

## An Interview with Homeowner Diana McHugh

55-year-old homeowner, Diana McHugh, resided in her Seaford neighborhood for over four decades before being severely-impacted by Superstorm Sandy in October 2012. With her home also weathering damages from Hurricane Irene one year prior, Ms. McHugh had successfully completed a full range of repairs just three weeks before Sandy struck. Still, she said that leaving was simply not an option. “This is my home,” she said matter-of-factly. “After hearing about NY Rising from a friend, Ms. McHugh applied to receive assistance through the program. As a result, she is now in the process of rebuilding her house, elevating its structure and making improvements that will act as safeguards from future storms. The following questions and answers are excerpts from an interview with Ms. McHugh, as transcribed and edited by the Governor’s Office of Storm Recovery.

**GOSR: What was your neighborhood like before Sandy?**

**DM:** My neighborhood was peaceful and quiet; you had the sound of the birds. Very serene. It was like being away on a vacation. When you went to work and came home, it was like— ahhh. It was very nice and comfortable.

After the storm, it was a lot different because a lot of people vacated their homes. There are still a lot of houses empty here. Even the wildlife was all screwed up. We had geese and ducks laying eggs all over. They didn’t know where to go.

**GOSR: Were you worried at all when you heard the storm was going to hit?**

**DM:** Yes. My neighbor kept saying, “Are you ready for this superstorm?” And I’m like, “Ehhh it’s going to be nothing!” Because you know, we get coastal flooding anyway from time to time, and I always say, “Alright, it is what it is.” What am I going to do?

But when he kept saying, “It’s going to be a big one, it’s going to be a big one,” I said, “How bad could it be?” And Irene was bad enough. I had just finished a lot of work, April 14, the year before, because I had water everywhere. I just finished my floors three weeks before Sandy. So I said, “OK, I’ll do it again.”

We put everything up like we did the last time, but it turned out to be a whole different ballgame. Because when I came home from work around 6 p.m., I had to park five blocks up. The water was already knee-deep and it was really cold. It sounds stupid to you, but we all have life rafts, canoes and boats that we put out. So I had my raft ready. I always do, in case I have to throw the dogs in, throw myself in and get out of here. So I tied it up, and it had a hole in it. And I said right there, I said, “Uh-uh, I’m not staying.” That was my clue that this was not going to be so good.

Within a half hour, I went out, and it water was already up again six inches; it went that fast. I got the hell out of here and then I stayed up all night. And when I came back in the morning, on the outside it was OK. It was what I expected. Boats everywhere, you know, mud. But then when I came in... I was with my boyfriend and he walked in first. And he just looked at me and said, “Take a breath.” I said, “You better let me go first,” because I had, you know, seen this. I just went, “OK, let’s go to work.” We took everything out, the hose came in and we started cleaning. It takes days and days and days and the bad part was that it was so cold already. I was frantic to get heat. We didn’t get turned on, I think, until about six-to-eight weeks later. We were the last ones to get electric.

**GOSR: When you first heard about NY Rising, what did you think?**

**DM:** I loved the name because I felt that it was positive and that we were coming back. So for me, it was terrific. And I was willing to give anybody a call. My girlfriend called me and said that her friend (who had damages) had gotten in contact with a company called NY Rising. She said, “Call up and see what they are.” And I did. I made an appointment right away. Great kid I got...this caseworker Mary. I love her. Helpful, supportive, knowledgeable, and open. I can reach her any time. She always e-mails me back. For me, this has been the fabulous rebuilding of my life. It really has. I went from nothing back to normal.

**GOSR: Are you going to elevate?**

**DM:** Yes. There’s not even a question that I’m going to pursue it no matter how I have to do it. And I’m looking forward to that. I don’t care about the inconvenience. I really don’t. It’s the aftermath that serves as the light at the end of the tunnel, for me. I’m going to have a bird house!

**GOSR: What would this process be like if NY Rising wasn’t around?**

**DM:** This would be a nightmare. I wouldn’t be this far. I exceeded what I thought I could do. I had exhausted every penny I had the year before, so I was starting from the bottom up.

**GOSR: What have you taken away from this experience?**

**DM:** New York people are fantastic. The camaraderie and just the support was just unbelievable. I had a friend who grew up around the block from here. Her brother lives here. She’s been in Pennsylvania now for years. She heard about the storm and she came right up. She brought all of her friends, her church people, dropped them off at different houses. I had a family with me— a couple and their two adopted children— and they worked here with me and my kids all day long, helping me remove and gut and take everything out. Not once did the kids say, “I’m really tired.” They were like, “What can we do next?” It was fantastic. The love and support was unbelievable and I’m very grateful to every one of them.

My kids, my ex-husband would come on the weekends with garbage cans, garbage bags, tools. They’d say, “Where can we work today?” That’s how it was. My friends would show up and say, “What can we do?” It’s been unbelievable. It takes your breath away.

**GOSR: Is there anything you’d like people to know about the program or your experience?**

**DM:** I have a co-worker. She has a house down in Freeport. Devastated. She kept saying, “I can’t get anybody, I can’t do this.” So I went and said, “You have to call this number. People will help you.”

People have to do it from within here. She kept saying, “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.” I said, “Of course you can. I’ll drive you!” People are scared still. They don’t know what to do. They’re out of sorts because they’re displaced, a lot of them. But go in...they have to go. What do you have to lose? Absolutely nothing. I don’t know what I did right in my life, but this has been a miracle for me. They helped me get my life back.

