



# The Flood

*When Tropical Storm Irene struck Vermont, rain-swollen waterways washed away homes, bridges, and roads. Amid the destruction, Vermonters found hope in one another.*

**T**he flood came to my Vermont town in waves. First came the water. Then came the neighbors, and hope. Hurricane Irene was forecast to hit New York City and other parts of the East Coast on Sunday, August 28, 2011. The national news was crackling with warnings of mandatory evacuations in low-lying urban areas. In Vermont, we prepared ourselves for a major storm, something my Waterbury neighbors and I are accustomed to. Weather is life here. Blizzards, wind storms, torrential rains—it's all part of the rhythm of the seasons in these small towns that cling to the flanks of the northern mountains and valleys. We button up, check in on one another during the tempest, then clean up when the howling stops, often helping one another when the task is particularly tough. This is a routine as familiar as stacking wood in fall and sugaring in spring.

But Irene was no ordinary storm. The rain and wind lashed my house throughout the day that Sunday. Water began leaking into my basement by late afternoon, and we hurriedly moved boxes around to avoid the growing puddles. I periodically ventured outside to check that critical drainage ditches weren't blocked by debris; they were flowing in torrents. Power flickered off and on. But other than fallen branches and a small basement leak, my house and family were unscathed.

At around 8 p.m., I reached a friend, Madeline Drake, a local schoolteacher, whose husband, Tom, is principal of Crossett Brook Middle School, where my son was planning to start sixth grade

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in two days. "We just waded through chest-deep water to evacuate our house," she said breathlessly. Downtown Waterbury, just four miles from my house, was disappearing under the raging Winooski River. "We're heading to higher ground," she said urgently.

I was stunned. I checked *CBS Evening News* for information. I watched in astonishment as an expert, with a sweep of his hand toward Vermont, declared that the danger had passed. Irene, now downgraded to a tropical storm, was over, and overblown. The national media, focused on New York City, had missed where Irene had hit hardest. To the outside world, Vermont didn't exist. We were on our own.

By early Monday morning, August 29, the rain had stopped and a warm sun had broken through the clouds. At 6:30 a.m., I ventured downtown. I confronted a surreal scene. Neighbors were blinking at the sight as if emerging from a dark cave. Main Street was under several feet of water, and numerous buildings, from the used-clothing store to the fire station to The Alchemist, a much-loved brewpub, were flooded. The town offices and police department were under water. The state office complex was deluged, and the state's emergency-operations center had been evacuated in the middle of the night. Randall Street, the closest street to the Winooski River, was completely submerged, rendering dozens of homes there inaccessible. I was speechless, staring in shock and awe at the destruction. A woman near me wept quietly.

I saw Don Schneider, principal of our elementary school, who told me how he'd come down in the middle of the night, opened the school, and thrown tumbling mats down on the gym floor; more than 100 people had spent the night there. "It's an emergency shelter now. I don't think we can start classes tomorrow," he said as he surveyed the sodden streets. (The start of school would be postponed a week.)

My wife, Sue Minter, who had been appointed Vermont's deputy transportation secretary eight months earlier, was up most of the night receiving increasingly dire reports of the dam-

age. By morning, she told me the news, her face etched with a mix of shock, grief, and grit: "At least 250 miles of state roads are destroyed, three dozen bridges, and we've lost miles of town roads and many local bridges." State and local road crews—true heroes of the disaster—were trapped as they closed roads and battled floods through the night; miraculously, none were hurt, though four other Vermonters died in the storm. Sue dashed out that morning and would rarely return home before midnight in the days to come. After surveying the damage from the air and ground that first week and speaking with people in towns that had lost all road access, she told me what Vermont was facing: "This is bigger than we ever imagined. We're now running the largest emergency road reconstruction effort in the state's history—maybe even bigger than the Great Flood of 1927."

Within a couple of hours, the Winooski River receded. My 11-year-old son, Jasper, and I pulled on boots, grabbed shovels, and headed to Randall Street. We didn't know who would be there or what we would find. We just knew that our neighbors needed help.

The first thing that hit us was the incongruous smell. Here in the middle of the mountains, it smelled like the sea. It was as if 10,000 years of evolution had occurred overnight, with water pulling back to reveal raw new earth. The pungent, fishy aroma soon mixed with the smell of oil and gas, the toxic slurry that had formed in numerous basements when oil tanks had floated loose and ruptured.

We arrived at the home of Madeline and Tom Drake and their three sons. They'd bought the house a year earlier. River water sloshed around my feet as I walked through the living room; it had reached the kitchen countertops when it crested during the night. Furniture had been tossed upside down,

and kitchen appliances had floated and settled into random locations. Family photos were strewn about. An inch of dull-gray mud and silt covered everything, and the basement was still filled to the ceiling with river water.

Outside, Wendy Moore, a science teacher, was pushing mud off the porch and wiping down furniture, as calmly as if she were doing her regular chores. Within the hour, other teachers and community members streamed in. Tom and Madeline tried to assign tasks, but quickly gave up control of the situation to the throng of neighbors and friends. They removed sodden contents from the house and placed them outside to hose off, or to pile in ever-rising mountains of debris.

By noon, Randall Street was packed with people. Food and grills arrived to feed the volunteers, and sump pumps, power washers, and generators showed



ABOVE, volunteers from the University of Vermont pitch in on the Randall Street cleanup. OPPOSITE, firefighter Mandy Drake clears a storm drain in front of the Waterbury station.

up on people's lawns and were deployed. All of Waterbury seemed to be there, young and old. The noise of work—generators grinding, people shouting instructions, pickup trucks rolling in—became the new normal. The entire town had stopped what it was doing and turned all its energy to a single, monumental task: saving our neighbors.

By the next morning, with outside help only beginning to trickle in, our community's own cavalry appeared: Harwood Union High School's girls' soccer team, trading their cleats for mud boots,

arrived at one end of Randall Street, as the boys' soccer team spilled out of cars at the other end. Preseason practice could wait. The athletes formed bucket brigades and mucked out cellars, all of which were filled with up to a foot of mud. In the days ahead, they would clean more than a dozen basements.

Vermonters were soon streaming into town to help. By Wednesday, a morning meeting at the elementary school to coordinate volunteers drew hundreds. Randall Street became so clogged with traffic that town officials went on the radio to ask volunteers to park elsewhere. I ran into a dozen or so members of the Green Mountain Club trail patrol, who literally came down from the mountains to help dig out homes.

"I don't even know the people who are working so hard to clean my house," Randall Street resident Kathy Mackey told me. As one group of volunteers were pulling up sodden floorboards, her husband, Scott, asked where they'd come from. "Ben and Jerry's," replied one of the men. The ice-cream factory is just a mile away and was undamaged. "That's nice. What do you do for them?" Scott asked, assuming they were factory workers lending a hand. "I'm the CEO," the man replied.

At the end of a long, hard day of helping a friend carry wet belongings out of his house, I felt buoyed by the progress we'd made. *We're Vermonters. We're tough. We can do this.* But as I drove home, I spotted an older fellow leaning on his shovel, head down, exhausted. A massive, wet pile of debris—his life—stood before him. I choked up. Vermonters were trying so damned hard, throwing everything at this. But this was so much bigger than we were. We needed help.

By Thursday, I was meeting volunteers from around the country on the mud-caked sidewalks of my town. There was a group of hammer-wielding men in dust masks and Southern drawls standing next to a van from their South Carolina church. Janet Darnall from Nashville was helping to cook meals for the community, while Gail Brunner

drove from her home in Bergen, New Jersey, to distribute food.

I ran into Tino O'Brien at one house, where he was cutting away wet Sheet-rock. Tino had come from Montpelier to help; 25 years earlier, he'd hired me as an instructor for Outward Bound, one of my first jobs out of college. I asked him why he'd come to Waterbury. "To be of use," he replied with a gentle smile. Amid the din of hammers and generators, Tino recited part of a poem of the same name by Marge Piercy:

*I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart, / who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience, / who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward, / who do what has to be done, again and again ... / The work of the world is common as mud ...*

On November 3, 1927, after days of soaking rain, the Great Flood swept down from the mountains and devastated Vermont, the largest natural disaster in state history. It claimed 84 lives, destroyed 1,285 bridges, scores of homes, and hundreds of miles of roads and railroad tracks. Waterbury was nearly destroyed, which is memorialized on Randall Street by a granite sign midway up a second-story window denoting the flood's high-water mark.

Gleason "Gus" Ayers, was 10 years old when the 1927 flood forced him to flee his family's Randall Street home in a rowboat. On August 28, 2011, he was once again evacuated from the home that his grandfather Orlo had built in 1892, this time helped by grandchildren wading through waist-deep water. "Well, this is second time we've done this," the 94-year-old great-grandfather said as he evacuated to the same school where he'd sought shelter 84 years earlier.

I talked with Ayers in a Waterbury retirement home, where he was staying while his family repaired his flooded home. I asked him how a community recovers from such a trauma. "The way you get through it is one day at a time," he replied quickly. "Stop worrying

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