Miles of devastation along Braes Bayou in Houston

A Hurricane Harvey diary: Part 3

Charles Abelard
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This is the third installment of my diary of Hurricane Harvey. I began these notes in the evening of Tuesday, August 29, 2017, after the hurricane moved off to the east and Houston skies began to clear. This installment covers September 5.

It was a warm, sticky day, with sunshine, some clouds, and a hazy sky. Very little was available in a breeze. A cold front was said to be on its way, but there was no sign of it yet. I had decided to visit a part of Houston I know well and in which much flooding damage had been reported.

I started driving south on Buffalo Speedway from US Highway 59 (now also designated as Interstate Highway I-69), heading down the gentle, nearly flat slope towards Braes Bayou, which lies a couple of miles ahead. I didn't see any evidence of flooding until I got to Carnegie Street, a few blocks north of the intersection of Buffalo and Holcombe Avenue. At that point I started to see piles of soggy trash in the front yards and driveways of some houses. Holcombe is about a mile north of Braes Bayou, and runs parallel to it.

I drove by a small four-unit townhouse development on the corner of Buffalo and Holcombe. It obviously had been flooded. I lived in one of them for 18 years, until two years ago. It had flooded once when lived there, thanks to Tropical Storm Allison; that was in 2001. Now, with someone else owning it, it has flooded a second time.

As I continued south from Holcombe, I started to see big piles of trash on Bellefontaine and Maroneal streets, and on every street from there down to the bayou. The piles of trash were much larger, and were in front of almost every house in the neighborhood. Thus, Braes Bayou had been nearly a mile outside its north bank in this area.

The piles of waterlogged trash were stupefying to see. The closer I got to the bank of the bayou, the deeper the water would have been, and the evidence is seen in the higher and higher piles of trash. The sheer quantity of stuff that has be hauled away and discarded can hardly be imagined! Soggy gypsum board, scrap lumber, furniture, toys, family photos, books, clothing, everything that had been inside these homes was now out on the lawns, moldering away. And it goes on for miles up and down Braes Bayou.

I stopped to take a few photos, and to see if I could find anyone to talk to. The neighborhood seemed mostly empty of people. Most of the houses, with the exception of some of the more modern two-story, post-Allison raised-foundation ones, are in no condition to be slept in at the moment.

I met and talked with Lisa, a surgeon, in front of her house, which is within a block of Buffalo Speedway. Lisa said that the water in her neighborhood, just a few blocks north of the bayou, was far too high to even think of trying to get out; this condition lasted for about 30 hours.

Lisa and her neighbors saw a nearby Coast Guard air rescue in progress during the flood. I asked if it was on her side of Buffalo Speedway. "We couldn't tell exactly where it was, we obviously couldn't get out, but we saw this helicopter hovering for about 30 minutes, trying to rescue somebody." Lisa said, "All the neighbors have been great." Pointing to some of her neighbors' homes, she said that "this family [pointing to one house] is staying with that one [pointing to another]." And this pattern of neighbor hosting neighbor is repeated multiple times up and down the street.

Clean-up and construction crews are already coming into the neighborhoods to start work. Many of them

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speak little English, and I saw little evidence of formal supervision while I was in the area.

Craig was getting out of his car to go into his home when I caught up with him. He has lived a long time in the neighborhood, and his house had previously been flooded by Allison. He mentioned that many of the newer houses that were rebuilt after Allison on higher foundations did not get flooded. However, I have been hearing on the local media that some of those newer homes were flooding out anyway. I imagine it's some of both, and is all in the luck of the draw.

I turned right onto North Braeswood, heading west (upstream) along the north bank of Braes Bayou. I stopped at the Hideaway Condominiums, which is hard on the north bank of the bayou.

There, I spoke with Alice, who lives alone, and had just celebrated her 80th birthday. She said she had not been paying much attention to her own unit during the rain because she was watching the flood water enter the front door of one of her neighbors across the courtyard.

Alice reported that the neighbor "got a shovel and tried to dig a trench, so the water would drain into the pool area." (The pool is a couple of feet lower than the apartments.) Then she noticed her own unit was flooding also.

She said she had not worried too much about flooding. "I didn't pay too much attention, because I've lived here for 40 years and never saw the water go beyond the third step," referring to the steps leading up to the main entrance to the condominiums. "Wringing my hands and saying 'woe is me' isn't going to make it go away, so I went and got a bottle of whisky and went upstairs," she said, laughing.

The water got only about four inches deep in Alice's condo, so she continues living there. Dehumidifiers are running in her unit. They aid drying out by continuously collecting water vapor as liquid water in a container that must be emptied out several times a day.

At some point, she will need to get the repairs done. As to insurance: "The condo will take care of the floor damage, the walls and the sheetrock [gypsum board]," Alice said, but she doesn't know any details yet. "The adjuster's coming out on Thursday."

Alice was able to save a few things. Her couch had been elevated on risers because it is easier to sit on with some extra height. It was lucky that the flood water did not reach it. She also saved a "beautiful new rug" she recently bought by rolling it up and taking it upstairs.

And she saved her car, or rather some friends did. Alice said of some neighbors, "The guys saved my car by rolling it up the ramp. My car is old, and I only have liability insurance. But they saved it."

As a member of the homeowners' association, Alice collects the monthly checks from the residents for their association fees. "When I went to the mailbox to collect the checks, they were all soaked. I had to take them out of their envelopes and hang them on a clothesline to dry."

Our interview came to an end, and she got up to empty out the dehumidifier. "If you turn it off, it gets steamy in here real fast."

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