

## **'Angels are gathering' amid ruins of a Shore town In blue-collar Union Beach, where the destruction is almost beyond imagination, the rebuilding of homes and lives has already begun**

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They are stairs to nowhere, concrete steps that once ushered visitors into cozy cottages along Brook Avenue. Now they overlook calamitous ruin, witnesses to nature's savagery, sentinels to the misery of Union Beach.

Twenty-four days after Hurricane Sandy sent a vicious wave of water through this small, blue-collar community, the stairs are all that remain of most of the neatly kept homes on this street. Beyond each top step is a storm of splintered wood and shredded furniture, lives reduced to rubble and rock. No rooms, no walls, sometimes not even the cinder-block foundations. A roof sits in a field, a lawn chair and a blue phone float in a pool of water where a house once stood, and pieces of pink insulation hang like dirty Christmas tinsel in wind-bruised bushes and trees.

Union Beach, on the shore of Raritan Bay, was laid bare and brought to its knees by the megastorm that smashed through New Jersey last month. Sixty-two homes "no longer exist," according to Mike Harriot, the borough's emergency management coordinator, and approximately 200 homes are uninhabitable. More than 300 other homes sustained damage and 400 were flooded by six feet or more of water. In northern Monmouth County, along the bay, more than 4,000 houses were devastated by Sandy's wind and water.

"I put one foot in front of the other and breathe," said Anna Yurgelonis, who lost her home and all her possessions when her three-story house was smashed from its foundation, pummeled into pieces and blown back over the bay. "If not for my faith and my family and my friends, I don't know what I would have done. ... I don't think I'll ever get over it. It's going to take a long, long time to get perspective."

Tough times have defined Union Beach since its inception 100 years before the start of the American Revolution. And tough times are likely to define the battered borough of 6,700 residents for years to come. But sewn into the seams of this hard-luck, little neck of land is a tenderness and a tenacity that also makes it seem likely it will survive. Some will walk away, others will be forced to relocate, but many will return and rebuild.

thanks and work

On this Thanksgiving Day, grateful to be alive, most of them will gather for a meal at the homes of friends and relatives, or at the Outback Steakhouse in Middletown, the Elks

Lodge in Keyport or Memorial School in Union Beach, all of which are offering free dinners to the victims of the storm.

The Fitzgerald family will pause for a meal, then quickly return to rebuilding their brick house on Third Street. Kevin Fitzgerald, 53, rode out the storm with his parents -- his 80-year-old father, Pat, and 84-year-old mother, Bridget, who is bedridden.

"Mom's tough," Fitzgerald said. "We put her mattress on top of the backs of two chairs and we each held one end of the bed."

At the height of the storm, seawater hammered the brick house, rushed under the doors and through the seams of the walls as Fitzgerald and his father held fast to the inflatable air mattress on which his mother lay. With each foot of water, both men seemed to stand higher on their toes, clutching the sides of the bed and trying to steady it. The water crested at chest level, then quickly receded, leaving the three wet and exhausted, but alive.

Father and son, with the assistance of volunteers, including an Amish family from Pennsylvania, have already gutted much of the house and removed the major appliances. Room by room, inch by inch, they will clean, replace and renovate, they say.

A FINAL "I LOVE YOU' It will take a lot more than that for Charlie and Anna Yurgelonis to recover. They have lived in their three-story frame house on Brook Avenue for nearly 20 years, raising the last of their 11 children, eight of whom are adopted. The day before Sandy made landfall, Anna Yurgelonis left plenty of food for her 9-year-old macaw, Diego, whom she thought could survive by flying to the top of the house. Then she opened both doors of the bird's cage and told Diego she loved her.

"I love you," the macaw answered.

The couple, along with three of their children and two grandchildren, waited out the storm at the Best Western in nearby Hazlet. When the electricity went out, all Yurgelonis said she could see were jagged bolts of blue light streaking across the night sky accompanied by thunder-like thumps or "bangs," likely from transformers going out all over town and beyond.

"I felt coldness, the stillness of something not right," she said. "Just the wind, numbness and fear."

**SHOCKING DISCOVERY** For more than a week the family stayed with friends. When they finally received permission to visit their house, they were stunned.

"I couldn't breathe," said Anna Yurgelonis. "I could breathe in, but not out. They called an ambulance. I had oxygen. I couldn't place anything. ... It's been a lot of tears, trying to get my head around it."

The only recognizable parts of the home were the roof, which sat flush on the ground, as if it had been ripped off and tossed aside like the roof of a doll's house, and bits of white fencing, on which someone had written, "Angels gather here." Yurgelonis isn't sure who wrote it or when, but said, "Everyone knew I loved angels."

A few days later, still dazed, she received a call from Tinamarie Gaidus, who runs "Tina's Wieners," a hot dog cart, on the other side of town. She had found Diego's body, near her home, on Dock Street. Yurgelonis retrieved the macaw and buried him in what was once her garden.

All around Union Beach, neighbors are exchanging personal items found miles from their owners, or helping each other locate the scattered relics of their lives.

Struggle and desperation have often defined Union Beach. Just 1.8 square miles, it has been hit hard with historic storms over the years and suffered its share of economic disasters.

The Lenni Lenape sold the land in 1676 to Richard Hartshorne, who divided it into farms where salt meadow hay was harvested for commercial use.

When the town's rich blue clay was discovered to be useful, a booming brick-making industry took off and lasted until homeowners demanded fire-proof tiles instead. When the Central Railroad of New Jersey arrived in the late 19th century, small summer havens were built for those seeking respite from the heat, but with the building of the Garden State Parkway in the 1950s, the barrier island communities sprouted up and Union Beach was increasingly bypassed.

When the railroad ended its passenger service in the mid-1960s, the borough unofficially became a backwater and the low-cost, shakily built bungalows were winterized for low-income residents. It was the only town in Monmouth County without a sewer system or paved roads in the early 1970s, according to local historian William Burket.

A state improvement project helped rehabilitate the beaches and beachfront property beginning in the early 1980s, but the population remained fairly insulated, squeezed between the bay and Route 36. There is no downtown, no high school, just a few convenience stores and random retail businesses like Louie's barbershop and Jerzee Boyz Pizza. International Flavors & Fragrances operated a plant here from 1951 until it closed in 1997. What remained were the residents, rooted in a tight community used to adversity.

## HISTORIC STORM

Nothing, however, quite prepared them for Sandy. The previous high-tide surge at Union Beach was 11 feet. Sandy was closer to 15 feet, said Ed Groberg, the borough

engineer.

"This was a monumental change in the storm of record," he said last week at a borough council meeting. "This will maybe go on for years to get us back to where we were 20 days ago."

More than three weeks after Sandy hit, most of the streets of Union Beach have reopened, but the curbs are piled high with sodden debris and the beeping of trucks and earth-moving machines fills the air from dawn to dusk.

#### ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS /B

Hundreds of volunteers have poured into Union Beach since Sandy left town, said Jennifer Maier, the borough administrator. Among the visiting volunteers, she named Southern Baptists, Mennonites, Muslims and Presbyterians. They come from Michigan and Maryland, Ohio and Nevada, Colorado and California.

"The outpouring of love from across this country is unbelievable," Union Beach Mayor Paul Smith said. "The love in this town is unbelievable. I've never been prouder."

Patricia Knudsen, who lives in the borough but whose home did not sustain any serious damage, was so moved by the sea of volunteers, she became one, joining people from Occupy Sandy, an offshoot of last year's Occupy Wall Street, and Rainbow Rapid Rescue, a loosely affiliated group of people dedicated to nonviolence and freedom. The groups pitched tents and set up a portable kitchen on the grounds of Union Hose Fire Company No. 1.

"I felt I should have the ability to do the same. It's a beautiful thing," she said. "I wanted to immerse myself in these people. I've been a secretary in the corporate world for years. I lost my job, and I felt I had to find a purpose -- to heal humans, or let them know they can heal themselves."

A group of Amish men and women from Christian Aid Ministries arrived on Tuesday morning last week after driving a bus nine hours from Greenville, Pa. They took just a half-hour to eat a sandwich and hot soup at the Rainbow tent kitchen around 2:30 in the afternoon, then went back to work, gutting condemned homes, until darkness fell.

"Wherever there's a need, we're there to help each other," said Joseph Miller, 42, one of two elder Amish men. "That's part of our life as Christians, to help each other."

Natlynn Frazier, whose Union Beach house was inundated with floodwater, stopped by the firehouse to pick up diapers for her granddaughter and get a hot lunch.

"I think this is great what they're doing here," she said. "Nobody thought it would be like this. You hear about it happening everywhere else. Not here."

Last week, Anna Yurgelonis received another phone call, this one from a woman in Staten Island, on the other side of Raritan Bay. The woman's son had found a box on the beach containing the ashes of the family's former pet dog, a Maltese named Beanie Baby. Yurgelonis was speechless.

"My house was (moved) so far back it pushed another house off its foundation," she said. "I believe my house was spread through three or four lots -- some of our clothes are in the trees -- then sucked back out to sea when (the tidal surge) went out. That had to have been some 'bang,' Like a tsunami. How could anything spread you out like that, like butter?"

**BITS AND PIECES OF LIVES** Very few things have been salvaged. Her husband, Charlie, recovered a homemade toolbox and a brass cross that once belonged to his father. Daughter Lisa found a photo of her parents, dressed for a Sadie Hawkins dance, taken in 1994. Otherwise, Yurgelonis said, "No. Nothing."

On some of the steps to nowhere, owners are slowly gathering remnants. Religious statues often peer out from scarred eyes. A pile of toy cars sits atop one stoop; a loose collection of nail polish bottles on another.

Yurgelonis is hoping still more belongings might turn up in the debris this weekend when dozens of volunteers who offered to help descend once again on the family's desolated property.

"All those angels are gathering," Yurgelonis said. "I'm so wholeheartedly grateful for people coming to help. I saw a woman with one arm picking up stuff. I was in awe. Amazing. They are angels. They are all human angels."