

Storm Stories Transcript

Jill Bogaerts

JULIE: This is Julie Christie interviewing Jill Bogaerts of Lake Macquarie City Council about the storms of June 8-11, 2007.

JILL: On June the 8th I was at work and got a phone call about half past 5 to say that the roundabout at the end of Hillsborough rd, um, was underwater and not to go that way home. So when I left at about quarter to six to go home I went home via the crossroads and there was a bit of water on the road there and um, I continued on up the hill and down into Jesmond, the traffic was very heavy all the way through and, much heavier than what it usually is and um, I, I knew that it had been raining all day but at work my desk faces a wall so I don't get to see what the weather's really like and I had no idea of the amount of rain that had fallen um in the area. Once I started going down the hill at Jesmond, I could see water across the roundabout at Jesmond, and I thought oh, that can't be too bad because there's still cars there so I followed another car through the roundabout and as I went through the roundabout the water was about, oh probably about 6 inches below the window of the car and I looked into the roundabout, into the centre of the roundabout and there were cars floating there and I thought Ooooo that's strange but what I discovered later on was that the roundabouts actually a dish shape and the, the centre of the roundabout is quite lower than um the actual lanes for the traffic. So I continued on into New Lambton and got stopped a couple of times redirected by police who were, some of them standing in water up to their waists and I went one way into New Lambton got turned back, had to go another way. Um by this time it was about quarter past 7, I was still trying to find my way through New Lambton, my husband was ringing me every 10/15 minutes and kept on saying why aren't you home? And I kept saying well I've only moved 100 metres since I spoke to you last and um then I just realised that I wasn't going to get out of New Lambton and my car started making strange noises so I um, rang my husband and said I need to find someone in New Lambton that I can actually go and stay with because um the I, I just can't get through, can't get through at all, I've tried all ways and I can't get through. I realised that my former sister in law lived in that area so I went to her place and I was not there very long when red cross rang, part of my job is, is just um the personal services team leader, which um I carry out for Red Cross, and um what we do is we, we set up with the Department of Community Services, evacuation centres and recovery centres in the event of a disaster. So Red Cross rang and asked whether um, come back to Lake Macquarie and set up an evacuation centre at um Club Macquarie and I said unfortunately I'm stuck, I've probably got now a 2 block radius in which to move. They said well where are you? And I said well im in New Lambton, they said oh can you get to Wests? So um I went to Wests and um when I arrived there was already 50/60 people already there for the evacuation centre and um there were no other agencies there so ah, by the time that um, some help arrived at about 11.30pm had about 150 people in the evacuation centre. Some of them had come there from the hospital some of them

had been, cause the, the hospital could still get um vehicles down to ah Wests, the, the, the club where the evacuation centre was. So some of those people, very elderly people late 80s, early 90s who'd been carried out of houses, taken by boat, to ambulances and then to the hospital and then the hospital brought them to the evacuation centre.

Other people we had in the evacuation centre were people who were stranded and just couldn't get home, people who knew that there was definitely quite a lot of water in their houses, people who didn't know what had happened to their houses or couldn't get in touch with their families cause some of the phones were down and we also had people who had been pulled out of vehicles by um SES and by volunteers um with water over the top of them, windscreens pulled off the front of the car and people actually pulled out and the water right over the top of the cars and a couple of people who were really quite distressed. So they, the distressed people actually created a bit of an issue at different times through the night because their behaviour was a bit difficult to manage given the, the level of assistance we had in the, the club at the time. Also during the evening um, I had one gentleman who'd fallen over earlier in the evening, while he was trying to leave his house, and he'd bumped up against something, and um he was complaining of chest pain so got an ambulance to take him to the hospital and he came back probably about hmmm 3 hours later and they just said look he's broken some ribs and gave him some panadeine forte and that was his treatment so um there was a man who had a head injury who had only spent 3 hours in hospital and it was a good job that, on that particular case I think, that I had been a nurse in previous life, and that um I was able to call on some of my experiences from there to actually deal with the people in the, the evacuation centre. The evacuation centre we were spread over 2 floors partly in the lounge area on the um first floor and then on the second floor in the auditorium. The club had actually provided gym mats for people to sleep on but we had a number of people, the elderly people, who couldn't get down to sleep on the um the gym mats so we tried to organise a room within the motel section of the club for some of those people and um we were able to get a room for two people but the, unfortunately the rest of the rooms were booked and so that was a bit, a bit difficult. So we had a few situations where we had to um, move cushions onto floors and, and build them up and try and create you know suitable beds and places for some people to sleep. I also had a very incontinent man at this stage and um I had no equipment to deal with the, trying to clean him up, um the club has blow dryers and there's no paper towel in the club's toilets so really I just went with toilet paper and tissues and that was, that was all I had to clean him up so that was a bit drastic, he was pretty upset by it, but you know there was nothing we could do, it was um, it really made me aware, my, my experience there, that you know we've got an aging population and the number of elderly people who turn up at evacuation centres is going to increase as, as time goes on.

Um some of the people I worked with in the evacuation centre um Andrew Bryant was there for a few hours, Andrew and I work together at council, Andrews the deputy team leader for personal um services team and um he turned up about um, about 11 ish and um at half past one I said to him why don't you go home

because we can't, there's no, we can't get anyone else, you live not very far away from the club, um we can't get anyone else to come in. I'll need you to come in and um relieve me in the morning, I can't go home, I've spoken to my husband and we've got 2 foot of water in the laundry and the toilet and the water's lapping the floor at the main part of the house um so I'm stuck here. So Andrew went home, came back in the morning. I had some assistance from some people at Anglicare who also helped to um help people with their um beds and things like that and to, to comfort people. Upstairs where we had all the mattresses, oh sorry the gym mats because they were gym mats, they were very thin um laid out, the roof of the club, the wind was so strong outside, the roof of the club was extremely noisy and some people just wouldn't stay up there because they were worried the roof was gunna come off, and um they came back down and just slept in the lounge area on the floor down there. The club was really great, they did food, they did blankets, they did the gym mats for people to sleep on, they did towels, they dried peoples clothes. We even about 2 o'clock had um an SES crew and a police officer come in who were absolutely drenched to the skin and, and been in water for 4 or 5 hours so we just took their uniforms, gave them to the club, the club dried them, we got them meals and um they had a rest and then they went back out into it again. So at this stage we didn't know exactly what was happening outside because um there was a king tide expected, and it was expected that the water level throughout the suburbs would rise and um... we were asked not to tell the people in the club that the king tide was expected because they didn't want to distress the people any further then they'd been stressed so um it was a bit worrying because I already knew that my own home was probably under threat and um but there was nothing I could do about it.

In the morning some of the, most of the water had gone down, um some people were able to travel through to their homes so we, we had to contact, um the RTA to find out about the road closures. I had one phone, my mobile phone in the um, in the club which people used to ring families when they could get through and I think I made 150, there was 150 calls made I think on my phone that night. Um also we had people who knew they definitely couldn't go back to their houses and some very elderly people who eventually went from um the evacuation centre in to respite care because they, they couldn't go home. We had some people whose families turned up to collect them and took them home to their place but given the sorts of damage that had happened it was going to be some time before a lot people could actually go back into their houses. In some situations, we later discovered that um, the water had been up to the um the ceiling in some houses so it was quite traumatic for a lot of people and some people actually did lose their houses cause they were unable to be saved.

The storm took place on the Friday, on the Sunday we were called out for another evacuation centre um at Teralba because there was a dam up above um Teralba and the um quarry there that they thought was going to break and would flood Teralba. So we were called out ready to take the people from Teralba in. Luckily that didn't happen and the people from Teralba were able to remain in their, their homes. We continue to expect the recovery centres to open and whilst um there was a telephone number available to people um to ring for assistance the actual recovery centre didn't open until the following Thursday and for a lot of

people that was quite, quite difficult because they relied on family and friends and neighbours and people they didn't even know to actually assist them during that period because lots of areas had no electricity and no phones so they, they didn't know about the um, the phone number that they could ring to get assistance. When the evacuation centre opened it was what we call a one stop shop, sorry the recover centre opened it was what we call a one stop shop, it had all the agencies involved, there was Salvation Army responsible for food, there was Adracare responsible for temporary accommodation, there was St Vincent De Paul responsible for clothing, Red Cross assisted Personal Services team we looked after the reception and did the, the um initial assessment for people coming in seeking assistance, the Anglicare people helped with the um, the welcoming to people into the centre and um occupying people in the um reception area while they were waiting to be seen. There was the Department of Community Services who gave out emergency financial assistance and there was also Centrelink who also gave out emergency assistance to people who had been out of their homes for 48 hours or more. It was quite interesting to see the number of people that was really effected and um the numbers were, were excessive. We was, I think we saw a couple of hundred of people each day in the recovery centre for about a week and uh, there were actually stacks of phone calls going through on to the emergency line at this stage as well when people weren't coming into the centre they were just ringing. Also we'd organised teams to go out and door knock in certain areas to actually see whether people knew about the, the recovery centre and what assistance was available. You know there were areas which um were really badly effected, and people, as I said earlier didn't know about that assistance and were very grateful when the door knockers came out. Also the door knockers had um bags of you know urgent food and that which they took out to, to some areas as well.

After the first week in the recovery centre the numbers went down a little but was still constant flow of people through. We actually had um a lot of people come through who had um problems with English so we had Sudanese families who were new arrivals to the area, we had elderly Greek and Italian um people who had trouble with, with English and we also had um some, some other Russian families as well come in. We had no interpreters um constantly in the centre but we did have access to the interpreters by phone and where we knew that those people were coming we did arrange for interpreters to, to be there.

The process in the, the recovery centre, we varied it a bit as we went through. The process was adjusted um fairly frequently. Given that we had mostly volunteers working with the agencies apart from the State Government um Department of Community Services and um Centrelink, um Commonwealth Government's Centrelink department, um there were a lot of volunteers who had extremely limited skills which meant that they were called on to do things that they'd never been called on to do before and that was quite difficult for some of them.

I worked in the recovery centre for almost 3 weeks and the members of the personal services team worked for a total of four weeks and um I think most of the people listed on our personal services team list have now had experience with both flood and bushfire and at the moment we are gearing up towards the

um the bushfire season for 2007.

Other evacuation centres were set up at um, Club Macquarie and, where they had about 30 people and at Morisset where I think they also had 30 people from memory. The people from Morisset that were affected were along the, mostly along the Dora Creek area where the water rose there later in the evening and whilst I was working in the evacuation centre at New Lambton I was trying to organise staff to get to those um other evacuation centres. We've got about 40 people on our personal services um team list and about 35 of those people are volunteers and we rely on them very heavily to come and assist in times of disaster.