecting themselves in case events like Sandy happen again.

Amy: Absolutely. If there's a need to evacuate or if there's severe flooding, do you know where to go?

Shunyan: If there's severe flooding, elevators won't be usable during earthquakes, fires, or floods. We have fire escapes; you just push the door and go down.

Amy: Do you know where to go, like a specific place to evacuate?

Shunyan: In case of flooding, we should head to a higher place, not go down to a lower one. So going upstairs, to the top floor, is the right thing to do. It's unlikely that the water would reach the top stairs.

Amy: Living on the third floor probably means you won't have that problem.

Shunyan: Yes, it's advantageous to live on the third floor. We can easily go up and down.

Amy: That's good. So during Sandy, you stayed in for two days. Did you go out afterward?

Shunyan: Yes, after two days, I went out.

Amy: Was public transportation available and convenient at that time?

Shunyan: Because I lived on 59th street. There was a Hong Kong supermarket just two blocks away, so I went there to buy food.

Amy: Was the Hong Kong supermarket open during Sandy?

Shunyan: Yes.

Amy: Did they close during Sandy?

Shunyan: I'm not sure since I didn't go out during Sandy, but before the storm, I went there, and many things were sold out. The shelves were almost empty; not much was left.

Amy: Did they restock after Sandy?

Shunyan: I think they did. Merchants are usually more aware of these things than we are.

Amy: Were stores open when you went out?

Shunyan: Some were open, and some were not. The Hong Kong market was open. Some small stores might have been badly flooded. I don't think water came into the Hong Kong market. Maybe its terrain was higher. However, some downstairs restaurants took a while to reopen, probably facing similar issues as my husband's restaurant.

Amy: I see some took a while to reopen. So you walk there; you don't need to take the bus?

Shunyan: We don't need to. Both my husband and I like physical activity and moving around. One time, it snowed heavily, and we wanted to go to 68th street to take a look. We walked there. However, on our way back, I almost thought we couldn't make it back since it was snowing so hard we could barely see in front of us. We had to walk back very slowly.

Amy: Exercise is good.

Shunyan: Yes, I believe being physically active is important.

Amy: I've asked most of my questions. Anything else that particularly impressed you or how Sandy affected your life and thoughts afterward?

Shunyan: Sandy was truly powerful. My husband and I went to Coney Island long after the storm, and we saw the wooden roads there were all flipped over. They were eventually fixed.

Besides, We often go out on weekends. We took the A train and got off at the last station. There were also many wooden roads which were all flipped over. They were not fixed after a long time since it might take a lot of work. So you can see that Sandy was really powerful. The wooden roads are connected by nails, but they were still damaged.

Amy: Were your friends' homes seriously affected?

Shunyan: Mostly, there was water leaking into their homes.

Amy: Nothing more serious?

Shunyan: No, nothing more serious among my friends.

Amy: That's good to hear.

Shunyan: You probably collected many serious cases, right?

Amy: There were some, depending on where people lived. After Sandy, did it affect your choice of future home location?

Shunyan: At that time, we didn't have much choice in where to live. We're older and didn't lead the moves. For example, we lived at 758 for seven to eight years, but the owner needed to rebuild the house, and it doesn't look the same as when we lived there. We had to move and eventually found a place. Then the second landlord left. We need to move again. We didn't have many options, and we were just happy if someone allowed us to rent.

Amy: I see. Regardless of where you live, being prepared is necessary.

Shunyan: Yes, exactly. We've experienced a lot at our age, so we know how to face natural disasters. We prepare what we can, and for the rest, we let nature take its course.

Amy: That's a great attitude. Thank you for sharing your experiences with me.