

After the Storm Clouds Dissipated: Mental Health in the Wake of Hurricane Harvey

By Andrew Tello

When a hurricane strikes, those caught in its path often feel powerless to do little else but weather the storm. While physical damage is frequently synonymous with hurricanes, it represents only a fraction of the damage a natural disaster can bring. With a storm as intense as Hurricane Harvey, trauma follows much like the sun when the storm clouds dissipate. Some of the participants in the Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey project discussed how trauma remained with them even after the storm had left the region and how they grappled with it as best they could.

A licensed professional counselor, Mary Jo Lagoski specializes in EMDR therapy that focuses on dealing with and overcoming a traumatic event. She explained that the three basic responses to a trauma are “flight, fight, or freeze,” but “one way or the other, [survivors are] going to have a reaction.” Trauma from flooding, unlike some other events, lingers because when a person’s home floods, the situation does not quickly return to normal; instead it extends for months and, perhaps, years.

Even as an experienced professional, Mary Jo was taken aback by the community-wide impact an event like Harvey could have. Before Harvey made landfall, she was not particularly worried about it nor was she concerned by a news broadcast announcing that “Lake Conroe was going to open the flood gates just a small amount.” The next morning, she recalled, “[Our] street was totally dry. ... So I thought, ‘Okay, everything’s fine. We’re fine. It didn’t flood,’” until she turned on the television. Mary Jo was shocked to see the damage done to her neighborhood and the city at large, calling the pictures “guilt-producing and frustrating.” She recalled, “In the early days we were somewhat ‘trapped’ on an island. The water had come within a quarter of a mile of our street in all directions. We sat on an island of sorts until the water receded enough to get out and help.” At that point



As recovery from the storm began, Houstonians found solace in each other. Linda Vogel (second from right) assisted many in her Kingwood community through caring and outreach.

Photo courtesy of Linda Vogel.

she put her therapy skills to work.¹

Mary Jo’s efforts centered on her ability to help people process what had happened and to work through their trauma. Her services varied: from leading a support group for storm survivors, to training others how to listen and speak sensitively with their flooded neighbors, to helping them adjust to living with others or in their own flooded homes, to helping a client whose

trauma was “retriggered” by dealing with FEMA and seeing images on the non-stop news coverage. Through her work, Mary Jo saw trauma take shape in a myriad of individuals in multiple ways. Over a year later, she was still seeing more clients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than she had seen with any prior weather event, which was exemplified by the number of people posting worried comments on Facebook asking if it will flood again whenever it rained.²



Though she escaped direct damage from the storm, Mary Jo Lagoski assisted those who were less fortunate by using her skills as a counselor and as a leader.

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.

The trauma produced by Hurricane Harvey resembled the trauma people faced from earlier storms and carried with them for years. For example, Harvey was not the first storm Third Ward resident Gloria Rose survived. Originally a New Orleans resident, Gloria and her family crammed themselves into their two cars and took off in search of a dry place during Hurricane Katrina. They had to pause their escape at a bridge because the “pitch black” night made driv-



Gloria Rose, seen at left speaking with Sherridan Schwartz at Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, credits her faith for her survival. In times of crisis, prayer gave her strength to see things through.

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.

ing too difficult. Gloria recalled “[hearing] people falling off the bridge,” which was confirmed when daylight broke, and she “saw people on the ground that had expired.” The lingering memories of the sights coupled with the sounds of “children crying everywhere” may have caused Gloria, who is devoutly religious, to pray before Hurricane Ike, “Lord, don’t let it be as drastic as Katrina.”³

After Katrina, Gloria and her family settled south of Houston in Pearland, and she felt confident in the choice, noting that “[people] told me that it didn’t flood out there.” But hearing news of Hurricane Harvey approaching, Gloria said she worried because “[every] time we get a hard rain, it brings back memories” of Katrina. She remembered standing by her front door and praying, “Lord, please don’t let this water come in the house.” When she saw the water recede before reaching her home, Gloria recalled saying, “Thank you, Jesus. The water is going back.” Even though her home did not flood, Gloria continued to pray that no one drowned because she did not want history to repeat itself.⁴ Her faith gave her strength to weather the storm.

Nomi Solomon’s home flooded in the 2015 Memorial Day and 2016 Tax Day floods before Hurricane Harvey hit the family again. After those previous experiences, Nomi said, “Your mentality changes. It’s like survival. How am I going to survive, if and when this happens again?” The first time Nomi flooded, she had just given birth a few weeks earlier, but six or seven months later, she still “didn’t feel like [she]

For Ana Vazao, and many other Houstonians, the physical damage from Harvey was only the beginning.

Photo courtesy of Ana Vazao.



was getting out of the funk.” An experienced social worker, Nomi sought the aid of a psychiatrist to help her through her trauma.⁵

During the Memorial Day flood, Nomi wanted to help her pre-school children deal with the emotions that flooding can cause and had them pretend they were on Noah’s ark, asking what animal they wanted to be. Nevertheless, she explained, “We’re super open with them. . . . I’m not hiding my tears or my sorrow.” After Harvey, Nomi mentioned that “[their] elementary school flooded, so all these kids [were] displaced,” which has become a common thread of Meyerland residents’ existence and gives the children “a very similar experience, so they can talk about it.” Nomi tells her children, “This is your stuff to share. If you want to talk to your friends about it, go for it.”⁶ Nomi sees tremendous value for adults and children alike in talking through their problems to grapple with trauma.



The Solomon family has remained resilient, despite repeated flooding, by being open to talking through their feelings.

Photo courtesy of Nomi Solomon.

A Houston native and educator, Ana Vazao only suffered minor flooding. However, she stressed, “[I]t doesn’t matter. One, two inches, you still have to gut out your home. You’re still going through the trauma. You’re still going through the rebuild.” Ana, after seeing the damage the flood water did to her home, felt as though she was there “physically, [but] not mentally.” Despite being affected by Harvey personally, Ana had to help coworkers with their loss. As her school’s counselor, she did a presentation for the faculty on strategies to cope with their Harvey experiences. She found this very difficult to do, but she also wanted to convey a sense of strength about rebuilding – the same sentiment that helped her deal with her trauma. Ana observed, “You have to take care of yourself before you can do anything else.” Although

she admitted that “sometimes life is hard; you have to understand that you’re not always going to be okay. But you have to keep telling yourself, ‘Face your fears because you’ve got this.’”⁷ Ana’s self-reliance worked for her, but sometimes people needed more help.

A Long Island native, Linda Vogel’s career experience as a chaplain and life coach became invaluable when Hurricane Harvey impacted her Kingwood neighborhood. She became aware of Harvey’s devastation when she saw posts by her friends and family on social media, recalling, “It was so big and so overwhelming.” She began by checking on people she knew and then “helping them physically with what they needed . . . mucking out houses and bringing food and giving them emotional support.”⁸ Providing such support for Harvey survivors became Linda’s goal in the storm’s aftermath.

Linda had extensive disaster training and understood the importance of “listening and giving people the time to tell their story and to have genuine concern about who that person is because every story is different.” She believes that “God gave us two ears and one mouth. And it’s real important that you use your ears a lot more than your mouth because the kind of trauma that people go through [in a disaster] isn’t a physical thing a lot of times.”⁹

As time progressed, Linda’s efforts coalesced into a group called “Hope in the Forest,” a play on Kingwood’s nickname, “The Livable Forest.” She planned to assemble a forest of decorated miniature Christmas trees to share with Harvey survivors for the holidays because many people who had lost almost everything “were not thinking about Christmas.” Linda’s friend Mary Jo Lagoski enlisted help from her congregation at Kingwood First Presbyterian Church, until their joint efforts grew “from five trees to ten to fifteen to twenty to over two hundred [trees].”¹⁰ Linda’s experience, coupled with her desire to help, brightened the spirit of Harvey survivors, giving them a ray of hope to aid them in dealing with their trauma.

Survivors of Hurricane Harvey’s emotional turmoil encompassed much more than these few examples or these neighborhoods. Harvey is unique in that it affected almost every Houstonian in some way, even if they did not receive a single drop of water inside their home. A 2018 study in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* that examined the effects of Harvey on Houstonians one year after the storm found that 46 percent of the study’s



Linda Vogel’s disaster training was put to the test after Harvey, when she provided emotional and spiritual support to storm survivors who had endured multiple rescue operations or dealt with fear because they could not swim.

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.



A Kingwood resident shows off a donation from Hope in the Forest, a project that tried to restore a sense of normalcy — and provide some Christmas cheer — to people who had lost their homes and possessions.

Photo courtesy of Hope in the Forest.

participants “met the threshold for probable PTSD symptoms” based on a questionnaire that measured “symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety disorder.”¹¹ While storm-related trauma may not be as visible as physical damage, it still requires compassion and care.

Working through trauma takes time and patience, and though there is no one-size-fits-all approach, showing empathy seems to go a long way on the road to recovery. In speaking to the University of Houston’s Voices from the Storm class, Mary Jo Lagoski discussed the importance of being respectful of someone affected by trauma, emphasizing, “If you ask them how they’re doing, listen to them.” She added it is crucial not to “impose what you think they should think” but rather to ask them open-ended questions and then really pay attention when they are speaking openly about what they experienced. While Mary Jo said “ultimately life moves on to the ‘new’ normal,” she also stresses the importance of seeking the help of a therapist, pastor, or friend when trying to navigate the healing process from such a tragedy, even for those who may not be suffering from PTSD. Linda Vogel offered a similar perspective on how to help Harvey survivors, saying: “I can’t put a Band-Aid on what happened to you. I cannot do anything to change what happened, but I’m sure going to be your friend. And I’m sure going to listen as best I can.”¹²

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