



Mother Nature's Fury

— how Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee affected New Yorkers

By Ellen Bidell

The summer of 2011 was a great time for Heidi and Ryan von Linden. They had a baby and were renovating their home in the Village of Schoharie. As a young couple that had been living with Ryan's parents, they bought everything they needed for their house and their new baby.

Then one day the rain started. The von Lindens didn't think much of it—maybe the basement would get some water in it, but they had a sump pump to keep things under control. Sometime later, Ryan's

father phoned and told them he received an automated call suggesting that people near the Schoharie Creek evacuate. Heidi and Ryan gathered what belongings they could and threw them into their vehicles. They made it over the bridge out of town just as the roads were being closed. For the next day, they waited in darkness at Ryan's parents' house (several power outages were affecting the region). The next evening, they were allowed to return to the village and saw the unimaginable devastation. Five feet of water had

invaded their home, leaving appliances askew, and furniture toppled and covered with muddy silt. Virtually everything they left behind was destroyed, just weeks after they had moved in.

Over the next several weeks, Ryan cleaned the mud and ruined belongings from his home, with a lot of help from coworkers at the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). They gutted the house, eliminated the mold, and dried the place with space heaters. Almost a year later, their plan is to raise



John Bulmer

the little ranch house nine feet, but they can't do anything until they receive their grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. So for now they mow the lawn and pay the mortgage and wait for the day when they will be in their new house again.

The von Lindens aren't alone. Nearly 80 percent of the homes in the village were damaged by the storm. Life is slowly returning to normal—a few children ride their bikes through once quaint neighborhoods, farm stands are open, and the sounds of hammers and circular saws pervade the village.

But stately Victorian homes that once had picturesque views of the creek are now boarded up. Many "For Sale: As Is" signs can be seen throughout the village: a sad reminder of the devastation.

Meanwhile in the Town of Hunter, Jessica Tompkins was sleeping in because she had been at a wedding the night before, which lasted into the early morning hours. She awoke when water started lapping over the sides of her bed. She immediately called her father to pick her up and grabbed whatever belongings she could. Her father arrived just before her road was closed—any later and she

would have been trapped. Jessica works in DEC's Division of Operations and had spent the previous days assisting in the evacuations of DEC campgrounds.

She hasn't been back to her rental cottage since the storm, except to meet with inspectors. Most of her furniture and possessions were unsalvageable. She now lives in a home owned by family in a nearby town. When Jessica returned to work, she spent weeks processing refunds for thousands of campers who were forced to evacuate. Despite her personal tragedy, she made sure that everyone got their money back, even if it was only a few dollars.

"I was amazed at how quickly my entire community, and the surrounding communities banded together to offer help to neighbors, friends or complete strangers. I was also very humbled by the help offered to me by my coworkers here at DEC. Because of their generosity I was able to make a donation to the people of Prattsville in the name of the employees of DEC," Jessica said.

When ECO Scott Daly woke up on the morning of August 28 and turned on The Weather Channel, he was shocked to learn that Hurricane Irene had changed paths during the night and hit upstate New York instead of Long Island. He started packing life preservers, ropes and waders on an all-terrain-vehicle and a boat, and headed to Greene County to meet fellow ECO, Anthony Glorioso. By 8:30 a.m., he heard other ECOs on the radio calling for help—too many rescues and not enough people.

ECOs Daly and Glorioso responded to Maple Crest, where an older couple was in their mobile home as the flood waters rose. The husband went to the garage to retrieve his cell phone and in the short time he was gone, the home was swept away. The last time he saw his wife, she was in the doorway of the home as it was ripped off its foundation and carried down the creek.



courtesy of the von Linden family

Flood waters toppled appliances and covered things in mud at the von Linden's home in Schoharie.

The ECOs headed downstream to the house. Along with several troopers and firefighters, they fastened a rope over the raging water and secured a ladder along the rope so that ECO Glorioso could climb across the creek to reach the building. Everything inside was gone.

“I have been a volunteer firefighter since I was 16, so I am familiar with tragedy. But this was the first time I had to tell someone their loved one was gone,” ECO Daly remembers. “I knew scenes like this one were happening all over the area. It was at that point that I realized this wasn’t a tragedy; it was an all-encompassing disaster that will affect the victims for the rest of their lives.”

Reports started coming in over the radio for rescuers to report to Prattsville (a small town in the Catskills). “They were calling it “ground zero” of the damage. When we got close, we realized that we couldn’t make it. Bridges and roads were washed out, trees were still coming down. In some areas, roads were blocked by debris, including homes,” ECO Daly said.

They went back to Windham to help out there. “It was so frustrating for us that we couldn’t get to where the help was needed the most. After the water receded and we cleared enough debris, we were able to get into Prattsville on ATVs. Local farmers came together and cleared the roads with tractors so that emergency vehicles could get in,” he explained.

What they found was complete destruction. The village looked like a war zone—there wasn’t a home or business that wasn’t damaged or destroyed. An entire mobile home park was washed away. The water had reached so high that a propane tank was hanging from the telephone wires.

“It was a lot worse than anyone expected. But thanks to the quick thinking of Prattsville Fire Department, everyone got out safely. They went house to house to get everyone out,” ECO Daly recalled.



ECO Scott Daly

Rescuers ran a rope and ladder across the raging creek to check a house.

“In a nearby town that was cut off from help, we found a woman who had been eating grass because all her food had washed away. Her husband was wearing garbage bags on his feet. Everyone was stretched so thin from working 16-hour days. But finding those people gave us the strength to go on and recharged our batteries,” ECO Daly said.

During the following two weeks, ECO Daly and his colleagues focused on helping people live until they could get somewhere safe. They brought food and water to communities on their ATVs from a makeshift distribution center set up at the Schoharie County Fairgrounds. Later, they shifted their focus to environmental clean up, going from house to



ECO Nathan Daly

DEC ECOs transporting flood victims to dry ground.



Forest Ranger Joan Oldroyd

Forest rangers used airboats to rescue flood victims.

house looking for petroleum spills, sewage and leaking propane tanks.

Ten days later, while ECOs and DEC forest rangers were still working to clean up from Hurricane Irene, Tropical Storm Lee hit. The flood waters of the Susquehanna River didn't crash through the Southern Tier in a raging torrent like its predecessor. There was still destruction, but few houses were swept away.

Forest Ranger Rick Schroeder was operating an airboat in Appalachin, west of Binghamton. "Residents were separated from higher ground by the flooding. They were without power, surrounded by contaminated water and had no access to food," Ranger Schroeder recalled.

"We lowered victims off their roofs down into the airboat without a ladder," he said. About 50 people were rescued



ECO Scott Daly

While flood waters caused by Lee were relatively calm, damage to homes and businesses was still devastating.

by airboat, some from the second story of their homes, and relocated to a shelter at the fire department.

"It was emotional seeing all the families that had their homes destroyed by the flooding. Some residents who lost their own homes were still helping their neighbors and the elderly overcome the damage," he said.

A Slow Recovery: Prattsville

Walking through Prattsville in late spring, I couldn't help but notice the red "X" marks on most of the houses on the main street; a sign used to indicate they were searched for victims during the floods. One vacant lot has only a foundation; its house washed three lots away and is now perched precariously behind another home. Outside a home with a condemned sign on it, the smell of mold permeates the air along the sidewalk. There are only a few people on the street: a man raking stones around a crumbling foundation, and a group of volunteers meeting at the Prattsville Methodist Church. Looking around town, it feels like the days immediately after the storm, even though it's been nine months since the flood waters devastated the town. It feels... forgotten.

But there are many volunteers that won't let that happen. They travel from around the state; this weekend it was volunteers from the Westbury United Methodist Church in Long Island and Holmes United Methodist Church in Dutchess County. They wear matching T-shirts and carry brown bag lunches as they head into the church, happy to be giving up their time on a beautiful late spring weekend to help strangers.

"Each week, volunteers arrive to help move dirt and rocks and plant trees, and our activity is not slowing down. When the residents see us out here helping, it lifts their spirits. The job is too overwhelming for them to face alone," the

Reverend Lorraine DeArmitt from Westbury United Methodist explains.

A Heroic Response

DEC ECOs and forest rangers were among the front-line responders during both storms. However, many other state employees and citizens provided invaluable assistance and support during the emergency. DEC operated full command centers in several areas of the state. DEC meteorologists worked with the National Weather Service to determine the storms' impacts on different areas. Based on their recommendations, Operations staff evacuated hundreds of campers from DEC campgrounds before the severe weather began.

Engineers from DEC's Division of Water began checking dams to make sure they were structurally sound. As the water rose, spill responders from DEC worked with contractors to contain numerous petroleum and oil spills.

Many residents of the Catskills found themselves without shelter in the hours and days following the storms. The staff at Belleayre Mountain Ski Center remained around the clock, providing shelter and food to nearly 170 evacuees. They cleared mud and debris from area roads and prepared food for volunteers and emergency workers.

In the days after the storms, DEC staff removed debris from streets and streams, pumped raw sewage out of basements and educated residents about safely removing hazardous waste.

Department of Transportation employees cleared 6,400 miles of roads and repaired an additional 1,300 miles of roads, 30 bridges, thousands of feet of streams and numerous culverts. These dedicated employees completed the majority of this work in less than two weeks. The Army Corps of Engineers was deployed in Irene's aftermath to open roads and provide emergency response;



ECO Scott Daily



ECO Anthony Glorioso

After flood waters receded, ECOs checked damaged homes (top pages 6&7) for environmental issues (such as leaking petroleum tanks) and delivered supplies (bottom) to victims.

at times their numerous military vehicles made the area appear to be the center of a war zone...in some ways, it was.

These and many other dedicated public servants worked tirelessly by responding to both storms. Volunteers from all walks of life donated time,

money, food and supplies. Thousands of New Yorkers have shoveled, cleaned, served food, and dropped off clothing and furniture. They came to the aid of strangers through their churches, civic organizations, youth groups and neighbors. Governor Cuomo's Labor



ECO Brian Canzani



Helpers from United Methodist Church

Helping Hands

It's not too late to help out. Here is a sampling of organizations that continue to provide volunteers and assistance.

Schoharie Recovery
www.schoharierecovery.org
518-390-8828

SALT – Schoharie Area Long Term Recovery
www.saltrecovery.org
518-702-5017

NY Annual Conference – The United Methodist Church
<http://nyac.com/pages/detail/1786>
914-615-2226

Catholic Charities of Broome County
<http://catholiccharitiesbc.org>

Rebuild 123
<http://rebuild123.org>



DEC photo

Assisted by local fire departments, Forest Ranger Lt. Stephen Preston used an inflatable kayak to rescue three stranded canoers (one at a time) from flood waters on the Sacandaga River.

for Your Neighbor initiative brought 2,000 volunteers into the storm-ravaged Schoharie Valley in the crucial days immediately following Hurricane Irene.

While the storms only lasted a few days, the recovery and revitalization efforts continue one year later. Victims of both storms still face great chal-

lenges. But with the help and support of neighbors, friends and strangers, all the residents will be able to return to a normal life—even if it is very different from before.

Ellen Bidell is a citizen participation specialist in DEC's Albany office.