

# SANDY UPDATE

## Still Heroically Strong For Those Silenced By Sandy



*A mariner's view of the destroyed homes on Mantoloking beach, between Herbert and Lyman Streets, as seen on November 3, 2012.*

David Turton Photography

Three years have passed since Superstorm Sandy wreaked havoc at the Jersey Shore. If you listen to the news, you might believe that the shore has, indeed, been restored and all is well. However, when the smoke screen clears, there are still many displaced families who aren't back in their homes and others who have yet to recover, almost 1,100 days after the storm. Two organizations, there from day one, continue to assist Jersey Shore residents and make sure that those who still need help are not out of sight or out of mind.

### Disaster Within A Disaster

Hometown Heroes, headquartered in Toms River, and with a current presence in five states, is a registered non-profit organization founded in 2008 on the idea of paying it forward. The organization has helped individuals and families with homelessness, drug abuse, domestic violence, hunger, and more. When Sandy hit, Hometown Heroes sprung immediately into action helping thousands of Jersey Shore residents. Soon after the storm, they were chosen to lead the Restore the Shore

Hurricane Sandy relief campaign.

Hometown Heroes co-founder and president Michael Schwartz explained that, while most people think Sandy is old news, there is still a real need for assistance, albeit three years later. "We get at least one call per day that is still Sandy related. Sometimes that number is as high as ten per day," he said.

To illustrate how so many Jersey Shore neighbors are still not "stronger than the storm," Schwartz used an example of a recent request for help from a widowed woman living in a motel with her two teenage children. They moved into the motel

three years ago when Sandy hit. He explained, "She called me from the hospital where she is recovering from an illness and was worried about her children in the motel. When we found out they hadn't eaten much, we sent over food and are now working with them to find suitable housing. While Sandy may be a distant memory for some, it's a harsh everyday reality for those living it or caught in the proverbial donut holes."

In an ironic twist of fate, after helping so many others, Hometown Heroes' offices suffered a fire in May 2014, which was a complete loss. As such, the organization had to start from scratch. "We were completely devastated. What the fire didn't take, the water from the fire hoses destroyed," said Schwartz. Despite rallying together and relocating to a new office within three weeks, staff members continually recall sentimental items lost in the fire.

Even though money specifically earmarked for Sandy victims (including donations, fund raisers, and grant funding) has been distributed, Hometown Heroes still finds a way to help Sandy families with food, clothing, housing, and supplies. "We are still here supporting those families, regardless of funding, through our network of heroes who step up every day to do extraordinary things. It's that network of heroes throughout the country that keeps Hometown Heroes going every day," said Schwartz. Hometown Heroes' last audit reflected a three percent administration cost, which according to Schwartz, is exceptionally low for a charity.

Schwartz noted that the staff at Hometown Heroes hears heart-wrenching stories every day from so many that are still suffering. To them, they feel as if nobody is listening. "If we speak loudly enough, our government, other charities, and our neighbors may start to pay atten-



*In May 2014, Hometown Heroes' offices suffered a catastrophic fire, which was a complete loss. The organization had to start over from scratch.*

Courtesy Toms River Police Department

tion. This is a ten-year process. Three years ago the story was the water, the homes upside down and washed away. Today, the stories of hardship are still the same," he said. "We need to tell their stories, and keep them in our thoughts and prayers, as our work is far from over."

Schwartz estimates that the network of Hometown Heroes has helped over ten thousand people in more than two thousand five hundred families since its inception in 2008. "We help anyone facing a crisis. These are your friends, your family, your neighbors, and God forbid, one day, possibly you," he said.

### One Coat Started It All

Manasquan resident and SquanStrong president Dana Connelly watched the storm shatter her neighborhood and community. Within a week, she organized a coat drive, and just like that, SquanStrong was formed. Early assistance efforts by the non-profit organization included feeding several hundred people per day, setting up a distribution center to provide non-perishables, clothes, and cleaning supplies, sending crews to help move, clean or demo, and more.

Connelly and her team of SquanStrong volunteers have not stopped supporting those who need assistance as a result of Sandy, even though the perception is that the shore area is recovered. She explained, "There are still individuals who are not back in their homes. These people are not only paying the mortgage on their homes that were severely damaged, they are also paying rent and utilities where they are currently located. In some cases, they are also paying storage fees until their homes are ready."

SquanStrong continues to help displaced families with housing expenses, including storage fees and mortgage bills, and will also aid with the actual physical demands of moving

from one dwelling to another.

The driving force of SquanStrong is the volunteers who rally quickly and meet the needs of the community. Connelly explained that whether it is a Thanksgiving food drive, a holiday toy drive, or collecting food and water for the first responders who battled the Seaside boardwalk fire, the people behind the SquanStrong name would do whatever it takes to help those in need.

SquanStrong paired up with the Where Angels Play Foundation, which built twenty-six playgrounds to honor the twenty-six victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Connelly stated, "Manasquan's angel was Olivia Engel, and her playground



Donna Phelps

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What many people do not realize is the increase in the amount of families who need assistance during the holiday season, particularly from Thanksgiving through the New Year. Funds are already tight for them, but Sandy's impact further limits the family budget. SquanStrong tries to alleviate some of the financial worries for such families by assisting local churches and schools with col-

lection drives and financial support in the southern Monmouth County area every year.

All of SquanStrong's officers and board members, including Connelly, are volunteers. With no administrative costs, all of the money raised by SquanStrong goes right back to the community. "The SquanStrong motto is that we are paid in hugs and high fives. When we are involved in bringing a family home, filling someone's refrigerator, relieving someone of a payment, or donating an appliance, we feel like millionaires," she said. SquanStrong has been honored with several awards, including Mary Pat Christie's Hometown Heroes and one of the Lakewood Blue Claws Sandy's 70 Ovations.

"SquanStrong's goal has always been to help those in need in whatever way we can," Connelly said, "and the reward of volunteering is so much more than what a paycheck provides."

Knowing that the next person who might need help is right around the corner, SquanStrong, with Connelly at the helm, will do everything possible to be a source for hope and support for the community.

—Jill Ocone

For more information or to volunteer, donate, or request assistance:

**Hometown Heroes**, 236 Washington Street, Toms River, NJ 08753

Phone: (732) 473-9400

Website: [www.usahometownheroes.com](http://www.usahometownheroes.com)

Facebook: [USAHometownHero](https://www.facebook.com/USAHometownHero)

Twitter: [@HometownHeroUSA](https://twitter.com/HometownHeroUSA)

Instagram: [@USA\\_Hometown\\_Heroes](https://www.instagram.com/USA_Hometown_Heroes)

Upcoming fundraising event: **11-1: Annual Zombie Run** at Argos Farm in Lacey Township.

**SquanStrong**, P.O. Box 166, Manasquan, NJ 08736

For assistance or information,

email: [squanstrong@gmail.com](mailto:squanstrong@gmail.com); to volunteer, email Donna Phelps: [squanstrong2@gmail.com](mailto:squanstrong2@gmail.com).

Facebook: [SquanStrong](https://www.facebook.com/SquanStrong)

Upcoming fundraising event: **12-5: Holly Jolly Trolley Tour**, starting point to be announced, 12:00 noon.