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Documenting Disaster: A Student Teacher Learning Experience

BY NANCY SOLOMON

In the fall 2012, Long Island was struck by Superstorm Sandy, one of the worst hurricanes in history to strike the region. Long Island Traditions, with the assistance of a National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)–Preserve America Grant, implemented a maritime traditions’ program in the Freeport School District, New York, during the 2015–16 school year, to look at how Superstorm Sandy affected the seafaring community, its residents, and its maritime traditions. Freeport is a diverse community of recent immigrants and established immigrants. Many of the students were in alternative schools and homes during Sandy, due to the storm’s impact in Freeport, one of the hardest hit communities on Long Island. The project was designed with the teachers, so that they and their students could share their experiences with the local fishermen, who were also devastated by the storm.

The goal of the project was to examine the history of this waterfront community through the eyes of tradition bearers, including fishermen and baymen, boat builders, and decoy carvers, who learned these traditions within their families and communities. Freeport was once home to dozens of maritime tradition bearers, who harvested finfish and shellfish in the western bays of Nassau County, using traditional rakes, nets, and flat-bottom boats. They harvested clams and oysters, menhaden, fluke and flounder, eels, and other species. After the Second World War, recreational fishing became a major industry for both baymen who harvested baitfish and for the new sportsmen. While new regulations affected the commercial fishing industry, there was still an active group of full-time commercial fishermen until Superstorm Sandy.

Long Island Traditions first began a school program in the school district in

1988, one that brought students, their families, and the community together. After Sandy, many participants in the school program were unable to work due to the closure of the bays and the necessity of restoring their homes, docks, and boats, which were severely damaged by Sandy.

The maritime traditions program provided important opportunities for traditional fishermen to teach students in their communities about the ecological changes in Freeport, based on their personal observations over decades of experience. It also helped students to better understand how the traditions of commercial fishermen and baymen changed over time, through interviews, hands-on workshops, and field trips with local fishermen.

The program began with class presentations by baymen Tom Jefferies and Michael Combs of Freeport, for several reasons. They both suffered from Superstorm Sandy on both a personal and occupational level. Using photographs collected by Long Island Traditions, they discussed their harvesting activities, their backgrounds, and how Superstorm Sandy affected their occupational culture. The photographs came from Long Island Traditions’ fieldwork journeys with each of them prior to and after Sandy, and from public archival collections, including NOAA and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). During the class presentations, students shared their own experiences of Sandy, as well as asked questions of the baymen.

Following the presentations, the students videotaped an interview with the baymen and fishermen that became the basis for their video production. The students developed interview questions and conducted the interview using an iPad and microphone. The questions focused

on occupational experiences, Superstorm Sandy, and changes in the bay.

The second component of the program was a hands-on workshop and interview sessions, in which students worked with tradition bearers to create a traditional maritime object or use a traditional skill, such as net mending, trap building, decoy carving, or other traditional activities. The students also conducted short interviews with each of the tradition bearers. The participants, a variety of tradition bearers, included commercial fishermen who worked inshore and offshore, decoy carvers, boat builders and model makers, net menders, and trap fishermen.

These activities took place in the winter months, for several reasons. First, more tradition bearers are available to participate, since fishing in the winter is severely limited in the mid-Atlantic and northeastern United States. In addition, schools have more time for extended school residencies such as this one, enabling Long Island Traditions to offer an immersive experience.

After these activities, students conducted recorded interviews with the fishermen. One of the classroom teachers worked with the students to produce a finished piece, based on the interviews and research conducted by the students.

The final program element was a fishing trip on a local charter boat that specializes in educational experiences. The students learned to fish in the bay and near the inlet, about the different species in each habitat location, the changes to the habitat since Sandy, and the different kinds of bait used. For many of the students, this was their first time to fish or being on a fishing boat. Students and their teachers documented the trip, which was incorporated into the final video production.



Freeport during Superstorm Sandy. Photo by Ben Jackson, courtesy of LI Traditions/LI Studies Institute.

Documenting Disasters

One of the reasons this project was feasible was because of Long Island Traditions' longstanding relationship with the school, the students, their teachers, and the fishermen. As a result, it was possible to conduct interviews within the community shortly after Superstorm Sandy. We were fortunate to have established relationships with the tradition bearers prior to Sandy. In addition, Long Island Traditions had worked with the school district, so that there was respect for the program, one that could be developed collaboratively. Enough time had passed since the storm, so that the students and teachers were no longer coping with the trauma of the storm, yet there were still

important memories that could connect the parties to the event.

Documenting disasters such as Superstorm Sandy can be full of challenges but also provide rewards to the community. Programs such as this one provided a safe space where disparate groups, who have limited contact with one another, could establish close relationships across many boundaries. The program helped participants learn from one another, in a multidisciplinary environment that encouraged reflection and creativity. By focusing on local ecological knowledge, and occupational traditions, the project provided a place that opened new doors and ways of looking at their community among all the participants. While we

hope the ravages of natural disasters spare our hometowns, recent stories of tornadoes, superstorms, and hurricanes unfortunately seem to be growing more common. We offer this program as an educational tool that may help others in different places cope. ▼

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