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## In Gerritsen Beach, Fighting the Flood and Finding Shelter

by Matthew Vann | on October 30, 2012 | in [Brooklyn Life](#) | [7 Comments](#)



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Gerritsen Beach in southern Brooklyn was abuzz with the sound of electric generators as residents began pumping their homes of several feet of water the morning after Hurricane Sandy pelted streets with rain and wind.

Chris Gambale, 44, who has lived in Gerritsen Beach for 15 years could only describe the night the storm struck as "sheer panic" when flood waters quickly filled his basement and began seeping onto the first floor of his home. "What do you do? Where do you go?" he said. "It's too late."

He and his wife grabbed their dog and cat and went upstairs to the second floor as three inches of water began to fill their kitchen and bathroom.

Unlike zone A areas like Coney Island where mandatory evacuations began on Sunday afternoon, Gerritsen Beach was listed as a zone B area with only a potential for flooding, leaving most residents like Gambale to stay in their homes and wait out the storm.

"We feel like we lost everything," said Gambale, pointing out that his heating system is fried along with two motorcycles he had in the yard and a convertible parked along the sidewalk. His elderly father who lives near the Gowanus Canal, another zone B area, experienced similar flooding while a friend who lives in Coney Island "was fine."

Water started surging through Gambale's basement around 7 p.m. Monday, inundating a large collection of power tools and other expensive electric equipment. Gambale said he felt shortchanged by the decision to not designate the area as an evacuation zone, likening it to the City's slow response to a record snowfall two years ago where areas of Brooklyn sat in feet of snow for days.



Gerritsen Beach residents sweep water away after Hurricane Sandy hit. (Photo Credit: Matthew Vann)

A block away, Nick Panebianco, 23, and his brother and father swept leaves outside on the sidewalk as they continued to pump floodwater from the house to a nearby sewer grate. After almost two hours of pumping, a quick look at the basement showed a completely flooded room with several more feet of water left to go.

Panebianco was briefly underwater when his basement suddenly began flooding, uplifting his refrigerator and submerging him up to his chin. "I almost drowned down there," he said with a laugh. The pressure of the surging water was enough to break part of the basement door down, leaving behind some broken wooden pieces.

"I think they should have gave us better warning," he said of the government response. Panebianco had just moved into the basement a month ago with new furniture including a flat screen television and appliances—now all destroyed. "Lucky me, right?"

Jean Dixon, 70, and her husband, Donald, 74, were more struck by what they could not replace. "All the things that can't be replaced are in the basement," said Donald. Family photos, Christmas items—all floating in over five feet of water.

The retired couple has lived in Gerritsen Beach for 53 years and has never recalled flooding on this scale. Donald was wringing out a towel onto the sidewalk as he tried to dry out his new Honda sedan, which filled up with water when the trunk popped open and the windows automatically rolled down in response to the rushing water.

In the long-term, Jean said she is worried about whether she and her husband can afford to fix the basement because they live on fixed income. In the short term, she's worried about how she will keep her insulin refrigerated; she is a diabetic and power was shut down in the area last night.

The flash flooding caught several residents by surprise including Noreen Cunningham, 44, who decided to get into her Honda Pilot with her husband and kids when they realized the water levels were beginning to breach the basement. "This was the scariest thing," said Cunningham. They decided to stop driving and head back to the house when the water level went past the hood of their car on the street. Many of the houses in the flat area are low and do not exceed past two or three floors.

Even those who thought they were well-prepared for Sandy's arrival like Fred Swensen, who lives along the waterside in Landis Court, found himself at the mercy of an unrelenting flow of water. Swensen, who works in the Department of Sanitation doing building maintenance, was wheeling gas for a generator to run three electric pumps he has in his flooded basement.

Aside from firefighters in the area who were responding to a call about odors of gas in the area and a suspected gas line break, many of the residents were carrying out pumping and debris-clearing efforts on their own—borrowing and lending electric generators and pumps from one another.

Swensen had prepared sandbags and other blockades to stem the flow of water but was surprised at the severity of the flooding which almost began to pour into his first floor.

For now, Swensen is skeptical of the repair effort and doesn't expect to see power back in the neighborhood for a few days, citing estimates by Con Edison.

Felled trees scatter the streets of this quiet Brooklyn neighborhood the day after Hurricane Sandy hit. Streets here are so narrow that cars can only park on one side of the block. The homes range in size from small apartments to two family houses.

Gerritsen residents are angry that their low-lying neighborhood next to the Plumb Beach channel wasn't evacuated. Those who haven't left are either pumping water out of their homes or seeking shelter at the local church.

"This is terrible. I've been down here 47 years and this has never happened," said Ann Smith, 76, who was with her husband at the shelter and whose entire home has been submerged by water. "I don't know where I'm going to go now."

The gymnasium of the Resurrection School on Gerittsen Avenue was converted into a makeshift shelter late last night as evacuees began to pour in. The shelter at the church, however, is temporary.

The Red Cross is recommending that residents in the neighborhood be evacuated to Franklin D. Roosevelt High School, which is a little more than a mile away from Gerritsen Beach.

People in Gerritsen Beach, a neighborhood of retired firefighters, police officers and former city workers, say that water began to enter their homes early Monday evening, forcing them to leave their home and seek shelter at Resurrection Church, which also sustained flood damage to the basement.

Vincent Rongo, 50, left his home after water burst through the first floor of his house described a scene of terror as he had to be lifted out of his home because of recent knee surgery.

"I can't walk and I had to be pulled out of a window, said Rongo. "Our whole first floor was totaled and now they're about to throw us out of here."



Gerritsen beach residents seek shelter at a school gym at the Resurrection Church after Hurricane Sandy made landfall. (Photo Credit: Matthew Vann)

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**Debbie**

October 31, 2012 at 12:01 PM #

Do you have any pictures from the area. Thank you for the info you have given its been super helpful.



**Big Joe**

November 1, 2012 at 4:33 PM #

Good work. More photos please



**Mike Trotta**

November 2, 2012 at 12:03 AM #

Hello, I live in Delaware. We were not hit nearly as hard as New York. I am heartbroken at the devastation you have endured. I have been trying with no success to contact my good friends Doug and Janet Frerichs who live on Beacon Court in Gerritsen beach. Im learning that you are still without power, water or phones. I want to help in any way that I can. I hear that there is no gasoline for generators. I imagine that all vehicles are now undrivable. If anyone knows the whereabouts of my friends please email [mikegffg@aol.com](mailto:mikegffg@aol.com) and if possible ask Doug Frerichs to contact me. I dont know if its even possible for me to drive to you to help. I am saying constant prayers for all the good people of Gerritsen. Thank you, God bless you. Mike Trotta



**Mike Trotta**

November 2, 2012 at 12:09 AM #

May all the scumbags disguised as Con Ed workers but who in fact were thieves and robbers taking advantage of this horrible catastrophe burn eternally in hell with all others of their ilk. God please bless and help the good people of Gerritsen Beach and New York.. Sincerely, Mike Trotta



**Alice**

 November 2, 2012 at 12:42 AM #

How can we help?

 **Alice**  
November 2, 2012 at 12:43 AM #

Will you be in Gherittsen Beach or fdr hs?

 **DeAnna**  
November 3, 2012 at 9:54 PM #

My 70 year old Aunt and my cousin live on Celeste Court, and another cousin lives in Gerritsen Beach with his wife and small baby. I live on Long Island, just got my power restored, and have desperately been trying to contact them. Does anyone know what happened on Celeste Court and where I might find my family?

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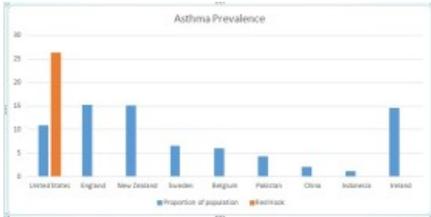
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