



The scene outside the Slagles' home (center) shows the water line near the top of their garage door; just beyond their house, a car is completely submerged. Wakes from rescue boats launched at the intersection pushed another foot of water into the Slagles' home. Photo courtesy of Debbie Z. Harwell.

# Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Hurricane Harvey Through the Eyes of Houstonians

By Andrew Davis

The scale of Hurricane Harvey was unfathomable. Between the nationwide volunteer efforts, the overtaxed first responders, the drone footage of I-10 looking like the Mighty Mississippi, and the sense that it affected everyone, the storm's vast impact remains incomprehensible.

Reflecting on those heady days, one of the best ways to understand what Harvey meant to Houston is to see it through the eyes of Houstonians. The several participants profiled here took part in the Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey project, sharing their thoughts, their feelings, and their stories about how they survived the hurricane's onslaught.

## Tom and Lisa Slagle — Retired Firefighters from Kingwood<sup>1</sup>

When floodwater begins to threaten homes and lives, many people have no experience or plan for such a situation — they might even panic; but not Tom and Lisa Slagle. They have a combined fifty-six years of experience as firefighters and EMTs, retiring in 2014 after distinguished careers. As first responders with the Houston Fire Department (HFD), they have extensive disaster training.

In August 2017, as Lisa and Tom enjoyed retirement in their tranquil Kingwood neighborhood, meteorologists predicted that then Tropical Storm Harvey was gaining strength and would impact Southeast Texas. Their experience as first responders allowed them to formulate a plan of action; but seeing as they were on the civilian side of the disaster, could that plan withstand five feet of floodwater flowing freely through their family home?



Lisa and Tom Slagle also participated in an interview for Houston's First Baptist Church at HFD Station 6, where the couple worked for many years.

Photo courtesy of Houston First Baptist Church.

Tom: “[We were saying], ‘okay, this is bigger than us, and we’re going to have to be on the receiving end’ ... Even though we’ve experienced and seen and dealt with a lot of what we’re dealing with, it was in a completely different perspective.”

As one might expect, Lisa and Tom prepared for the storm. They had food, gas, and a generator to keep their phones charged and refrigerator running if they lost power. They had friends to help them move furniture and a support network of first responders who cared about them. Based on their experiences with Hurricane Alicia, Tropical Storm Allison, and Hurricane Ike, the Slagles reckoned that they could deal with Harvey's consequences.



Lisa: *"We were prepared to be without power for at least a couple weeks and had all the food and things that we thought we were going to need. When you have five feet of water in your home, none of that matter[s] because all of it was destroyed."*

At 1:03 a.m., the Slagles were dismayed to find water seeping underneath their front door. Lisa thought, "Okay, it's going to stop." Less than two hours later, the water had climbed to the fifth step of their stairwell and showed no signs of slowing down.

Lisa: *"Tom was saying that we felt like our lives were going to be in danger — because you didn't know how much more water was going to come. It could have overtaken the whole house, upstairs and all. You just have to get into a different mindset about that."*

Though their training assuaged their anxieties somewhat and helped keep things in perspective, the rest of the night was a nerve-wracking experience.



The Slagles' kitchen.

Photo courtesy of Tom and Lisa Slagle.

Lisa: *"We could hear noises ... We'd go down and check. One time ... [we] hear[d] a big crash ... and we said, 'Oh, it's the water line for the refrigerator — the ice maker.' Well, it's spraying everything in the kitchen ... the line's just going crazy. I've got the flashlight in my mouth. I'm climbing over the island in the kitchen, trying to get behind the refrigerator, which had floated up and wedged itself between the island and the wall and the garage doorknob ... I'm trying to reach over the top of it just to turn the water off. And I said, 'I can't reach it.' He's like, 'Yes, you can.'"*

Tom and Lisa received a cascade of phone calls from friends and family concerned about their welfare, offering to help them evacuate. The Slagles initially rebuffed the offers, confident that their preparation and training would see them through the crisis. They found it difficult to put themselves in the mindset of rescuees. When Jimmy, a firefighter comrade, arrived with a boat to rescue them, the couple told him, "We're fine." But Jimmy refused to take no for an answer and brought the Slagles and their three cats to his house.

The Slagles' home was completely destroyed — including the furniture that they had raised onto counters, which were not high enough to escape the deluge. The active and engaged mindset (and probably adrenaline) that carried Tom

and Lisa through the worst of the storm inevitably gave way to the crushing reality of losing their home and possessions, and the eighteen-month-long road ahead to rebuild.

Lisa: *"I can honestly say I don't think I would do this again. I don't. And we have a lovely home, and it's going to be beautiful when we get back."* — October 2018

### **Wayne Wilden — Warehouse Owner; Zack Harvey & Kris Petrosky, Wayne's Tenants<sup>2</sup>**

Just east of downtown stands a grove of bohemian splendor, where the rent is cheap and noise complaints are non-existent. The Warehouse District's eponymous warehouses have mostly been converted to lofts, where they attract a diverse smattering of artists, musicians, and other libertines who flock to the area's concert halls and art galleries. Hurricane Harvey disrupted this lifestyle when it caused Buffalo Bayou to overflow and envelop the neighborhood. The unique culture and history of one century-old warehouse provides a distinctive lens through which to view the storm's impact.



Water rose around Wayne Wilden's hundred-year-old warehouse, now converted to apartments, during Hurricane Harvey. The stairs leading up to the Starry Night-inspired façade are completely submerged.

Photo courtesy of Wayne Wilden.

Wayne Wilden, having grown up in Houston, had weathered hurricanes before, saying, "I have a theory that if you live in Houston long enough, you start to tell time by when the last hurricane was." Wayne mentioned his parents discussing the 1961 storm, Hurricane Carla, like "an aunt I once had."

In 2001, Wayne lived in the warehouse as a tenant when Tropical Storm Allison drenched the city with over two feet of water. The owner had no interest in starting an expensive renovation, so he planned to sell. Wayne had grown to love his home, where he had constructed his own theater. Faced with losing the space, he purchased the damaged building, planning to do the renovations himself. So in a strange twist of fate, Wayne's relationship with the warehouse is intimately tied to Houston's storm history.

Zack Harvey also has an interesting relationship with hurricanes. A musician, Zack hails from New Orleans and came to Houston as a Hurricane Katrina evacuee in 2005.



The damage was extreme, with four feet of water inside, drenching even what had been elevated on a platform. The roof also collapsed in multiple places. The foul, murky water that flowed throughout the building's ten units smelled of sewage and left an oily film on everything it touched.

Photo courtesy of Wayne Wilden.

Upon hearing Harvey was headed for Houston, Zack said, “[W]hen I hear anything past Category 3, [I have] got to take it seriously. Katrina was devastating, they still haven’t recovered.”

Kris Petrosky, originally from Michigan, runs a small business that rents staging and audio/video equipment in the building. He recalled their preparations, “Because of the past storms, we knew there was high potential that it would flood. But ... we didn’t ever think it would be as bad as it was.” Kris brought in a three-foot-high platform upon which they piled valuables, including lighting, music production equipment, and an old Hammond organ. Although he felt comfortable this would get them through the storm, it was not enough.



Wayne inspects the damage to his property, gesturing at the water line in one of the tenant’s rooms among the debris.

Photo courtesy of Wayne Wilden.

Zack and Kris evacuated, but Wayne stayed to watch over his building. As water pooled in the streets and seeped through the door, Wayne described it as feeling like “watching a slow-motion car crash where you’re helpless and it just keeps crashing.” As he scrambled to salvage irreplaceable documents, photographs, and memorabilia, the furniture and electronics slowly submerged. Glancing outside, Wayne could no longer see his 1965 Chrysler Imperial, a car that his family had

owned since before his birth. Though he had parked it in a location spared by previous floods, he was dismayed to see it four feet under water, along with other cars.

Wayne: *“They talked about Carla for fifteen years. Allison was worse than Carla. Harvey was worse than Allison ... Harvey was the worst thing I have ever seen.”*

When asked what he might have done differently, Wayne responded unequivocally, “I would have had flood insurance.” The experience rebuilding after prior storms gave the warehouse denizens a degree of confidence that they could rebuild, but Harvey was unprecedented. Faced with the staggering amount of damage and the sudden prospect of losing all of his income, Wayne got a FEMA-backed loan for \$240,000, but that was not enough to cover a whole complex.

Wayne: *“I did all the repairs myself, or else I never could have gotten it done for \$240,000. Between tearing out all the sheetrock, replacing every single appliance in the building, replacing every single kitchen cabinet, some flooring ... you’d be shocked at how much damage four feet of water can do. The water was only here for about twenty-four hours, but it was enough to really hurt me.”*

Help was found within the community as well. Nine out of ten of Wayne’s tenants stayed, including Kris and Zack, despite the warehouse’s unlivable condition. And they did more than just stay — in a testament to the neighborhood’s palpable DIY ethos, they grabbed hammers and crowbars and began clearing out the rotting drywall and trashed furniture. Kris described the sight as a “Mad Max scene” with debris strewn along the road. Along with help from friends, social media followers, and people who lived on the block, the warehouse was cleared out over the course of the next month, followed by Wayne spending most of the next two years rebuilding. For those who call it home, the warehouse is more than a place to live — it is a unique part of Houston culture to be cherished — they’ve rebuilt before, and, if necessary, they are ready to do it again.

### Lillian Hood — Retired Teacher and Grandmother from Kingwood<sup>3</sup>

An eternal optimist, Lillian Hood and her husband moved to Kingwood in 1997 after lengthy careers teaching in Odessa, Texas. Their new neighbors vividly recounted stories about flooding there in 1994, and showed Lillian a picture of water covering the street signs nearby. While ominous, the neighbors told Lillian that the flooding was, to some degree, caused by the controlled release of water from Lake Conroe, where heavy rains threatened the dam. Water flowing down the San Jacinto River began to pool as it entered Lake Houston, causing extensive flooding throughout Kingwood.

The U.S. Geological Survey indicated the median discharge of the West Fork of the San Jacinto River is usually about 68 cubic feet per second (cfs). The San Jacinto River Authority disclosed that the rate of release in 1994 reached over 33,000 cfs.<sup>4</sup>



Despite the deluge, only one house in Lillian's neighborhood had water. Because of the manmade character of the disaster, many Kingwood residents dismissed the danger of future flooding. Lillian remembered her neighbors saying confidently, "That will never happen again." For more than twenty years, their happy-go-lucky approach was validated when storms, including Tropical Storm Allison, brought no significant damage. However, Hurricane Harvey shattered their solace.

Lillian, now an eighty-nine-year-old widow in a wheelchair, recalled meteorologists predicting fifty inches of rain. Then came the bad news — officials planned to release water from Lake Conroe to prevent a breach of the dam.

Lillian: *"I was like, 'Uh oh, I've heard about that from 1994.' My [caregiver] Judy Arnold was there, I said, 'Judy, watch the street.' The street was perfectly dry. Thirty minutes later, she said, 'Lillian, the water is curb to curb, it's coming up the driveway into the yard.'"*

The peak volume of water released from Lake Conroe was more than double that of the 1994 storm — 79,100 cfs.<sup>5</sup> Without power, Lillian received no official evacuation notice. As she and Judy watched the water rise, Lillian felt that she was in imminent danger being wheelchair bound in a one-story home, so she called 9-1-1. After double-digit attempts to get help, she was told that the first responders could not guarantee immediate rescue.

Lillian called her daughter who lived on the other side of the river but received no answer. Now worried, Lillian called her granddaughter, who explained, "Mama and daddy are on a boat on the way to a shelter. They've just been rescued." Considering how much water now lay between them and Lillian and Judy, they might as well have been in Saskatchewan. No help was coming from her family.

Eventually, a firefighter arrived on Lillian's doorstep to say a firetruck waited a few blocks away, but high water prevented it from coming closer. He suggested that they walk to the truck, which Lillian could not do. She inquired about the high-water trucks, and he replied, "maybe tomorrow we can find one." With the rapidly rising water, "maybe tomorrow" became downright terrifying.



A new retail center only a quarter mile from Lillian's home, including the Whataburger, received over seven feet of water.

Photo courtesy of John Knoezer and reduceflooding.com.

Lillian: *"I thought I would probably drown that night, that's what I thought. We hung a lantern, a battery-operated flashlight lantern on the front gate, right by the front door and put out a white towel. I thought that would be a signal of distress. And we just stayed right outside the front door with the door wide open, hoping somebody would come ... [but] if nobody came, there's no way we could be saved."*

Luckily, Lillian did not have to wait until morning. With water about to breach her front door, rescuers arrived in the nick of time. The 9-1-1 operators had organized a dump truck to back up to her front door where they scooped up Lillian and placed her in the truck. Judy and a handful of other neighbors piled in the back and were taken to a shelter.

After the rescue, Lillian recalled, "I still did not think about the horror. I thought maybe a few inches of water.

In my wildest dreams, I never dreamt four feet. I thought, 'well tomorrow, my daughter and son-in-law will go get my van and come over here and get me at the shelter; I'll go home.' [sorrowful laughter] I didn't know that was the end of everything as I knew it."

Ever the optimist, Lillian preferred not to dwell on the destruction and never returned to see her home. Volunteers did the demolition work, salvaging what they could to decorate her new apartment in an assisted living facility. Lillian preferred to extract the good memories, especially those of the volunteers who opened their homes to strangers; offered food, water, and clothing; and took their boats out, saying, "They risked their lives to save people."

### **Helen Benjamin — Grandmother from Kashmere Gardens<sup>6</sup>**

Helen Benjamin is well-known in Kashmere Gardens. She is everyone's grandmother, a beloved fixture of the community for more than fifty years. As a long-time Houston resident, Helen is well acquainted with the omnipresent threat of tropical storms.

During Tropical Storm Allison in 2001, Helen's experience seemed to foreshadow future events. After the water in her house reached her ankles, Helen was forced to wait for a rescue. Told that the Coast Guard was coming, Helen eagerly anticipated their arrival — for hours.

Helen: *"They were supposed to be picking us up around 2:30. We stayed out there 'till after 7:30 that night and we didn't get picked up because every time the truck would pass they was already loaded, and they said 'we coming back, we coming back.'"*



Lillian Hood recalled how frantic the search for her new home was, considering all of the other people in the same position.

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.

After a long, tense wait, firefighters rescued Helen, but communication with the shelters was inefficient. As Helen was shipped around the city, being rejected by shelters that had reached capacity, the truck crashed into a ditch, forcing its passengers into the floodwaters to await another rescue vehicle.

In 2017, with cell phones, GPS, and experience gained from prior storms, one might expect that Houston handled Hurricane Harvey more smoothly than Allison. However, when asked to compare her experience with

the two storms, Helen simply said, in no uncertain terms, “It was worse with Harvey.” Helen and her daughter awoke before dawn Sunday, August 27, 2017, to find that water had already entered their home. She knew this meant the water outside was several feet high and their cars were destroyed. Helen: *“I don’t want to see it happen again ... [S]ome people said it didn’t flood out here, but you should’ve been here. You would know it flooded because this whole area was just like a lake ... The only way you could get out of it was take the towel and dry your feet off and get up in the middle of the bed.”*

Again, Helen had to wait for rescue, which came in the form of a gigantic dump truck — not a luxurious ride but high enough to ford the water and keep its passengers safe. Helen and her daughter arrived at the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRB), which again served as a shelter and seemed more orderly than it had in 2001.

Here, the two flood stories diverge. During Allison, the water in Helen’s home receded quickly, and, with the help of flood insurance, her life quickly returned to normal. However, Helen was subsequently dropped by her flood in-



*Helen Benjamin has weathered many storms in Houston, including Tropical Storm Allison and Hurricane Harvey. Both flooded her Kashmere Gardens home.*

Photo courtesy of Helen Benjamin.

surance, so she lacked the same financial advantage in 2017. Furthermore, the water lingered during Harvey, causing immense damage. Even after the water outside disappeared, Helen was baffled because the house still seemed wet inside.

Helen: *“We had this house built in the year that President Kennedy got killed ... we found out the wood floors was built on top of plastic ... and that’s why the water wasn’t going out. The plastic was holding the water and once they pulled [the floors up] it was little lakes under there.”*

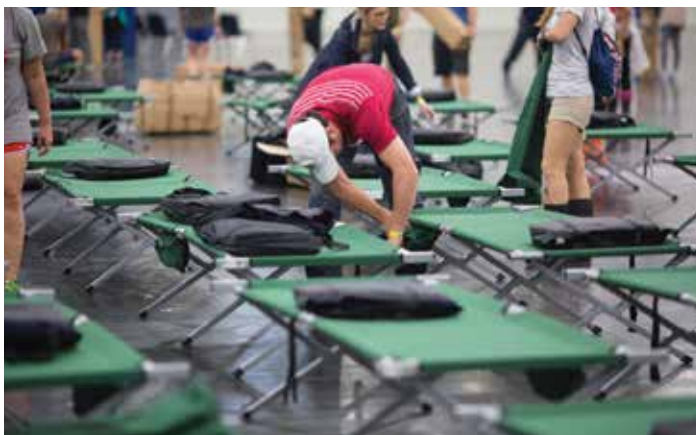
With her home devastated and no insurance, things looked grim, but Helen still had faith, family, and friends. She received support from her church, her community, and her daughter’s employer, but she still did not have a livable home and had lost most of her possessions. Then, fortuitously, a *USA Today* reporter, Natalie Neysa Alund, whose goal was to “write as many Harvey stories as possible,” sought out Helen, who quickly bonded with the reporter and her crewman, Larry McCormack. Helen and the reporter both belonged to the Church of Christ, and the cameraman reminded Helen of her late son, who was also named Larry. Helen’s story was published in *USA Today*, but she did not imagine the impact that would have on her recovery and her life.

Helen: *“I still hear from some of the people. One of the ladies sent me a little quilted piece for my table a few weeks ago and some little mats and sent my granddaughter something. And it was so funny because everybody mostly sent me some color books, and I was thinking, ‘Color books?’ So that Sunday night ... the lady from USA [Today] and Larry came to my room [in the hotel], and I was in the bed coloring [with] Crayolas and pencils. So I’m thankful. I’ve been blessed that’s all I can say.”*

Helen was also moved by a group of students from South Dakota who traveled over 1,000 miles to Houston on a bus to help hurricane survivors in her neighborhood. After posing for selfies, the gregarious students implored Helen to come to South Dakota for a taste of their extreme weather. Chuckling, Helen explained, “They going to show me a real blizzard.”

When researchers study Hurricane Harvey, they can quantify the storm’s myriad effects on Houston in many ways. They can count the 1.2 trillion gallons of water, estimate the total financial damage, or look at the number of homes affected. The numbers are informative, but they do not reveal what Hurricane Harvey means to Houstonians. We cannot quantify the Slagles’ feelings as they heard their furniture sloshing around their house, nor how Wayne, Zack, and Kris felt seeing their beloved warehouse under water. Nor can we quantify Lillian’s urgent fear that she may drown or Helen’s frustrating inability to repair her home. The experiences of ordinary people are the missing ingredient necessary to understand why the storm matters. Their experience is the story of Houston during Hurricane Harvey.

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*Volunteers set up cots inside the George R. Brown Convention Center in anticipation of the storm evacuees.*

Photo courtesy of Revolution Messaging, Flickr.\*