

Sunset Park Flooding and Climate Change Stories

English Translation

Participant: Yuzhu Zheng, female

Interviewer: Jing Zhu (NYU)

Interview conducted in Chinese on 6/30/22

Site: Participant's home

Amy: Today is June 30, 2022. We are here to talk specifically about Superstorm Sandy, which took place from Oct. 22 to Oct. 29, 2012, and how it affected you, your neighborhood, and its residents. We want you to tell us what you remember from your experience. First, could you tell me where you lived when Sandy came?

Yuzhu: I live on [...]. The floor below me was a food shop that sells meat.

Amy: So the first floor was commercial shops, and the second floor and above are residential.

Yuzhu: Is my floor the first floor or the second floor? Yes, the second floor, yes, the first floor sells food. There is another floor below the food shop floor. Yes, maybe there is another floor below. I heard that floor was seriously flooded.

Amy: Is the floor below the shop the basement, or is that the first floor?

Yuzhu: The meat shop was at the same height as the street. There might be a floor below it. I saw that the inside of the first floor was very bad, and I heard that it was flooded really badly. The water came in from outside. The wind started all of a sudden with no warning. People were not prepared. There were many things on the ground blown by the wind. There were many different things on the road. Some billboards fell, some wires fell. It was terrifying. I forgot many things. Some of the things I still remember. What I remember the most is when my son called me and told me, "Mom, it's horrible." He said that he was driving, and a tree behind his car suddenly fell down. When he saw the shadow of the fallen tree, he quickly drove away. I said, "Wow, it was very dangerous."

Amy: Wow, it's dangerous. Where was he at that time?

Yuzhu: It was in Flushing.

Amy: Oh, Flushing.

Yuzhu: After he told me, I said that maybe we got the blessing from our ancestors. It was really dangerous. He said he saw the shadow of the fallen tree, and when he saw it, he quickly sped away.

Amy: The first floor of where you lived was all commercial shops?

Yuzhu: Yes, the first floor was shops. I lived on the second floor.

Amy: How about above the second floor?

Yuzhu: There was one more floor above me, the third floor.

Amy: Are all the buildings the same in that block where you lived?

Yuzhu: There are mostly connected townhouses on the 8th Avenue block. Therefore, although the wind was very strong, the connected townhouses can resist the wind. It was mainly the things on the sides that were blown off and fell to the ground. It was scary at the time.

Amy: What kinds of things fell down from the wind?

Yuzhu: My impression is that they were all over the ground. I don't really know which ones were the important things. Sometimes I think that the billboard may not be stably attached, and the connecting sections may not be strong enough. If the wind blows hard, it will break. So the problem is that although there is no such wind at ordinary times, it should be attached firmly in a stable way at ordinary times, and every household should make things firm and stable. Besides, I was mostly afraid of trees, very large trees with shallow roots. At that time, I went to Flushing a few days later. The big tree fell down, and the whole root was outside. Two cars were crushed by the trees.

Amy: How about the area you lived?

Yuzhu: I lived here.

Amy: Were there fallen trees in your area?

Yuzhu: No, there were no big trees there.

Amy: How about tree branches?

Yuzhu: There were fallen branches everywhere in the park. At that time, it was too chaotic. People said that there was flooding in some places, and other things in other places. People were panicking.

Amy: Were there fallen billboards and fallen tree branches in your block?

Yuzhu: There were branches from small trees. Some plants that were planted at the back of the building were also blown over. There were no big trees. I mean big trees. In some places, there are trees that are at least decades old. It's really unfortunate that such big trees fell.

Amy: How long have you lived there?

Yuzhu: I was there, I don't know, probably for many years. The landlord asked us to move since the house was flooded and cannot be used for living anymore.

Amy: The landlord asked you to move because of Sandy?

Yuzhu: It might be around that time. It was leaking water. If we move, they can do the renovation.

Amy: That was why you moved.

Yuzhu: Yes, that was why I moved here.

Amy: After Sandy, were you affected by Sandy on how to choose the house to live? Do you want to choose a place that won't be affected by the storm? Do you have such considerations?

Yuzhu: There are considerations. But here, because there are all connected townhouses, no house was found to be fallen down by water. We are afraid of places with low elevation, so I have to find a place with higher elevation.

Amy: So you were intentionally looking for a place with higher elevation.

Yuzhu: Yes, yes. I and my children did not have a car at that time. I have heard others say that the car was very soaked, and because this is from a natural disaster, the insurance may not pay much. They said they were mad because the water was poured in and the water was dirty, and the car was not functional anymore. You know, the houses here are so expensive. At that time, we just came here and we didn't have a lot of money. The rented houses were not very good. Some are basements. People struggled living in the basement. So although this place is narrow, small, and expensive, it is pretty good.

Amy: Yes, right, and also higher. Could you tell me that before Sandy arrived, when did you know that Sandy was coming?

Yuzhu: We didn't know.

Amy: You didn't know at all?

Yuzhu: No, because I didn't have a smartphone like now, and I didn't use the phone to look up information.

Amy: Yeah, right. So did your friend talk about it before Sandy came?

Yuzhu: No, no. I needed to look after my child at that time. I needed to pick her up after school. So I didn't pay attention to such things. I didn't understand. Now I know because I'm in the community. There are many old people there. We will be informed if there are things happening. There is also WeChat, and I have friends now. Anything happens, we will all quickly know, even for little things.

Amy: So at that time you didn't know at all.

Yuzhu: No.

Amy: Then all of a sudden, the storm came?

Yuzhu: Yes, it started at noon time.

Amy: Even your neighbors were not talking about it?

Yuzhu: The place I rented at that time was not like now. At that time, I rented one unit. Young people who lived in that unit went out to work. I look after my grandchild. I have low back pain. I cannot do anything else. I can only pick up my grandchild from school. I didn't know much about what was happening outside. And I just came here at that time. I didn't have friends and relatives. I didn't have anyone to tell me things.

Amy: So you didn't prepare for the storm?

Yuzhu: Not at all. Now I can. Therefore, all people, old and young, all need to join some groups. Then they can get to know things. Otherwise, you don't understand, and you don't know what's happening.

Amy: So what were you planning to do that day?

Yuzhu: I forgot. It was too long ago. It has been more than 10 years.

Amy: When did the wind and the rain start?

Yuzhu: About sunset time. It was very windy.

Amy: You mentioned noon time?

Yuzhu: I know it was daytime, but I didn't remember if it was noon or late afternoon. When it happened, the door was closed because when it's windy, water can leak in through doors and windows. People all tried to prevent water from leaking in here or there. That house was not in good condition. So we needed to wipe here and there. We didn't have friends at that time, so we didn't ask why. Stores were closed. How should I describe?

Amy: It just all of a sudden started.

Yuzhu: Yea.

Amy: Then did you go outside afterwards, or just closed the door and stayed inside?

Yuzhu: I just closed the door. Because how can I go out? When I went out after it stopped, it was very dirty outside, and I stepped on things like broken glass. And stores are all closed. What can you do outside?

Amy: So you closed the door and windows when the storm came.

Yuzhu: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Amy: Then you stayed at home.

Yuzhu: Yes, and of course.

Amy: Did you contact anyone at that time?

Yuzhu: No. I just stayed at home.

Amy: Did you look outside? Any leaking or something else?

Yuzhu: There was just leaking through doors and windows.

Amy: There were leakings even when you closed them?

Yuzhu: The wind can blow the water in little by little.

Amy: Were there any other influences in those days?

Yuzhu: Yes, of course, there were. Because the room is usually dusty, when the wind blew, the room was full of dust.

Amy: Okay. So you didn't prepare anything, like food, water, or candles?

Yuzhu: It happened all of a sudden. How did I prepare? Now I know I need to buy a flashlight and have it at home. I have a flashlight at home now because I'm afraid of a power outage at night. Luckily, there is rarely a power outage here. And because houses here are all connected to each other, they can resist external forces. So the loss wouldn't be huge in general.

Amy: Were there power outages those days?

Yuzhu: I don't think so.

Amy: How about water?

Yuzhu: I forgot. It's been too long. I think we still had water. I heard there were other places that were out of water.

Amy: How long did the storm take to stop?

Yuzhu: Not long. It was really windy, but it only rained for a little while. That's my impression. It's been too long; I can't tell now.

Amy: It's alright, it's alright. So the wind was strong, but the rain was just fine. Is that what you mean?

Yuzhu: Wind was strong. Rain started late.

Amy: Oh rain started late.

Yuzhu: What I remembered is that the wind was very strong and the rain was not much. Then the wind stopped, then the rain became heavy. Seemed like so.

Amy: And you stayed at home for the entire time.

Yuzhu: I stayed at home. I don't know how to do other things anyway.

Amy: Did you have enough food? You didn't prepare.

Yuzhu: Food is just normal food. It was enough. Because although there was no preparation, it's just vegetables, fresh fish, and meat (that's not prepared). Because there were usually vegetables for sale downstairs, I didn't
Yuzhu: Not at all. Now I can. Therefore, all people, old and young, all need to join some groups. Then they can get to know things. Otherwise, you don't understand, and you don't know what's happening.

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Amy: It's alright, it's alright. So the wind was strong, but the rain was just fine. Is that what you mean?

Yuzhu: Wind was strong. Rain started late. normally buy much. At that time, it was okay for a day or two, because there was something else to eat. It was okay. Sometimes we eat dry food.

Amy: In those days, apart from you being unable to go out at home, was there anything else that affected your life and was particularly inconvenient?

Yuzhu: The biggest impact was, how should I say, we were not in a good mood and were a little scared. We were afraid that what should we do if the wind came again? There's this thought: what if the house were blown down by the wind? It took me a long time to get rid of this shadow. Because it was too scary. I don't know if you feel this way, but I do.

Amy: Oh, right right. I was scary when you all of sudden have to experience this. So after sandy, how did you overcome that scary feeling?

Yuzhu: We didn't have things , especially a flashlight. Now we bought it and keep it there. And we have water stored at home, food stored in the fridge. It is okay. Americans usually buy a lot of things when they go shopping and stored them at home, then they can last for many days. I'll store food like rice, because compare to other food, we need to have rice at those times. And noodles, instant noodle, store some instant noodles. After they're finished we buy a few more and store them there. That way is the best.

Amy: Yes right right. Did you go out when the storm stopped? Did you feel any difference in the street?

Yuzhu: It was messy everywhere.

Amy: Were the stores open?

Yuzhu: No. The store owners were more scared than us because they have property and goods. If you don't close the door, the wind would blow in, and things would turn bad. Stores were definitely closed.

Amy: Oh okay, so the stores in your area were all closed.

Yuzhu: Yeah, all closed.

Amy: When did they reopen?

Yuzhu: They started organizing the second day. They had to start selling. Seafood had to be sold. I see sometimes they throw away seafood that turned bad.

Amy: So they wanted to reopen the store soon.

Yuzhu: Yeah, of course.

Amy: When they were closed, where did you get food?

Yuzhu: They only closed for a day.

Amy: Oh okay, they reopened quickly.

Yuzhu: It's fine as long as we have rice. It's fine if we don't have vegetables.

Amy: Yeah, yeah. You mentioned your downstairs.

Yuzhu: Downstairs is a meat shop. They sell meat. I think there's a basement. I heard that they told our landlord to let us move because they need to reorganize their space. I heard from others that their space was flooded really badly. They had a very hard time. I heard this from other people. I didn't know. They wouldn't let us go in and take a look anyway. Other people said that they had a very hard time.

Amy: How long did your landlord tell you to move after Sandy?

Yuzhu: Not long. About several months. After several months, he said we need to move out. The store owner downstairs kept complaining about the house that it was broken. The landlord was very annoyed. The store owner told the landlord that the house needs to be fixed and organized. I didn't know very much about it. They didn't tell us. They only told us to move. Later on, I got to know that they renovated the house.

Amy: They told only upstairs people to move? Or the entire house to move out?

Yuzhu: The entire house.

Amy: The meat shop downstairs also needed to move out?

Yuzhu: I think the meat shop downstairs closed at that time.

Amy: You mean the meat shop closed?

Yuzhu: Yeah, because they can only renovate when they close.

Amy: Oh, you mean after you moved out. Were the meat shop still open before you moved?

Yuzhu: Yeah, they were. They can only renovate after everyone moved out.

Amy: Wow, so the influence was big.

Yuzhu: Yes, it affected everyone. Everyone was thinking about what we should do if this happens again. Luckily, this is the connected townhouse. I have a friend in Staten Island. She said her house was flooded really badly.

Amy: I understand that you were scared. So what did you do when you were scared at home those two days? Like how did you improve that scared emotion for those 2 days at home?

Yuzhu: I was scared. Sometimes I can still hear the wind sounds at night when my eyes were closed. Sometimes I all of a sudden opened up my eye to check if there's wind or not.

Amy: Did you talk to your friend or your children at those two days?

Yuzhu: I talked with my children when he/she came home.

Amy: Oh when he/she came home. So that was after Sandy.

Yuzhu: Yeah.

Amy: So how about those two days? You didn't contact them those two days?

Yuzhu: We talked through the phone.

Amy: Oh okay. You talked through the phone. So did Sandy change any of your opinions, like opinions about different things?

Yuzhu: I had. I thought. I saw big trees falling down. I thought, what a pity! Such a big tree. Aiii. I went to look at it again later.

Amy: Where did you see the fallen tree?

Yuzhu: In Flushing.

Amy: Oh, in Flushing.

Yuzhu: Yeah. I don't remember the exact name of that place. The root of the tree was huge, the top was quite high. I thought if the top can be cut off a little bit, and the root can be stabilized a little more, such as with stone. The tree might not fall down. What a pity. That tree was at least several decades old.

Amy: Yes, what a pity.

Yuzhu: If a house falls down, you can fix it with money, as long as people who live in are still safe. However, if a tree falls, it's such a pity. It takes a tree several decades to grow like that. The environmental people should discuss this. Use stone to stabilize the side of the tree or use something to stabilize it. I don't know why I keep thinking about this problem. Maybe we can use steel to stabilize the root, and cut off the top a little bit. Then the top becomes lighter. Then the tree might not be that easy to fall down.

Amy: You really care about the nature!

Yuzhu: I don't know why I keep thinking about this problem. I often see trees in the park. There are many old trees in the park. There are rotten trees. I don't know if they all fell down during Sandy time. I think it is such a pity. If there are people who can take care of those trees, to prune the trees, or add some soil around the root part, or use some shelf to stabilize the tree. Then it will not be such a waste.

Amy: So other than Flushing, did you see fallen trees in your area, like Sunset Park?

Yuzhu: Yes, there were many in the park. Many trees fell in the park.

Amy: It is the Sunset Park where you went and saw fallen trees?

Yuzhu: Yes.

Amy: Were those big trees? Small trees? Mixed?

Yuzhu: They were small trees. I didn't see big trees in Sunset Park.

Amy: What time did you go to the park after Sandy?

Yuzhu: Several weeks after Sandy. I don't really remember. Not too long after Sandy. The fallen trees were still there in the park. They were not cleaned away yet.

Amy: At that time, you didn't join Chinese-American Planning Association and Chinese-American Planning Council.

Yuzhu: No, I didn't join both of them.

Amy: So you didn't receive any help from other people?

Yuzhu: No. I didn't have friends here. My relatives were not in America.

Amy: You just came here at that time?

Yuzhu: I came here for several years at that time. But I didn't have relationships with other people. People do a lot of things outside. I didn't do anything. I only stayed at home and picked up my grandchild from school. After I pick my grandchild, I just stayed at home. I did shopping downstairs.

Amy: The school didn't stop when Sandy came?

Yuzhu: No.

Amy: How did the child go to school?

Yuzhu: I forgot.

Amy: Did your grandchild live with you?

Yuzhu: Yes.

Amy: So you didn't go out the second day. So your grandchild didn't go to school?

Yuzhu: I forgot, it's been too long

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Amy: How old was your grandchild at that time?

Yuzhu: 5. I forgot. Might be in ... grade. I forgot.

Amy: Okay. You were taking care of the child.

Yuzhu: Yes.

Amy: So now you joined the organization. It gets better?

Yuzhu: There's everything in the organization. There are seminars, for example, teach you how to do red card, blue card, or white card.

Amy: Do they offer flood seminars? Or storm seminars?

Yuzhu: No, not yet. There are no seminars about natural disasters. The seminars are mostly about how old people follow the rules and laws in the US. What to do. There are many. I can't finish.

Amy: If they have seminars about natural disasters, are you willing to go?

Yuzhu: Yes. It's good for us. We have many seminars.

Amy: Do they use WeChat to inform you about the seminars?

Yuzhu: We are now all on Zoom during COVID. In the past, they informed us about the date of the seminar.

Amy: How do they inform you?

Yuzhu: Chinese-American Planning Council uses a group chat to inform us.

Amy: The WeChat group chat?

Yuzhu: Yes. They have a plan. How do they arrange the week.

Amy: Okay. Then you will go.

Yuzhu: Yes. Now all the seminars are on Zoom.

Amy: If there is a storm coming now, do you think you will know before the storm comes?

Yuzhu: Yes.

Amy: How will you know?

Yuzhu: From the group chat.

Amy: Do you watch any news?

Yuzhu: I don't really watch the news because my English is very poor.

Amy: Okay, so from friends. Have you made friends from there?

Yuzhu: Yes yes, we have many friends now. Now I am very happy. At that time, I didn't have people to talk to. Every day other than working, I just watched TVs.

Amy: Thank you. You provided much very useful information today. Is there anything else about the storm and other things that I didn't ask but you want to share?

Yuzhu: If you tell me to say, I can't think of anything. If you ask questions, I will remember. I am old, sometimes I forgot.

Amy: It's okay. You already said a lot of useful information. I just want to know, do you know how to prevent the storm damage now? For example, if the Chinese-American Planning Council informs you that there will be a storm, do you know how to prepare for that?

Yuzhu: If I know it now, I will open WeChat, and discuss with my friends in WeChat, that the storm is coming, what should we do to prepare? I will provide suggestions. People in the group chat will also provide suggestions. Some people are very kind-hearted. They will say "oh, the storm is coming, what we should do..." Everyone says something, then it will turn into a great plan. Not just one person says something. Everyone says something. "Oh, the storm is coming, we need to buy things, we need to do something". It's so great we have WeChat now.

Amy: Yes, yes, it's convenient to know information and to make friends.

Yuzhu: Yes, making friends is very important. Friends are more important than relatives. Relatives are so far away. Friends are here. Friends are sometimes more helpful than relatives.

Amy: Are you in Chinese-American Planning Council or Chinese-American Planning Association?

Yuzhu: Both.

Amy: You found them or they found you?

Yuzhu: I was very depressed, I don't know why. I saw from the newspaper that Chinese-American Planning Council offered counseling. I knew Miss Lin. She said that I can make friends there, talk to them, participate in some activities. Here, Chinese-American Planning Association is right there. Because my English is very poor. I wanted to learn English. They teach you English songs. I think I can learn English from singing English songs.

Amy: They both have seminars?

Yuzhu: Chinese-American Planning Council offers more seminars. Chinese-American Planning Council has plans for seminars. What time it starts. For example, they tell us what time we should start Zoom. Then we all join Zoom. Miss Lin will be waiting for us in Zoom and let us in. Chinese-American Planning Association often has seminars all of a sudden. They notify you that oh, we are having a seminar.

Amy: Hope they will have some seminars about natural disasters.

Yuzhu: That will be great! It is great for old people because old people need to know what to do when disasters come. In usual time, we need to check the door and windows to see if they are okay, if clothes are hanged well, if the flowerpots are okay. Old people will pay attention to such things if people remind them to. Young people who work outside also need to pay attention.

Amy: Yes, yes. Thank you so much. I will replay the recording to you now.