

Former E-J staffers remember Hugo

Enquirer-Journal, The (Monroe, NC) - September 21, 2019

- Author/Byline: Holly Morgan; hollymorgan@theej.com
- Section: News

UNION COUNTY -- Covering a Category 5 hurricane is no easy feat for print and broadcast journalists, even with today's technology that can predict the strength and speed of hurricanes.

The difficult and often dangerous part of covering a hurricane is getting out in the field and reporting the damage left in the wake.

The Enquirer-Journal reached out to former reporters and editors and asked them to share memories of what it was like reporting the damage Hurricane Hugo did to Union County when it struck 30 years ago, and what it was like for them the night Hugo hit the local area.

Amazingly, the paper did not miss a single publication during the aftermath.

(All of the information presented under each person's name and title is according to them unless otherwise stated.)

Nancy Stephen, Executive Editor

When Stephen was the executive editor at the EJ, the Friday, Sept. 22, 1989 edition cost 25 cents and the paper was published Monday through Friday. At that time, the E-J had four reporters and two photographers. An annual subscription cost \$81. The paper, including when it combined in November of 1965, had existed for 115 years. Current Staff Writer Holly Morgan was born six years later.

When Hugo hit Union County on Sept. 22 at about 2 a.m., Stephen was working her last two weeks with the paper. She said the paper had not missed a publication day, ever, and it was not going to under her watch. She, John B. Ashcraft Jr. (publisher), editors, reporters, photographers, the crew working the press to the circulation team and support staff worked tirelessly to put out a paper the afternoon after Hugo.

First, hours after Hugo swept through, Stephen, reporters and photographers met at a picnic table at the former E-J building on West Jefferson Street, where they received their assignments. Stephen revised the Sunday paper, cutting down the number of pages in the newspaper while waiting for the reporters and photographers to return.

Second, the paper had to be edited, pasted up and then published at the former Shelby Star, a sister publication, because the previous E-J building on Jefferson Street lost power. The Star had a different computer system than the E-J, so the staff had to learn their system. (The E-J was printed at the Shelby Star just once.)

The printed newspapers were loaded on a truck and brought to the E-J building for carriers to make their deliveries.

"It was almost overwhelming because it was at least the middle of the night -- much later than we should have been. The carriers were standing there cheering as we were coming in," Stephen said.

For the Sunday edition, Ashcraft was able to obtain a generator large enough to work the press. It came from Kentucky. There was one issue: It didn't have enough power to run both the press and electricity throughout the rest of the building. Therefore, when the press was running, the electricity in the rest of the building had to be turned off. It went on like that for several days.

"In a weird way it was fun because it was such a challenge to get it done," Stephen said.

Dan Voorhis, Staff Writer

Voorhis and Ian Hoffman, another staff writer, composed the article that made the front page of the edition the day after Hugo. The headline read, "County devastated by Hurricane Hugo." The first sentence of the article was: "Union County's worst disaster in living memory has left an infant dead, contributed to the death of another person and caused untold damage."

Those words ring eerily similar to an E-J report a year ago (mid-September), when Tropical Depression Florence came through Union County and flood waters resulted in the drowning deaths of a toddler and an elderly man.

Voorhis went to a scene where a person drowned in flood waters near Lake Twitty close to Richardson Creek and Olive Branch Road.

He said emergency crews were at the scene when he arrived.

The deceased drove during the night, during Hugo, toward town. The car went off the road and sank.

Voorhis remembered the roads being covered in debris.

When asked how reporters handle situations where a death is involved, Voorhis said, "First of all, you're doing a job and you're responsible for coming back with something that is usable. You're not really allowed through your training ... to have an emotion-first response."

Voorhis said that it may seem trivial what the color of the car was or the spelling of an officer's name, but as a journalist, those details become the primary focus and the emotional response to a death becomes secondary. So that's how he was able to compartmentalize and remain collected while gathering his report.

Deb Coates Bledsoe, Staff Writer

Bledsoe was at full-time staff writer at the time covering law enforcement, fire service and emergency medical services. She would make phone calls from her desk to each point of contact for law enforcement, fire service, emergency medical services and any other government agency involved in the recovery process after Hugo hit. Through information gathered while talking to those sources, she would write her stories. If she went out in the field and had a question for an editor in the office, she had to use a pay phone.

She couldn't remember how tight her deadlines were while covering Hugo, but she remembered the atmosphere and energy centered around "hurrying up" and getting articles done as quickly as possible.

Bledsoe was "almost trapped in her home" because it was surrounded by fallen pine trees. The fire department had to cut the trees just so Bledsoe could get out. She also had a 9-year-old daughter and her safety to think about.

"But we had to get out and cover it," Bledsoe said. "That is the downside of the news media is that when things happen you have to be there to cover it. You can't stay home huddled in a corner with your family."

She said in situations like a hurricane, journalists are required to think of everyone else before themselves.

"Journalism is a job where you've got to be out there in the thick of it," Bledsoe said.

She said the challenge for journalists is to remain calm and not feed into a heightened sense of emotion that's around them. To do that, Bledsoe advised that journalists should think of the information they need to know and produce and to not feel like they are a nuisance to both residents and those involved in hurricane recovery work.

"You've got people's homes that have trees on top of them. It's hard sometimes to go up to somebody that's standing there crying as they are looking at their home and it's destroyed and say 'tell me what you're going through,'" Bledsoe said.

Eddie Moore, News Photographer

Moore now lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico and is a staff photographer for the Albuquerque Journal.

Moore emailed the E-J what he remembered about Hurricane Hugo.

His job at the E-J was his first out of college.

Moore wrote that the day after Hugo was a "wild" one. The rain was not as bad as expected, but the wind was "crazy."

"Signs, billboards, awnings, all kinds of things came flying by us that morning," he wrote. He went with Ian Hoffman, a young and new reporter at the E-J.

"But after running around shooting photos all over town, we discovered that there was no power at the Enquirer-Journal or anywhere, so [Stephen] and a few reporters took my undeveloped film and went to another paper to put the paper together. I stayed in Union County and kept shooting. At the end of the day I returned to the insurance building to find my absolutely destroyed apartment," Moore wrote.

"On the night before Hugo hit, Ian Hoffman, an equally inexperienced reporter with whom I had become friends, and I were anxiously awaiting covering our first hurricane. I was living in an apartment above a Nationwide Insurance Agent and Monroe Florist on Hayne Street," Moore wrote.

The night Hugo hit, he hardly slept. Hour by hour the wind became stronger, shaking the two-story brick building where he lived. Still too dark to go out, Moore stayed in his apartment "listening and seeing the occasional flash of a transformer blowing."

"Then at some point there was a massive gust of wind, the building shook hard and there was a very loud crashing sound above me. The old building had a suspended drop ceiling with square tiles. A few minutes later as I lay in bed looking up through a crack between the tiles, I realized I was looking at the sky," Moore wrote.

Hugo ripped the entire stretch of roof off the building and rain doused everything inside. At first, insulation above the ceiling sopped up the water, but then in large streams, water descended throughout the building.

"I started moving the more valuable stuff to drier spots that were disappearing rapidly. Then that insulation that had been absorbing all that rain got heavy enough to collapse the tiles one by one. It was like little mortar shell landing all over my apartment. And above them was what looked like the ruins of something from a war," Moore wrote.

He wrote that years before he moved into the apartment, the building had burned and a man died in the fire. When rain poured into the apartment that September, soot also fell from the ceiling that was caving in. "So, with rain, insulation, ceiling tiles ... streaming down my walls, I had to go," Moore wrote.

He moved valuable belongings downstairs to a hallway of an insurance business and stayed there for a short period of time before Ian Hoffman pulled up to the building. Moore showed Hoffman the ruined apartment. Hoffman could feel the wind shake the building and was ready to leave.

Moore, deciding there was nothing he could do, went out to take pictures in the early morning hours.

Photos by Eddie Moore. (Taken on Sept. 23, 1989)

Above left: James Allen Lee helped his grandparents, Pete and Maude Lee, clear their yard and driveway at their home on Houston Street. Above right: Louise Law looks through what was a bedroom on Leewood Street the day after Hugo plowed through. Law said she had just left the room and had taken her son into the hallway in time to see a trail fall and cave in the roof.

Photo by Eddie Moore (taken on Sept. 23, 1989)

Louise Law looks through what was a bedroom on Leewood Street the day after Hugo plowed through. Law said she had just left the room and had taken her son into the hallway in time to see a trail fall and cave in the roof.

- *Record: a9841622*
- *Copyright: Copyright 2019 The Enquirer-Journal, All Rights Reserved.*