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“I lost everything”

By Andrew Malekoff

North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center has played a leading role in the hurricane relief effort, reaching over 5000 survivors, since Sandy hit Long Island on October 29, 2012. And, this is in spite of the fact that many of our service-providers were also victims of the hurricane. Being survivors and providers gives us an edge. As a Long Beach resident, I know this first-hand.

Following is a reflection by my colleague Amory Sepulveda, who recounts her efforts to engage a family that was devastated by the hurricane. Her account depicts the delicacy and skill necessary to successfully forge a helping alliance with a devastated family.

“As we arrived at the Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) about two months after the hurricane, my attention was drawn to the fast pace of a child's feet as he struggled to keep up with his mother. I smiled. As I grabbed my binder I noticed a few caramel candies that I grabbed and put into my pocket. My co-worker and I entered the trailer-office that FEMA had set up to serve the survivors of Hurricane Sandy and I recognized the tiny brown boots that caught my attention earlier. I then had my first glimpse of his adorable face. I greeted the mother and son as I passed by.

As I was settling into the office, I made eye contact with the mother who gave me a welcoming opportunity to speak with her. I approached them and said, "Hello, how are you?" The woman's tears streamed down her face and, in one motion, as if to hide them from me, she quickly dried her eyes and cheeks using the sleeves of her sweater. I pulled out the candies and asked her if it was okay to share them with her son. She smiled in agreement and I invited her to, "Please, come on in."

I asked my co-worker if he would entertain the child while I spoke with his mother. He took out some crayons and started coloring and drawing, instantly connecting with the child and putting the mother at ease. "Perdí todo (I lost everything)," she said in Spanish, "my house, my clothes, my kids' toys, my furniture, my life."

She lived in a two floor apartment building and did not think to evacuate. She thought she would be spared any flooding in her home since there are four steps up to her building. Nevertheless, what she witnessed and felt, she told me, was the shock of water entering every inch of her apartment. She

woke up the children and dressed them as fast as she could as the wooden floors were beginning to swell. She took them upstairs and then carried blankets and pillows to make a bed in the second floor hallway so her children could sleep through the storm.

It was at that moment that she acted decisively, when her maternal instincts and resiliency took over. After she shared her story with me, we explored and identified her immediate needs and worked together to access the resources needed to ensure a safe living environment, nutritional meals and food vouchers and case management services.

My experience in working with this family highlights the importance of making an empathic connection, gathering the proper resources and offering a sense of HOPE.”

Thank you to Amory and to all Long Islanders who gave of themselves, in order to give hope to others, during this difficult time.