

11-2-12 Oh, That Sandy!

I first heard of the possibility of a hurricane coming our way from our town accountant, Sandy Nolan. She was letting us know, with a sense of humor, that it might be a pretty strong one, since it was, after all, named after her! Sandy is a strong woman; a bright and logical thinker who, like a storm, seemingly came out of nowhere and then built up over time to a force to be dealt with! She started out as a part time secretary for Halifax's Zoning Department and then applied for the administrative assistant position for the Board of Health many years ago. Right away I knew I liked her determined personality, her steel trap of a mind, especially when it came to figuring out number problems and remembering just about anything; and she could do just about anything! She even took our soil evaluation course! Not many admin people do that! I was sorry to see Sandy leave when she moved on to the Accounting Department but I knew she was headed for success and I was right; she is now the Town Accountant!

Well, our Sandy was right: this was a force to be dealt with! In fact, it just so happened that she was before me on our emergency contact phone tree and so she was the one who called me to say that the town hall would be closed on Monday. That's when I really started to pay attention to this storm. Check the water and battery supply, etc. When Sandy heard that I didn't have enough emergency water and that I had just checked the stores, she was at my house in minutes with her bottles of water, for she knew I depended on my well for water. Oh, that Sandy! She's a good woman!

The next morning brought a call from the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) coordinator asking for CERT members to sign up for assisting at the Emergency Operation Center (EOC) at the Police station. I would be there anyway for the weather updates and National Grid conference call through our Massachusetts Emergency Management Association (MEMA) at 11:00 and 12:30, so, sure, I could volunteer some time to help with calls or whatever might be needed.

I'm telling you this: it is a privilege to have the opportunity to see the teamwork and the expertise of our Fire, Police, Highway and Building Maintenance Departments, along with the dispatchers! It was also fascinating to observe the improvements in communication and information technology we now have, allowing real time updates of weather, images of other EOC's, status of shelters and more. I also immediately saw the improvements since hurricane Irene in terms of National Grid's response to these emergencies. We had a liaison onsite, communications were clear, orders were issued and crews deployed!

I think this storm is also the threshold where we step over and stop making fun of meteorologists. They have the technology now to know what is happening where and when and what the factors of variability are. We can still poke fun at the reporters who risk their lives to give us unending coverage of how they can barely stand upright in the wind and close-ups of the people behind them who should be fined or arrested for risking the lives of rescue crews as they

climb on the rocks of causeways and let their children stand on the railings at the beach walls but I say praise be to meteorologists!

After the conference calls, it was time for the Fire and Police Chiefs to get back to their headquarters and their teams. There were four CERT members, including myself, left in the EOC with the main responsibility of documenting incoming events related to this storm. Once entered and saved, they joined a stream of other such updates from around the state. At any time we could view that chronology and or check out weather updates. When checking the status of shelters, it was interesting to also see their various capabilities; some were pet friendly, such as Bridgewater/Raynham and Weymouth but most are not. One shelter opened for one person and shortly thereafter had zero. Maybe that person found better accommodations but isn't it great and wonderful that the shelter was there, even just for one!

One very active CERT member was not there at the EOC because she had already done her share. Joyce Hay had cooked all night to provide food for the Fire Department. Bless Joyce and her husband, Bill!

The Fire Chief stopped in from time to time and then was back out again. Many people certainly earned their pay that day and that night! Later that evening, I was still listening to dispatch calls at nine o'clock and they were still frequent but had lessened. At that point some flooding issues were beginning.

Five hours in the EOC flew by very quickly listening to those calls of trees and wires down, trees blocking roads, trees and branches hanging on loose wires, wires sparking and transformers popping! It was time for me to head back home, with a daughter and niece at my house. I had given instructions about what to do if we lost power. I recalled the agreeable faces and nodding heads but I also recalled a slightly glazed over look that told me they might not be using all their listening capabilities. Yes, time to go home.

Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for Halifax, MA. Next week she'll tell you how it went at home. Tell her your stories at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us