When Superstorm Sandy hit the East Coast last October, former Flather Hall residents reconnected on Facebook and donated money for a Long Beach, N.Y., alumna and her family. Students at the University also stepped up, demonstrating that CUA’s mission of service spans the generations.

Storm Brings Out Good Samaritans

By Catherine Lee

On the set of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire, contestant Karen Danca Smith (B.A. 1995) is stumped by a question about Jim Thorpe. Was he a politician? An athlete? Smith decides to call her “phone-a-friend” Brian Curran, whom she first met when they were freshmen living in Flather Hall.

Curran picks up the phone. The clock is ticking, but he can’t resist having a little fun — a throwback to the days when Smith and Curran would give each other a hard time while hanging out in the dining hall that used to be near Flather. He starts chatting with host Meredith Vieira, but when an exasperated Smith says “Brian!” he quickly comes through with the correct answer — athlete.

On Nov. 6, Smith and Curran are in touch again, but this time the circumstances are more dire. Smith, who lives in Long Beach, N.Y., with her husband and two children, is struggling to keep it together following the loss of the first floor of her home and both the family’s cars in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, which hit the East Coast on Oct. 29. Curran has sent her a message on Facebook: “How are you doing?” Smith writes back: “Not really OK.”

Curran wants to help. He pictures the halls of Flather. In his mind, he goes from room to room and starts remembering the students who lived in each one. He gets on Facebook and begins typing in their names. He asks that they donate money for gift cards for Smith. Within a half hour, the first donation comes in and he’s getting messages from friends he hasn’t been in touch with since they graduated 17 years ago.

Curran is not alone among members of the Catholic University community who responded without hesitation to victims of the storm, which killed more than 100 people, left millions without power, and flooded and destroyed thousands of homes.

At Catholic University, where about 28 percent of this year’s entering freshmen came from New Jersey and New York, the plight of the storm victims struck a chord. Even though the University was closed for two days because of high winds and heavy rainfall, about 300 students gathered for an impromptu Mass at the Edward J. Pryzbyla University Center Oct. 30 to pray for those affected. They remembered a CUA student’s father who was killed in New York City during the storm.

Last November, the Office of Campus Ministry sponsored a Red Cross blood drive at the Pryzbyla Center. Every slot was filled beforehand, and several members of the CUA community showed up that day to give blood without appointments. The CUA Cares website, a Campus Ministry-sponsored site listing relief efforts in the wake of disasters, encouraged monetary donations through Catholic Charities and listed student fundraising initiatives.

Junior Maggie O’Neill of Williston Park, N.Y., launched a drive to gather supplies and donations for Saint Francis de Sales Parish in Belle Harbor, N.Y. The residence hall offices collected gift cards and monetary donations. The CUA Symphony Orchestra played an on-campus benefit concert in November to raise money for Catholic Charities’ relief efforts.

Rev. Jude DeAngelo, O.F.M. Conv., campus chaplain and director of Campus Ministry, says the University’s response is a reflection of its Catholic mission.

“There’s something inside us as Catholic men and women that drives the way we respond to these kinds of situations, whether we decide to sacrifice our time, our money, or our talent,” says Father Jude. “Our outreach is rooted in our faith. Christ gives us the command to love our neighbor and our Catholic DNA moves us to say, ‘This is what I need to do.’”

Spring 2013
Students Watch as Hometowns Ravaged

At the top of sophomore Nick Compagnone’s Facebook page is a shiny black helmet. Printed on it are the letters “FDNY” and “343,” the number of New York City firefighters killed on 9/11. One of them was Compagnone’s uncle, who had been like a father to him. A philosophy major, Compagnone was 8 when the terrorist attacks claimed his uncle and more than 30 residents of his hometown, Rockaway Park, N.Y.

The day that Sandy hit the East Coast, Compagnone’s parents were in Utah, visiting one of his brothers. Compagnone talked to friends in his hometown who cried as they described the terrifying power of the storm and the sight of cars floating down the street and houses burning to the ground.

Marty Petronis (pictured above), a sophomore business management major, says he “was devastated” when he saw on TV the damage to his hometown, Breezy Point, N.Y., which sits at the very tip of the Rockaways, a mere slip of a peninsula bordered by Jamaica Bay on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other.

A southpaw who pitches for the CUA baseball team, Petronis grew up playing on the fields of Breezy Point and Rockaway Park, located at the midpoint of the Rockaways. He created a fundraising website for each of the towns to give back to the area that means so much to him.

Compagnone, who helped to raise awareness of the need for funds to help victims of Sandy, was feeling pretty overwhelmed after the storm. One day that week, the tall, lanky surfer says he “kind of barged into the Campus Ministry office. I just needed to talk to someone.”

Father Jude says, “Nick just launched into this kind of rapid-fire conversation about the destruction to his hometown. At that point, it dawned on me just how unbelievable and far-reaching the devastation was for our community.”

The storm flooded the two students’ homes, destroying clothes, family photos, and sports trophies. Petronis’ car — a Chevy Impala given to him by his grandfather — was ruined when the storm pushed it up on top of a fire hydrant. Both of the students’ families moved into cramped Brooklyn apartments while their homes were renovated.

Petronis spent hundreds of hours responding to emails from people who wanted to give money, knocking on doors in the communities near his hometown, and doing media interviews to promote the websites. In November, $100,000 raised on the Rockaway Park site went to the Graybeards, a post-9/11 organization that is helping storm victims in the area. Petronis consulted with accountants and lawyers who helped him create the Breezy Point Disaster Relief Fund, a nonprofit organization administered by a seven-member board of directors. By the time the magazine went to press, the relief fund had raised $117,000.

While Compagnone and Petronis juggled classes, periodic visits home, and feelings of loss, their Catholic University friends were there to help. Petronis says that several of his teammates have donated money. They text him a lot to see how he’s doing. Compagnone’s friends took him shopping and helped him buy new clothes to replace the ones he lost.

Petronis notes, “I’ve lost my hometown, but I haven’t lost the memories it’s given me and I haven’t lost my community. I’m going to fight for my neighborhood and stay postive until it is better than it was before.”

The Night of the Storm

Karen Dansa Smith and her family had evacuated in August 2011 prior to Hurricane Irene and, in the end, the storm wasn’t that bad. Getting back to their home afterward was difficult because of heavy traffic, so this time they decided to stay put. On the afternoon of Oct. 29, they went to the home of neighbor and former Flather resident Jennifer Luntz-Mullarkey for an impromptu hurricane party. The friends pulled out old college photos and reminisced about their days at Catholic University.

After the party, Smith, her family, and several relatives prepared to ride out the storm on the second floor of their house. The power went out at about 6:30 p.m. The seawater reached the first floor of the house about 2½ hours later. By the time it stopped rising, there was three feet of water on the first floor. As the water receded, it gobbled up books, lamps, and furniture, and spit them out on Smith’s front lawn. Smith describes the scene on her street the next morning as “Armageddon.” Fire trucks had claimed three houses on her block and four others around the corner.

In her Facebook message to fellow alumna Brian Curran, Smith said her son, Gavin, who turned 5 in November, was “a nervous wreck.” Refusing to leave his mother’s side, Gavin watched as his parents threw away all his toys after the storm.

Luntz-Mullarkey and fellow neighbor and CUA alumna Michelle Monaghan (B.A. 1995) were also affected by the storm, but they both contacted Curran and asked him to give all the donations to Smith, saying that she had been hit hardest of the three. In the end, Curran, an account manager for Bentley Systems Inc. who lives in Ardsnow, Pa., with his wife and two daughters, raised about $3,000 and sent gift cards to Smith.

Referring to his classmates, Curran says, “These are the kind of people who go to Catholic University, or at least, the kind of people who graduate from Catholic University.”

The school produces quality individuals. It didn’t matter that I hadn’t seen some of these people since we graduated. I know they all would contribute. If I hadn’t started the collection, someone else would have.”

Service Is “a Given”

The day before the storm Pete Forlenza (B.A. 1988) was in Sea Bright, N.J., helping to sandbag local businesses that included Woody’s Ocean Grill, a restaurant he co-owns with a friend. He helped move inventory from a women’s clothing store to his home in Rumson, N.J., where he lives with his wife, Ellen Soell Forlenza (B.A. 1988), and their three children. When Sea Bright was evacuated, Forlenza was one of the last people to cross the bridge back to Rumson, an area southwest of the Rockaways and north of Sea Girt, N.J., where he grew up.

With high tide at 8 p.m. and a full moon, Forlenza says he braced for the worst. He brought his patio furniture inside, made sure there were batteries in all the flashlights, and then turned his attention to his day job as head of equities for the markets wouldn’t open in the morning. That night the water crept toward Forlenza’s house before stopping at the front steps. But later he learned that the restaurant had taken in about five feet of water; the furniture and kitchen equipment were ruined.

A few days later, the residents of Sea Bright started returning to their homes. Forlenza (pictured above with Ellen) and his partner quickly pitched in to help with what would become a massive recovery response. Working at a makeshift site alongside the Sea Bright firehouse, they gave out lunches to residents and first responders. The Army National Guard soon got word of their efforts and brought in refrigerated trucks, and supplies that became a tent city serving three meals a day.

On one particularly busy weekend, they served more than 10,000 lunches.

The partners also created a fundraising website that has generated more than $700,000 for the town. Donations from Sea Bright Rising, a nonprofit organization, have enabled residents to get their power back, pay their mortgages, and buy new furniture. Forlenza says that helping Sea Bright recover was “just a given” that hearkens back to his days as a Catholic University student. “The University’s small, close-knit Catholic community drives the mission of service,” he notes.

Now a member of the CUA on Wall Street networking group who’s in touch with his former classmates “all the time,” Forlenza says, “You see a problem and say, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do to fix it.’ It’s as simple as that.”

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