

# My Summer Journey to New Jersey

Story and photos by Sally W. Stoecker

Was it really 40-odd years ago? The last time I visited the Jersey shore? Combed the boardwalk for snowcones and soft pretzels? Danced and clapped to the beat of rock classic, “In A Gadda da Vida” at an Iron Butterfly concert in Asbury Park? Scoped the beach-scape with my girlfriends for cute guys? Yep, 40 years...



I found my way back to my home state this past July. Pastor Andy Walton at Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church suggested that our service committee consider embarking on a Presbyterian Disaster

Assistance (PDA) project on the New Jersey shore to assist in repairing homes ravaged by Hurricane Sandy. This idea quickly resonated with fellow member Chris Smith and I—both of us were born and raised in the Garden State (Chris in Dover; I in Brookside). We contacted the PDA hotline and immediately landed a one-week assignment in Point Pleasant Beach, hosted by the town’s Presbyterian Church. Upon filling out forms listing everything from our blood type to our painting skill levels, twelve of us, ages 14-70, set out for a week of manual labor.

For me, this was a chance to reconnect with and “give back” to the state where I was born and raised—a state that gave me many gifts: a top notch education (including training in the Russian language -- my passion and life long career); a bevy of long-lasting friends; cool historical sites, like George Washington’s Winter Headquarters during the Revolutionary war, and many sports—even downhill skiing! Perhaps most useful was my proximity to Somerset Hills where Jackie Kennedy owned a weekend retreat and rode her horses. This factoid was often handy as a quick retort to others who unabashedly shamed my state, calling it the “armpit of the nation.”

Giving back to New Jersey was more than repairing damaged homes with hammering, caulking, sanding, painting, and hauling tasks each day. Connecting with people whose lives and livelihoods had been damaged by the storm was the most meaningful part of the trip. The homeowner lived just two blocks from the ocean in a lovely, turn of the 20th century home with a wrap-around porch. During the hurricane, she witnessed the flooding of the first floor and described the scene as something akin to the whirling furniture in the movie Poltergeist. She moved to the second floor of the house and hoped to remain there, but was forced out by a FEMA representative who

insisted she leave for health reasons: toxic levels of mold. For several months she was placed in a nearby hotel and to some degree misses that—she had daily housekeeping and access to a nice swimming pool.

What made the disaster doubly hard for her was the loss of her 99 year-old mother, for whom she had been caring, just months before the storm hit. Losing a home and a mother

left her adrift, in many ways. It was hard for her to make decisions about paint colors and repair priorities because all was so overwhelming. She wanted to retain the interior colors and character of her mother’s taste, yet also bring a modicum of renewal and change to the look of it. We jointly decided that I would paint one wall in her back den a bold “tomato aspic red” – a sharp contrast to the preexisting pastels. I held my breath for the duration of the week hoping she would not change her mind.

As I left Point Pleasant on a quiet Saturday morning, I drove past the house one last time. The observation made by so many Sandy survivors during our work week was spot on: Many houses in Point Pleasant do not show outward signs of damage, but inside of the impact was extensive. True, not only of the house structure, furniture, and owner’s personal belongings...but for the people who lived through it, plenty of internal upheaval as well.



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Photo 1: Sally repairs a doorway.

Photo 2: The home the team worked in.

Photo 3: The relief team.