

**THE BASIC
GOODNESS *of* PEOPLE**



Recollections of
ROSE OROZCO

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A chapbook from
the "Vanishing Hoboken"
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Oral History Project



Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum

The views expressed in this publication are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the interviewers, the Hoboken Oral History Project and its coordinators, or the Hoboken Historical Museum.

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COVER PHOTO: Rose Orozco after graduating from nursing school, 1964. Contemporary photograph of Rose Orozco by Robert Foster, 2018, at 911 Bloomfield Street, which Rose thought a fitting address for an ER nurse.

BACK COVER PHOTO: Rose at a Hoboken Historical Museum Family Fun Day, 2016. Courtesy of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs reproduced in this chapbook are courtesy of Rose Orozco.

I always was a quiet person, and my realization was, I'll be silent for eternity, so if I have something to say, I should say it now. [Laughs.] I do believe in the basic goodness of people. I really, truly do.

—Rose Orozco
August 26, 2018



Images above, top to bottom:

Top left: Newspaper report noting Rose’s delivery of a baby in the HUMC parking lot, undated. Top right: Button for successful campaign to keep St. Mary Hospital in Hoboken. It is now known as Hoboken University Medical Center (HUMC), circa 2000s.

Bottom: Rose, far right, with other RNs at a Health and Safety Fair, 2000.

Photo, opposite page:

Staff of the Emergency Room, 1995. Back row, standing left to right: Dr. Y.Y. Lee, Maureen Glennon, Joni Brennan, Concetta Drew, Evelyn Cavener, Abby Ang. Front, left of couch: Rose Orozco holding her son, Malachy Orozco. Seated across couch, left to right: Sheila Jasovsky, Peachy Bacho-Cruz, Dee Mongan, Nora Aurora, Linda Mowad, Patricia Magliaro.

Whenever people get together in Hoboken to help one another—in an extreme crisis or to fulfill day-to-day needs—you will find Rose Orozco there, quietly organizing, punning, getting the necessary work done. With each organization there is something to learn, shared laughter, and, sometimes, the impulse for new undertakings. In our two conversations with Rose we learned that she has volunteered for St. Matthew’s Lunchtime Ministry (where she and fellow volunteers delighted in the addition of carrots to a mac-n-cheese dinner to create “14 Karat Mac n’ Cheese”), Fund for a Better Waterfront (staffing a sidewalk information table when the fate of the waterfront was a hotly debated topic), the Hoboken Historical Museum (helping children make silly stuff during Family Fun days), aided public school students (raising funds with an indoor flea market and running a concession stand during the school’s



theatrical performances for prom dresses and theater programs), and contributed to voter registration efforts at the PATH (accompanied by a little lantern in the dark). A few other community activities are mentioned in this chapbook, but our guess is she has participated in many more.

An emergency room nurse by vocation, Rose (now retired) has exercised her training in many places and in different conditions: Vietnam in the 1960s, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan during the heroin epidemic of the 1970s, and happily delivering three babies (one in a parking lot) when their mothers did not get to the delivery room on time. When the twin towers were attacked on September 11th, she prepared, and waited in nearby St. Francis Hospital in the eerie quiet.

Rose recently began to work on the Rent Levelling Board, and told us she attends City Council meetings far more frequently than she did when she was working in the ER. She even speaks at meetings now and then. Sometimes there is a piece of information or a perspective missing that should be aired for people to make the best choice for the common good. “I always was a quiet person,” she said, “and my realization was, I’ll be silent for eternity, so if I have something to say, I should say it now.” [Laughs.] “I do believe in the basic goodness of people. I really, truly do.”

Robert Foster and Holly Metz interviewed Rose Orozco on August 26, 2018 at the Hoboken Firemen’s Museum and on August 29, 2018 in the conference room at the Hoboken Historical Museum. The transcript has been deposited in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

Starting Out in Brooklyn

I was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, April 17, 1944. In high school I’d written a little poem, and the only line I remember is “Born in ’44 amid the bombs of war.” [Laughs.] It was kind of like the end of the war. My father was not really doing war work, but sort of. He was involved in printing presses. [I don’t know the whole story of what he was doing, but that] was one of those things that was not unusual for Irish families. They never tell you much of anything. [We left Connecticut,] then we lived in New York City—not quite the Bronx but really high up. [Then] we moved to Brooklyn, in 1948. I was four years old. But I remember that day. Absolutely.

At that time there were seven of us. What they would do is, everything got packed in barrels—not boxes, barrels. And we got to ride to Brooklyn in a taxicab. We hadn’t even been in a car. The taxicab had those little seats in the back, so two of us would be on those seats. We thought it was the coolest thing ever.

Anyhow, we moved to Brooklyn. [My father] was a pressman for the *New York Times*, in the old building. [He] saved money, money, money, and we had a house. It was a two-family. We originally lived downstairs, and the previous owner lived upstairs. But from a series of circumstances, she couldn’t afford to keep up the mortgage, so we bought the house and they rented from us. It worked out nice.

Both my parents were immigrants from Ireland. My father came here in, I think, 1927. He was seventeen years old. He had been from a large family and his parents died. He was the youngest. Then he lived in his brother’s house. They had the farm, but it was small, so he slept in the barn, [in the loft,] where they had the hay. But he was a very bright guy, with maybe a



third-grade education, because that's how it was. Anyhow, he came here. Another brother was here, too.

[My mother] worked later. Well, when you have seven kids, that's work, you know. [She'd been] a domestic. That's what she did when she came here. Again, I can't tell you [how that came about]. Years later, she took a basic health course, and she worked more or less as a caregiver to a woman, a rather wealthy woman, in New York.

When my mother left I was ten. Fifth grade. We went to school one day, we came home, and she wasn't there. She was gone a long time. I was already in nursing school when she came back. We had a nanny for just a little bit, but it didn't work out. And years ago—see, the neighbors knew, but no one ever said anything. I became the cook. What else? We were a year apart, my sister, Cathy, [and I, and] she did the laundry. We looked after each other. I was like a pseudo-mom. [Laughs.] And there was not a lot of money or anything like that. I used to babysit. I used to do shopping for the elderly, and ironing. [I remember delivering ironing to one family and] they were having heroes for lunch. I'd never even heard of a hero.



*A portrait of Rose, her siblings, and parents, ca. 1946.
From left to right: Rose is seated on a chair; behind her is James;
her youngest sibling, Maureen, was added to the photo later by
Rose's mother; Margaret is seated; Rose's father, James;
Rose's mother, Mary; Eileen is on Mary's lap; Cathy is sitting
opposite Rose; Eugene is standing behind.*

Opposite page:

*Left: Rose during the time her family lived in New York, 1945.
Right: Rose (left) and Cathy after their First Communion, ca. 1954.*

[But] we supported each other, we helped each other. Years later, my sister, Cathy, was having some problems with my mother—because they did get back together—but I was already out of the house. I said to her, “You know, the greatest gift that she gave us was leaving.” Because, it was not a good situation. It just wasn’t.

From High School to Nursing School

We grew up Catholic, went to a local church—St. Sylvester’s—and I and my sister—we got scholarships for high school. [We] went to high school together, because I kind of skipped a grade, only because they used to do six-month [terms]. But I was actually a year younger. Then they bumped me up to the next grade, so that we were then in the same grade.

We read all the time. All the time. My father read, read, read, read. Books, we never wrote in. We never turned the corners. We had—what?—reverence for them. The other thing is, we used to hang out at the library, close to home. To read, yes, but also, they had a fan! On a hot summer day, that was a good thing.

[Our high school] was tuition-free. The other schools, you paid tuition. Plus, we didn’t have to wear uniforms. We took two trains to get there, but it was near the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. So we could walk there, and I would go there to study and read. They had a Japanese garden, which I really loved. I always liked nature. We had a small back yard where we were, but it was hard to grow anything.

On weekends, I worked in a hospital in Jamaica, in the kitchen. My sister Cathy joined me [later on]. That first



Rose (right) and sister Cathy, after high school graduation, 1961

Christmas, we actually had money and we could buy presents. And the thing is—what did I learn? First of all, that all things are possible if you believe. But also that I did not have a problem knowing that whatever I wanted I was going to get myself. That did not bother me. I had a little education fund. It wasn’t a lot of money. I made a little box to put my money in. Penny-nickel, penny-dime, penny-nickel, penny—that’s all I had, but that was my education fund.

After that I went to [nursing school at] Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. [It was] a city hospital, so I had no tuition. You learned a lot, and I was always very inquisitive. I asked a lot of questions. The other thing is that we got paid a high salary. It was \$9.00 every two weeks. Then you could actually go out and get a ham and cheese sandwich and a soda. My big thing was fruit. I used to get an apple, a peach, and a pear—one and one and one. I had it on my windowsill. We lived in a dorm, so you had your own bedroom. Because, again, growing up with—there were five girls, two boys and my parents, and three

bedrooms. So I shared a bed with my sister, my older sister, for seventeen years. And then my other two sisters, they shared a bed. Then my younger sister, she was in a crib longer than she really should have been, but there was no place else.

I worked at the hospital for maybe two years. When you first start working, you're just getting your feet wet. I had evenings, and at that time the hospital was so big that we had separate medical units, separate surgical units. We also had male and female units. I worked on a female medical unit. You became very good at what it was that you did. I would come in early just to pour the medicine, because it took time to do that. Then I could pick up orders, take calls. I've been very fortunate, because I always liked what I did. That makes life easier.

Vietnam

Kings County Hospital was a very, very busy place. When I graduated, I worked there for a while, and I [also] started going to Brooklyn College. I had to take a bus [there]. That's where I found out about USAID (United States Agency for International Development.) On the bus [there were] these informational [ads]. There were two things that interested me. One was the Peace Corps, and the other was information on USAID. I sent [letters] to both. I didn't hear from the Peace Corps but I did hear from USAID, and then followed through and joined up. [That was] 1967.

[The training took several months.] We spent time, first of all, in Washington, D.C., to learn all about the government and our role. There was a group of ten of us. We [also] went



Rose in Vietnam with colleagues, at her going away party, May 1969.

to Massachusetts General, [partly to learn about] tropical medicine, to learn about different diseases and what you might see [overseas, and to] learn how to protect yourself. You're going to a different country, and it's the tropics, [where] there were diseases that you wouldn't normally see here.

[Next, we left for] Hawaii and were [housed at] an army base. At that time, there were more people who joined us; there were guys there, too. From there we went to Vietnam.

I was anti-war, but I wasn't anti-warrior. You know what I mean? I had stopped into a recruitment place once, for the Air Force, for nurses. I wasn't sure I wanted to join the Army. Then I kept getting the calls: "Hello, honey." [Laughs.] So I knew that wasn't what I wanted.

The other thing is, very early on, I knew that anything I wanted I would have to get myself. So you just accepted, okay, I want to do this, this is what I do. And no resentment; that's just the way it is. I always wanted to travel, and this was wonderful. I went to a hospital in Vietnam, the Central Highlands, and worked with a French surgeon. The reason why they sent me there was because I had French in high school. They never asked me, could I speak French?

[How old was I when I signed on?] I was probably twenty-two. [We got to] Vietnam in July. [We were going to work in] a hospital, up on a hill. And the people [there,] they were Vietnamese civilians, Vietnamese military, some Montagnards, mountain people. I worked there with another nurse, but after the Tet Offensive, she left. The Tet Offensive was something that changed everything.

Let me just tell you what happened. It was January, 1968, and we woke up and literally, about 2:00 in the morning, we hear this crackling, and we think it's firecrackers. It wasn't. It was gunshots. We had come there in November, and didn't get placed in this [hospital] until maybe December. So folks didn't know we were even there, that the Americans were there. Plus, the folks that came were North Vietnamese, not the regular locals. There was a small outpost at the base of the hill, and there were Vietnamese soldiers there. More than once I learned not to walk down the hill in the evening—even though they can see you—because they'd fire. So stop, drop and roll. I knew how to do that. I learned, okay, you take the loooong way around.

So what happened? Again, we didn't put the lights on, because we just knew something was going on. The thing was that I was standing by a window, it had green paint, and a bullet came through [the window] and still had green

paint on it. Within inches [of where I was standing]. So I said: my first brush with eternity. Americans came the next day, and kind of rescued us.

In the USAID program, we treated anyone that was sick. That included both North and South Vietnamese, but really only one from the North. I can't remember now, but he was a prisoner, [and] he only had one leg. He was kind of isolated, not in a prison cell, he was in a little room all by himself, a little place.

[A lot of the work was treating people with diseases—ones you thought you'd never see.] Would you believe you'd see plagues? You'd have TB, [though] not that much, but people were vulnerable. Probably undernourished.

So I worked there for, maybe two months or something. I always wanted to come back. Eventually I did. But for the majority of the time I was there, I was the only American.

[I was in Vietnam] from November '67 to May '69. I don't know that you're actually given the option [of staying], but I also think it was time to leave. One of my things, always, was to travel, and at that time we had Pan Am. I had a ticket from Saigon to New York. Instead of taking the express, [I could do] the local. You had to add to it, [but I got to] see a lot of the things I wanted to see.

I cut my trip short because [my sister] was in Ireland, and she had a baby due. I didn't want her to be alone, so I went to Ireland. Then my mother was there. I didn't know my mother was going to be there. So we stayed there for a bit, [and] then I went back to Brooklyn. I had not lived in [the family] house since I went to nursing school. So it was adjusting to that, and then trying to figure out: What is it that you want to do?



Rose in her Morningside Heights, New York City, apartment, 1970s.

St. Luke's Hospital

At that time I was thinking about going to medical school. So I applied to Columbia [and] was accepted. St. Luke's Hospital was up there, so I got a job there. I worked in their Emergency Room—which was—this is the '70s now—[dealing with] a lot of drugs and a lot of violence. There were also a lot of good people. But it was—what can I say—there would literally be bodies, people overdosing. Heroin was a big thing, and a lot of people were doing drugs.

[With medical school, after] maybe a year or a year and a half, I found that I really liked being a nurse. I liked the ER. Medical school is—it's not easy. I forget what course it was, maybe physics, that I had a hard time with because I'd never had it. So you realize, why am I doing what I'm doing? I can do something else. I liked what I did [before].

Moving to Hoboken

[After I got married,] we left New York and went to Jersey City. We lived there for about a year. I personally didn't like Jersey City. There was no sense of community. It was too big. I was still working at the time. We would pass Hoboken, coming down from Jersey City, and it looked kinda nice. We came to something here in town, we walked around, and I fell in love with it. [This was] '76.

It reminded me of home, of Brooklyn. It was, again, little stores. A lot more than we have now, but I'm just saying—everything was walkable. The other thing was, at that time the waterfront was still closed. But you knew [the river] was there. I think we saw more than one park. Where I grew up, there were no parks, no water. I would tell my sons, for example, that the closest thing we had to a tree was the telephone pole on the corner.

So I just liked it. I think we went to a real estate guy, and we got a one-bedroom apartment on Garden Street. Then I was pregnant. We had fixed it up, [and] I had a little crib ready. [But] the owners sold the house, and the new owners wanted to live in the apartment. Now there had never been signage out, saying it was for sale. It was told to us. This real estate person came in and said, "Well, you know, you have to move." So you have a woman, seven-eight-months pregnant, a little hormonal, and I said, "No! They didn't tell us anything. You have to find us a new apartment. I'm not leaving." We got an apartment on Park, a fourth-floor walkup.

My son, [Ben,] was born in December, [in New York,] at St. Luke's. That's where my doctor was. I was still connected. [I'd been] the head nurse on the floor, the medical/surgical floor at St. Luke's. Near the end [I took off time for maternity leave].



Rose's sons Ben and Malachy; photo damaged in Storm Sandy.

It was not uncommon for some nurses to have their babies, and then turn the child over to someone else. Day care. But once I had that baby, I knew I could not do that. So I resigned my position. I had [some] money owed me [and] it made it easier. Plus, I always feel sometimes that God is on your side.

[So I'm in this] fourth-floor walkup. I have this little baby. I'd go down and get the *Jersey Journal*. They'd put it in the vestibule downstairs, and somebody would take it and read it, but never bring it back. So I canceled it. They called me and said, "You know, we'd like you to [try the paper] again." I explained to them, and said "I'll do it, if the boy or girl who delivers the paper brings it up. Because I'm going to be home, and I'm not going to run up and down. I'm not going to leave my baby alone." Then, [when they went to collect], I said, I'd give them an extra tip.

Now the first day that I get the paper [again], just looking at it, I saw the house that we eventually bought. It was in the paper that day. The address was 911 Garden, and I was an ER nurse, so 911. . . . We lived there for a very long time. [We bought the house in 1977.] We moved in '78, that January.

The marriage didn't work out, and I got a divorce. One of the things that I wanted was the house. I didn't ask for anything [else]. We didn't break up with great animosity, but it was just one of those things where we were just going different ways, and that was that.

So my sons went to school here. And when they were in school I became involved with the schools—a little thing here, a little thing there. Brandt School at that time, Frank Spano was the principal. He's a wonderful guy. We started our own newspaper at Brandt. But then from Brandt they went to Calabro, and from Calabro, I think, they went to [the] Hudson School. Malachy wound up going to Demarest.

[The kids did] wonderful productions. Again, Frank Spano, and Sandra Smith and I and another young woman, we did a flea market to raise money. Some of it was for dresses, so the girls could have [them] for the prom. We'd never had one before. People came together. Sometimes people would look down at the Hoboken kids, but I championed them. It was like, Holy Christmas! You had no idea how good these kids are.

The Fires

Now going back to 1983, with the fires in Hoboken. Well, it was earlier, too. But 1983—that was the year that my [son] Malachy was born. I remember [a group of] us being in a very big hall, around a big table, and talking. It was police, fire, all sorts of concerned citizens. There was a woman [I volunteered with], our job was to go to all the buildings up and down Washington Street. We said, "You get a smoke detector, and



Night and day views of Hoboken firemen fighting a tenement fire at 121 Clinton Street, Hoboken, January 20, 1979.

The event was the worst example of a building being destroyed by suspected arson-for-profit in Hoboken during a period when such fires were all too frequent. Although arson was suspected and investigated, no one was ever charged with a crime related to it.

The death toll of twenty-one included several children.

then you take that out of your rent. You're entitled to a smoke detector."

I'll tell you one event—I can relive it. It was in the emergency room [of St. Mary Hospital, where I was working]. One evening Tommy Molta [from the Hoboken Volunteer Ambulance Corps] and the crew [came in]. They may change, but the crew is wonderful. And this young boy-man came in, and he stood against [the] high [desk that we had], and against the door, and he was pale. At that time, [the ambulance crew] could not pronounce anyone dead. It had to be a physician. So [the crew] had bodies in the ambulance that they wanted the

doctor to pronounce. Somebody else—another nurse—went out. They asked me. I said, "No, I don't need to see this. I do not." So he went out and pronounced.

I remember on Washington Street—it could have been Fourteenth. I'm not sure. But there were kids downstairs, and it seemed like [one of] their classmates [was] up there, with flames behind him, screaming [and] hitting the window. God, it was so—I have some vivid memories of that day. It was just so brutal. So brutal.

With the Pinter Hotel—it might have been somebody tossed lighter fluid or something. But there were all mothers and babies and little kids up there, and they couldn't get out. Some mothers tossed their baby out, [and] somebody [caught them].

I've been doing research on the fires for a while, because I wanted to start sort of a blog, to give a voice to the voiceless, and those who are literally scarred, and figuratively scarred by the things that happened. Because there never was any justice for those folks. There really wasn't. I think a lot of things have never been said or done or should have been done, and nobody really took responsibility. There was a lot of suspicion here and there. [But I think there should be some report of] what was there. That, to me, is important. As I get older (as I am, getting older), it's almost like I feel like I'm running out of time, and this is something that I really want to do.

The Shelter

[What made me decide to get involved in all these organizations?] Well, since I retired, it's more. The shelter, we were supporting that, because they wanted all the SROs [Single Room Occupancy] out, and a lot of seamen would live in these hotels. They wanted them out. But there was no place for them to go. And this one particular man—it could have been at the Hotel Edwards—he literally walked out to the river and drowned.

So [the Clergy Coalition started] the shelter [inside a church. One of the clergymen, from All Saints Church, may have been] threatened with jail? Because they were putting people in a church, and the city fought it, and then the judge said no [it can stay]. Because, in a church, it was church work. It was essentially God's work, that the city could not intervene. So that's why the shelter still exists. We do whatever we can, whenever we can.

The Waterfront

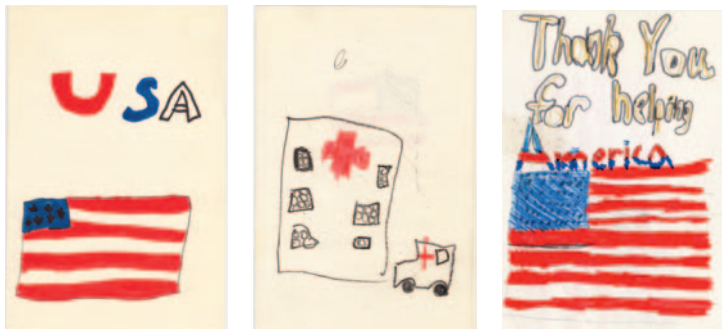
So '83 is when I went to Ireland, then came back, and then I had two children, and worked part-time. Sometimes you become more involved in your own situation, your own life, and so on. It was after I retired [that I could become more involved, like with] FBW (Fund for a Better Waterfront), when they were starting [to hand out information about a waterfront walkway and public access]. Marilyn Walters and I would put up a table on Washington Street, near Black Water Books, [with permission from the owner] David Cogswell. He really encouraged us, and that was important, you know what I mean? The adminis-

tration at that time, was totally against [a waterfront walkway]. They wanted the Port Authority to build out there. A lot of people came together. [Marilyn and I] would set up this table, putting out information, getting signatures, etc. Some people would come up, and they didn't actually spit on us—. [Laughs.] The two of us, we couldn't have cared less. Think what you want to think. Some folks, later on, embraced the whole thing.

September 11th

[Yes, I was still working at the hospital on September 11th.] I was. I have chills, to just even say that. I think at the time I was still an employee health nurse. I did occupational health. It was a small department. Two physicians came in to do physicals. There was Dotty Majewski, she was the secretary, and I was the nurse. At that time there was St. Francis and St. Mary's. With 9/11, I was at St. Francis, so we went down to the ER to see what you can do to help. [With our] employee health physician, Jerry Jurado, we set up a treatment area, but for less serious [injuries], because the ER, they would take care of [those].

There were not a lot of people [coming in]. There's a famous image of a woman walking [away from the destroyed towers], covered in white, and we would see that. I get chills, thinking about it. It was the silence. You didn't hear a dog bark, you didn't hear a bird chirp, no traffic. Nothing. It was like everything was down. There was one fireman who was admitted because he had been under a truck, under pressure, but we didn't have a lot of injuries... And we had these firemen who came in later on that day, looking for their friends.



Thank you cards about September 11th World Trade Center response created by Hoboken schoolchildren for Saint Mary Hospital workers, September, 2001.

So, from there I went back to St. Mary's, but it was the same thing—very few [people coming in]. My brother was living with me at the time, and he happened to be down in that area. He was there when the buildings came down. So he was one of those [people covered in white dust]—because you breathed that in, swallowed it.

We did go do what we could. I went back to work. But the most depressing thing to me, again, was the silence. Then we had people coming in, and all around there were pictures posted. I don't remember now, but I think it was fifty-two people we lost [from Hoboken]. And you didn't know who was gone. It would be like, down where I was living, there was a family there with two young boys, and I didn't see them, so I didn't know if they were okay. When I did see the husband, I was just so happy to see him, because you didn't know. Because there were, again, folks here in town who lost their lives.

I can't envision it right now, but [there were] pictures all over the place, of people who were lost. It's hard to say how many were found. I honestly don't know. Later on, I went down [to the site of the towers,] and it was like, when you see it, it was unreal. Unreal. But I will say, again, with other things, that volunteers came to do whatever they could, whenever they could. But that was really tough.

Superstorm Sandy

I can't remember if it was a flier or something that came in an email, that they were having a class [for CERT], the Emergency Response Team. My background is in emergency, [so I went]. I keep my license current.

[So this is the weekend of the storm.] The plan was to set up a shelter at Wallace School. At that time I lived on Park (Avenue), a basement apartment. So there was a good chance that I would get damage. I went out to [the grocery store and] you could not get sand bags or anything like that, so I got [something that was filled with paper litter]. Then I took plastic garbage bags and I made my own little sandbags along the windows, thinking that, maybe, I could save something. I moved everything up as high as I could, but in a situation like that, however high you think you are, you need to go higher. Then I put a little sign on my door to "Be Safe," for everybody else in the building who went out.

I went down [to Wallace]. The initial group [seeking shelter] was mostly older folks, and we had little cots. Tim Calligy was there and some of the staff from Wallace, making coffee and food. That first night, before the storm actually came, the mayor came, and she gave out flashlights to everybody—which was really, really nice, because they were pretty strong.

One of the rules in a group like that, you have to leave [an aisle] open so folks won't trip and fall. We had one older man who came with his son, and he was oxygen-dependent. He had COPD. The son went home and got another full tank—because nobody knew what was going to happen.

We went outside and there was a bright moon and light; you could see the water coming, the black water. The light was on it.

Superstorm Sandy 2012



*Left photo: Fallen tree, First St. between Bloomfield and Garden, one of the first to fall, October 29, 2012. Photo by Bill Curran.
Right photo: Flooding on 2nd St. from Grand to Clinton Streets, October 30, 2012. Photo by McKevin Shaughnessy.
Photos, both pages, courtesy of the Hoboken Historical Museum.*

All the lights went off across the street except for one house on the corner—because it was on a different grid—plus, there was a bus shelter right there, and the light was on there.

We got some sleep, because you knew you were going to be going all day. And during the night, Tommy Molta and the ambulance group came and collected some of the older folks that really would need more care. They took them up to Stevens [Institute of Technology, where] they had a first-aid station. So that older man didn't come back to us. Some of the people did not come back, because they had other means. And the reason they were there was because they recognized that they had needs.

What happened was that Wallace flooded. There was a sub-basement, [and] all of the electrical works and everything was below, so they had to find another place [to shelter and care for residents]. It turned out to be St. Matthew's. That morning,

Superstorm Sandy 2012



*Left photo: Flooding on First Street between Adams and Grand Streets, October 30, 2012. Photo by Michael A. Melendex.
Right photo: Cell phone recharging station on front steps of 206 11th St., in the week after Sandy when power was not fully restored, November 2012. People not identified. Photo by Sandy Cohen.*

Phil Cohen, [who] lived nearby, came in with his daughter. The thing was, "What can I do?" So, being who I am, I said, "Oh, we could use coffee." [Laughs] He went home and he made a huge urn of coffee, and came back. Maybe you didn't get a whole cup, but you got maybe two-thirds.

Then they worked it out with St. Matthew's [so] we would [be located] where they do their ministry. The kindness, again, and the goodness of the people of Hoboken, was unbelievable. That first night that we got there, it turned out one of our guests was a cook, and then another volunteer came, so they did some of the cooking for us. A neighbor came in with pasta and sauce, so we had something for folks to eat.

I was there up until, it could have been five, six, seven days. I don't remember now. I slept there also. But that's how I met many of the homeless, at that time. You make a connection. [But] not everyone there was homeless.

We were very fortunate that at that time St. Matthew's had these big sofas and chairs and a table. Some folks who really could not lie flat were able to sit up, with their feet up. We had one gentleman, over eighty, who had [swelling in his legs]. His legs were really big. Another man, the same thing. They can't really sit with their legs down all the time, because of the fluid shifts. We had one man—he kept telling us, and I believed him—he was 400 pounds. There was no way this man could have fit on one of those little cots. We had another little older lady who really couldn't lie flat, but the next day or the day after, her family found her. So she was able to go. Three people went to the hospital. One of them was an insulin-dependent diabetic, and he had no insulin. He was in a wheelchair. And he was incontinent, so one of the things I would ask for was Depends. And I swear to God, I did that more than once, saying, "You know what we need?" and somebody would walk in with it.

Right after [the storm ended], the president of Stevens canceled all classes, and told the students to come into town and help. There was a volunteer student from Stevens who just kind of jumped in and took it all on, and organized, and said, "You go here, you go here." They carried water, food, about seventeen floors [up and] down [in one of the high-rise buildings]. One of the things that still amuses me—her name is Alison Outwater. [Laughs.] God, they were just so wonderful.

I worked with Rich Tremetidi. He had a strong voice. We never had any chaos; we just set the rules. The other thing I would do [to get people ready for bed] was to start lowering lights. I would tell them, "I'm the Mom. Time for bed." [Laughs.] You had the tables up, because it's a feeding place. Then the tables would go down. We would leave a couple up, because sometimes you'd want to play a game or just chat. Then we set

up the cots. Then we'd reverse it in the morning, and clean the area. People did take the garbage out. There was one person, he wasn't doing very much. So I gave him a broom. I said, "I know you can do this." [Laughs.]

I wasn't going to go home until we took care of [what was needed there], and we did what we did. [I was flooded out from Sandy,] but I didn't know it yet, because I hadn't gone home. That last day, we were moving everybody down, got them settled. Then I said, "Okay, now I can go. Everyone's been taken care of."

Again, you didn't know what you were going to see when you walked in. And I saw—remember the sandbags I made? They burst, and there were all these little balls. They looked like something from the sewer. The water came up from the bathtub, and anything, let's say, waist-high [was ruined]. Essentially, I just had to let go of certain things.

Homeless in Hoboken

There are certain [homeless] people that I know, that I've known, literally, for years. And because Lunchtime Ministry [at St. Matthew's] is Monday through Thursday, I used to [go out and distribute food on] Friday, Saturday, Sunday. I always do two little chocolate kisses, a pickle (they don't get pickles) a piece of fruit, [and a sandwich]. Mostly tuna. Then I had a hand injury, and I [had to stop]. It's hard to get started again. I used to do soup, too. I had a little [container] I'd carry. But with my back...it's only, what, six cups of soup, but when you're fragile... My balance would be off. So it's like I do what I can, when I can, and I don't make excuses.



Hoboken Veteran's Day Parade, Washington St. between 1st & Newark Streets, ca. May 1990-1995. Photo by Donald "Red" Barrett. Courtesy of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

But yes, I do know some of the homeless. We have some veterans. With the veterans I became involved after [storm] Sandy. They wanted to have a cleanup day [at the VFW post]. So I went down there and saw what was going on, and went and got some [supplies]. There was so much mold, because it was weeks after [the storm]. People were trying to save things and just couldn't. So we cleaned and scrubbed.

Before this, on Veteran's Day, I used to send them a little card: "Thank you," and wrote them a little check. Because—did I march against the war? Only once. Only once, and that was when I was in Hawaii. In New York, I used to go every Sunday for [a spiritual growth program] called Unity. It was at Lincoln Center. I guess it was Veteran's Day, [in the 1990s,] and the troops were marching down. They were not active troops; [but] they were wearing their uniforms. Anyhow, they're marching—and they were booed. I don't cry a lot. I just don't. I'm not a crier. You feel things, but I just don't cry a lot. But the tears just came, and came, and came. So I felt like it was unfair. It's like we all should do something. That kind of thing. Some little thing to help. So anyhow, that's what I do.

Churches Past and Present

[The people of Hoboken are generous to organizations like the shelter,] once they know about it. I go to Hoboken Grace now, and they do lots of good things. At St. Matthew's, again, they're relying on donations. Mark Singleton and that whole family is wonderful. I don't know all the details, but I do know, since Trader Joe's been here, we're getting more fresh fruit and vegetables. Because people don't like a little bruised apple or whatever. The folks that we have that cook, you give them a carrot, a banana, a beet, they make something. [Laughs.] I love it.

Hoboken Grace does a lot. Coming up soon is the one-day event, where they go all out. The church that I grew up in, until 1948, [when] I moved, I remember from the days [when] nuns and priests were strict, and sometimes mean. What I couldn't understand—the priests explained everything, but we never read a Bible. It was all in the Latin mass. The priest is up here, not facing us, and they would explain it. It's not up to you to explain things. We had a Protestant church maybe two blocks down, but you weren't allowed to go near that. They called it the "Black Church," meaning dark.

Sophomore year, [in] social studies class, the nun was up there saying how terrible, awful the Communists were, that their children learned nothing about other types of government. And I said, "That sounds like the church!" [Laughs.] Principal's office! Letter home!

One of the things we had was purgatory. Folks were in purgatory, waiting to get to heaven. So as a young person, I had a list of get [in] free passes. I know Mario Lanza was on it. I had a cousin that I loved very much, and he died in an accident. I would pray for him, and his name was Malachy. That's who

[my son] Malachy is named after. I only met him once, when I was eight years old, but he was just the most amazing guy. He visited us, and when he was leaving, I said, “You promise you’ll come back. You promise.” And he said, “Oh, yes, I’ll be back.” And then shortly after that, he was in an apartment where they used to have gas heaters, hot-water heaters, and there was an explosion, and he was killed. He was twenty-two at the time. I was heartbroken. I wanted to go to the funeral but they said no. They wouldn’t let me go. It was in New York. But he was on my Big Prayer list, always.

Evolving Over Time

I think we all evolve over time. When you’re talking about the people of Hoboken, when they know there’s something [that needs to be done,] they do something. After Sandy, there was no question about it. The same thing with the shelter; people will do stuff, give [what is needed].

I just think I’m very fortunate. And that’s another thing—no matter where you are or what’s going on, be grateful for what you do have. I am not a perfect human being. [Laughs.] But, honest to God, be grateful. Just be grateful. Because, again, I have some physical issues, but I can still get up and walk around. I’m just more cautious. I’m older. [But don’t] be afraid of doing something new.



Christmas 2017 gathering of Rose’s extended family, identified by first name, left to right: Bottom row: Bobby, James, Kelsey, Karen, Laarni. Second row: Mike, Juliana, Linda, Pat, Bob, Rose, Chuck, Malachy, Lila. Top row: Ronald, Emma, John, Jeannie, Leo, Mary, Seamus, Ben, Olive.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to consequent “vanishing” of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken’s industrial base relocated over the 1970s and ’80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992.

In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken’s row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, in which affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, “Vanishing Hoboken”—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. Since 2002, thirty-three chapbooks—including this

one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets “chapbooks,” a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the “Vanishing Hoboken” series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the “manners and morals” of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

These are some of the folks from the '70s, '80s, and '90s who contributed so much time to create the community we have:

The Korman family	Paul Somerville
David Calamari	Augusta and Fran Pryzgod
Donna Cahill	Jen Giantino
Tom Olivieri	Cheryl Fallick
Frank Spano	Dan Tumpson
Norman Sweeten	Lynn Shapiro
Margo Singalese	Helen Manogue
Paula Ohaus	Robert Diaz
Ron Hine	Sada Fretz
Tommy Molta	Beth Walsh
Renny Rezato	Debbie Santana
Sandra Smith	Richard Del Boccio
Marilyn Walters	Joel Horowitz
Michael Cricco	Brother Bob Reinke
Rich Tremediti	The Clergy Coalition
Carmelo Garcia	Rev. Curtis.
Tim Calligy	Rev. Hagedorn
Phil Cohen	Sr. Norberta
Alison Outwater	Aaron Lewitt
Eileen Lynch	Jim Vance
Virginia Parrot	Heather Gibbons
Jerry Jurado, MD	John Carey
Joe Brennan	Bea Pasqualli



A PROJECT OF THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM