

a window propped open



ISSUE 1

TIMELINES

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*contributed to by everyone's words,
wisdom, and experience at west street
recovery*

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WITH AGENCY

IN CRISIS, A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY IS THROWN

OPEN. Despite everything else going wrong, despite grief and loss, despite the hands that are paid to enforce law and order being beyond reach, and despite lacking survival basics, we happen upon a chance to prove to ourselves and each other that we're human.

Human, as in what you think of when you conceptualize a human being. Each of us one of those; full of potential for something greater than what is defined for us by the racist, classist, sexist, capitalist, patriarchal redlining our society draws out for us every other day of the year.

We're caught off guard, looking through the window.

Behind us, the hands of the government and the corporate charities wave in a bureaucratic panic. But the window frames the space where we discover our autonomy. We realize the societal structure that anticipates disorder in its absence is more than wrong. The line between the volunteer and the victim is blurred. Borders between homes, between mine and yours, are lost under the water. All of us in the thick of it, some of us with nowhere to live next week, some of us squeezing every drop of energy into efforts to relieve suffering, are capable of caring for ourselves. In sadness, anger, love, pain, resilience, we breathe air that reeks of mold but stirs agency within us.

In disaster, there is a window of opportunity where we catch glimpses of new ways of relating to each other and ourselves. Harvey's water receded and we found it had washed the gloss of familiarity away; something new is waiting to be defined by those who respond, those who act.

How do we keep this window propped open? What good can we make of the stirring convection this opening welcomes?

ABOUT WEST STREET RECOVERY

West Street Recovery emerged when friends and strangers felt an impulse to act as Harvey drenched Southeast Houston. Our effort rose purely out of reaction.

Over the last month, it's been disorienting at times to find so many people excited about our raw, ad-hoc, radical response to this man-made disaster. Under the West Street house's roof, extraordinary people with special talents came together. But truly, we made up everything as we went along. At some points, we looked around the semi-organized mess constantly evolving around us and thought, "surely the professionals have their shit together better than this."

But after a month, we are collectively feeling profound disappointment with the bureaucratic structures whose job this type of work is supposed to be. It's not like we had high expectations; a lot of us jumped into this with a bitter taste in our mouth for capitalism and oligarchical governance. But even the anarchists among us have been caught off guard by how ineffectual and absurd the corporate effort to render aid has proven. And it is still shocking to see aid provided with so little dignity to the people who have suddenly been forced onto the receiving side of the table.

At the same time, and in part due to our newfound understanding of ineffective typical aid models, we feel empowered and capable. After plunging into this relief work, we've realized how much power there is purely in taking initiative. Oppression takes initiative away from people, but through this crisis' window, we are finding opportunity to grab it back and show off what we can build it with.

Anyone with access to the internet and social media/community networks can do the work we found ourselves doing. It is both obvious and necessary to remind ourselves that many before us have done this work, and many in Houston, most of whom we have never encountered, acted just as we did. We're eager to better prepare ourselves by learning from their stories. Similarly, we hope to offer

another story that stirs up some inspiration around the possibilities of disaster relief and preparedness.

West Street Recovery's work over the last month has most consistently been described as triaging. Now that we are catching our breath and trying to process all that happened this last month, we're discovering the hints of intentionality and synchronicity detailing the path that brought us to this point.

But the road ahead is long; a month after Harvey drowned Houston, people are perhaps at their most insecure since the floodwaters were last rising. The shelters are closing. The piles of debris are beginning to rot. The distribution hubs are anticipating less supplies and fewer volunteers. FEMA will stop paying for people's hotels. The churches don't have it in them for the long-haul. Not like this.

What do we have in us? How do we transition from pouring ourselves into emergency relief efforts to working sustainably?

This zine is an effort by a few of us to catalog our experience. We all have our own timeline of Harvey. Here are pieces of stories from ours.

DAYS 1 - 3

WHAT WE DID

Boat dispatch and rescues

INFORMATION WE SHARED

What roads were passable

What gear was needed

What areas rescues were still needed in

AUG. 27

Two housemates from a house on West Street offer rescue with their inflatable kayak over Facebook, receive an address and return from it with some new house guests.

AUG. 28 – 29

We make posts asking for more vessels, more hands. Crews of people with kayaks and canoes show up in the morning, drip rainwater into the kitchen, and are sent out with addresses received through social media. Dispatching from a smartphone is a learned skill.

Notes from Leah:

Vera coos from the couch in our living room where she's been sitting for two full days, "Well that's a blessing. That's a blessing." It sounds different when she says it.

77 years old, 5 children, two living, and a number of grandchildren I lose count of while she's telling tangential stories about one of them and always picking up at its end with a story about the next one. Vera has lived in her house in the north of 5th Ward since she was 9. It flooded in Allison but this is worse, she says before the news announces it.

Andrew and I paddled 2 miles to get to Vera and Chris, her adult grandson. Their house was on a street corner, and before we swung the kayak toward their driveway, we saw Chris standing watch under the overhang on their small porch, waving at us. The water rose as high as the top inch of the fence around their yard, up past the top of the lowest end of the wood railing that extended from their front door. We glided right up to Chris.

It took a little time to convince Vera the kayak was the best option at that point. While she was eyeing it, standing half inside her home still, a ceramic black caricature floated out of the front door. How many of your things can you fit on the highest cabinets, perches and shelves in your house? We left her wheelchair on the porch when we departed.

One of the few things Vera brought along with her was a blue umbrella that was a third broken. Once we had her in the vessel we handed it to her and paddled back out the driveway. The rain never came down faster than a sprinkle and Vera bubbled with compliments and exclamations the whole two miles back to the truck. She must have been uncomfortable and her legs were affected from being so long in the water, but she seemed like an honorary guest floating the streets of the 5th Ward, stretched out under an umbrella and talking like she was on an outing.

At our house on West St., she forgets the streets are flooded but remembers small details I've told her in passing about my life and mentions them in the next day's conversation.

DAYS 4 – 7

WHAT WE DID

Meal prep and distribution

Supply collection and distribution

Began scouting Northeastern Houston neighborhoods for needs

INFORMATION WE SHARED

Where to collect food for cooking

Where the folks without access to food or supplies were

Where to drop-off and pickup supplies for distribution

Where volunteers were needed

AUG. 30

Motorboats from Austin fill the street in front of the house. The house begins filling with supplies. Andrew and I run the computers and phones and people ask us questions.

AUG. 31

A sign is taped to the front door encouraging the 50+ people coming through our front door to empower themselves to make decisions. The kitchen runs from sun up to sundown. Our rooms fill and empty. The backyard becomes a dishwashing station. The hallways become sleeping quarters that are packed into corners by 7 every morning. A long folding table in the front room is stacked and cleared and stacked and cleared of hot food in aluminum pans. The middle room is an office.

SEPT. 1 – 3

The office is moved to the back room. Custom cut whiteboards are screwed into our walls. Word spreads. We work with other organizations and start becoming wary of duplicating efforts. We find ourselves becoming a connective tissue between pockets of information and resources and need. We are on the phone the entire day, connecting the dots between out-of-towners with U-Hauls stacked full of supplies and the communities that, to our knowledge, have

not yet to been seen the aid efforts of the Red Cross, Salvation Army or the City. More people at West Street start to make decisions.

After a week, it feels like a month has gone by.

We talk about how to organize horizontally, and why it matters. We start to talk about goals. We find ourselves in difficult meetings and then carry on in more fluid and fruitful discussions on the porch until midnight or later.

There are differences of opinion. Money is donated. Office space is offered. Cloudy visions float through our minds and leave us whittling at their shape through short nights of sleep. Folks from Austin to New Orleans visit and give us calm advice and wisdom is gathered on late phone calls from across the country. Something is materializing around us, and we keep looking to each other late at night, curious about what it is.

Notes from Victoria:

Four days in, the water in my neighborhood goes down enough for my car to get out. I've been watching my friends at their house on West Street via Facebook. They are posting about resources, and seem to be getting food out for distribution. I had intended to head to a local shelter but end up driving to West Street to see about lending a hand there instead.

I arrive to a driveway jammed full of cars. I park tentatively behind them and make eye contact with a tall stranger directing the people coming in and out of the house. He looks at me curiously, but doesn't question me as I walk past him into the house. The kitchen is bustling with coordinated movement, so I sit down quietly behind my friends who are glued to their laptops.

“Need something to do?” The confident stranger is back, I assume he’s the ringmaster of this circus.

“Ya, thanks...”

“I’m Ben. You can ask Philippa in the kitchen what she needs.” But without waiting for me he calls out, “Philippa, what do you need? Do you need this kale chopped?”

Loaded up with a couple boxes of kale and an overqualified knife, I set up my workstation in the back of the house on top of Andrew’s ferment coolers. After the days of inaction, watching helplessly as the water crept up and silently destroyed my neighbor’s homes and livelihood, it feels good to be using my hands for purposeful activity.

Wash, drain, chop, repeat. I fall into a simple rhythm and wonder what we could possibly do with all this kale.

“And this is Victoria!” Ben is back, leading a train of volunteers. He takes them past me into the backyard and sets them loose: “We need a way to wash dishes out here; the kitchen is too busy.”

Wash, drain, chop, repeat. I’ve prepped ten trays of kale.

One of the volunteers wanders back inside and introduces himself.

“I’m Tony. We’re with Americorp, we’re here to help however we can. I’m bad with names so I might ask you a few more times.”

Two trays later and my kale is traded for watermelon, and Tony joins me with a handful of skewers. “Philippa told me we’re making kabobs.”

I'm not sure this is a two person job, but I can't bring myself to say no to Tony.

Philippa pops by, a blur of flowered apron and auburn hair. I'm struck by her calm in the midst of the sweltering kitchen she's orchestrating. "Can I have a few? For the volunteers."

I barely manage a bite myself before Ben reassigns Tony and I.

"We need a team to serve food at the C&J supermarket. It's about seven minutes away. Just set up a table, and make sure people know it's free. If you can, ask them about their neighborhoods, and what they need. What services do they need, ya know, that kind of stuff. Bring us info back! Ok? It's okra and burritos and beans and kale salad. Here's my number - you can text me."

When we get to the C&J, there's already a young woman and a little girl buzzing around the back of an SUV.

"This is my neighborhood," the woman explains when we greet her. "See that street over there? That's where I grew up. We brought snacks for the kids, juice and stuff. I want to make sure the kids are taken care of."

The girl lends me some sharpies and I make my first FREE FOOD sign. Cars pull in and park haphazardly around the table.

"Y'all hungry?" Tony falls into a rhythm easily, and it gives me a chance to talk to people as they eat.

"We have water and electricity. You should go to the Lockwood apartments they don't have anything."

"Can you call my sister? She lives down the street and she needs help."

“We haven’t seen any FEMA. Do you know when they’re coming?”

Frequent sirens punctuate the conversations. Cops are rushing back and forth on the street in front of our parking lot picnic. They seem too preoccupied to stop and enforce the anti-food sharing law or question if the elderly man walking down the middle of the avenue needs assistance.

DAYS 8 – 13

WHAT WE DID

Dispatched our first mucking crews

Began more systematic canvassing

Networked between organizations and their resources and need

Meal distribution

INFORMATION WE SHARED

What tools were needed for mucking

What volunteers needed to ask occupants before mucking their house

What local organizations were offering their communities

What those organizations needed to be effective

SEPT. 4 – 6

We think of balancing each other instead of checking each other.

We watch the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the city flail like they've never been through this before.

We start having harder discussions around what we want to do moving forward; there is so much we could direct ourselves toward, there is so much that needs addressing. We talk about how to provide solidarity, economically and inspirationally, and we start learning how to imagine bridges between what appear to be different solutions.

SEPT. 7 – 9

We clean the house and the porch and end up with a stack of donations collected from the corners of the house – a whole mass of stuff 5' long and 4' high.

The last canoe in our yard is picked up and taken back to Austin. (Or was going to be until the Ranger it got strapped to forgot about it and it was run into an overhang.)

We talk about what an affinity group is and about how good it feels to be part of something which we want to trust to evolve organically.

We see piles and piles and piles of the insides of homes lining the curbs. We visit an entire front yard turned into a donation center to collect and distribute to the rest of the street. In other yards, we see tents where families are living and tables where people gather late in the evening, tired but laughing, ladling from big pots of hot Mexican soup. We walk into the skeletons of stripped mobile homes and look at pictures of what the living room looked like before the flood nearly licked the ceiling. We practice our Spanish.

We see people sitting in their front yards going through their belongings in the hot sun. We meet five different species of mold and small roaches who scurry away like we aim kill them and gecko egg shells in the walls of houses. We meet people still living in their homes all this time, too old and sick to do much about the walls that are speckling with fungus or the mud on the floors leftover from the flood, without respirators and whose stomachs hurt.

Notes from Ben:

Des from Dallas was the one who originally told us about how bad off a set of apartments on South Gessner were. "Y'all gotta get out there," he said. A day later, Jade from Unidad 11 stopped by the West Street house and confirmed that that area in the southwest was hit hard; she added a few red pins near 9707 South Gessner to our map, marking it as an underserved, affected area. Since I first got to Houston to help with relief efforts, I had spent most of my time behind a computer at West Street; I'd barely been out to see what everyone else was dealing with. Visiting the Woodscape apartments left me in a quiet shock.

Before reaching the complex, I stop at Casey's food Truck for the chicken, pinto beans, and tortillas I'm about to serve. There's another man there picking up food as well and, not knowing anything about each other apart from the fact we were both serving meals, we joke cautiously about the recovery effort. Before leaving I show him the flyers we've made on how to clean out a house safely, and he takes a hefty stack. "Why don't the shelters have these?" He asks, and I don't know.

I pull into the apartments and nervously park my janky minivan. The complex is enormous and the parking lot is full of people stacking rotten furniture, milling around, and looking despondently under the hoods of cars. Before I even get out of my car I realize that I've forgotten a table, and decide to just serve the food out of the back of the van. I arrange the aluminum trays in a row and go to the front to grab the flyers but before I walk the three steps a teenage boy arrives. "Free?" he asks.

"Yeah, it's free," I respond. Without thinking, I blurt out a quick series of questions: How high was the water? Is there mold? Are the complex owners out helping? What floor do you live on?

He smiles and responds, "No English." I begin to slog through the remnants of my Spanish to ask the questions one at a time but a little crowd starts forming. Everyone is talking at once and people are hungry. I have been there barely ten minutes and the food, enough for 70 people, is gone. It seems that everyone has taken more than one flyer, but most people aren't leaving. A few want me to take their phone numbers. They compare stories, "The water was at my knee." "Knee? Primo, in our apartment it was at the chest." From what I can make out there is still standing water in one older man's apartment. He thanks me too many times for his plate of food, and after the crowd thins, his son or maybe nephew asks if I want to see their apartment.

Our conversation is slow and it is unclear if Spanish or English is the better way to communicate. There is indeed water on the man's floor. The apartment has already been emptied, save some plates on the counter. The relative of the man reports that the complex owner knows about the water but hasn't come by yet. Nobody has come by yet. He says he believes the water is coming up through the floor, through the foundation. All I can offer here are some cleaning supplies and our meager flyer on how to contact legal aid.

The man and his relative walk me back across the complex to my car. We return to find a large box truck is in the lot now, and it's flanked by three police cars. The cop cars are parked and empty, but their lights are flashing. Their keepers are standing, hand on hip, gun on hip, guarding the box truck while men in church T-shirts uniforms hoist pallets of wonder bread and peanut butter. No one talks to the police.

I watch this spectacle a moment. The residents take what they are handed by the church group and edge back to the complex lawn. From my vantage point, the message of the police escort is clear: If we weren't here, you could expect a mob of hungry, desperate flood victims to ransack these supplies.

Do they really believe there are no social norms here? No mutual respect between residents? Are these residents really that scary?

They're not. What is scary is the idea that people in our cities are so disconnected that they think residents would steal flavorless bread from each other. The tenants at Woodscope are hungry and their homes have been flooded, but they are kind and cynical and have senses of humor still... I am tired and I'm frustrated with the situation, but I can't imagine what it feels like to be eyed by armed cops when everything you have is gone and you and your neighbors are just trying to get by.

DAYS 14 – 22

WHAT WE DID

Supported larger scale mucking efforts with food, tools, and volunteers

Planned for long-term recovery goals

Helped people navigate the FEMA grant process

Stabilized our commitments

INFORMATION WE SHARED

Information about applying for FEMA and other benefits

Information on tenant's rights

Locations still accepting and distributing supplies and locations that were closing

SEPT. 11 – 19

Here, some of us run into physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. The phones ring less. The emails begin to trickle in instead of flood. Some of us are finally able make it away from the computer and into the world for the first time in a week. Everyone is grateful for the time they get to spend actually doing the work they've been coordinating all this time.

We go grocery shopping for ourselves again and some of us go back to our jobs. Shelters and distribution hubs start closing for lack of volunteers who are returning to work schedules.

We hear some people talking like Harvey is over. We see how long and discouraging the road others have ahead of them is. We try to help people navigate FEMA and are disheartened. But not as disheartened as the flooded who are deferred to loan programs or flat out rejected.

We find out even the libraries aren't handing out information specific to Harvey and the city and federal resources people have limited time to access. That nobody whose taxpayer-paid job it is to

be a resource to the people is functioning as a resource.

That the Red Cross's websites are crashing.

That trucks of supplies arrive for distribution in parking lots with rented armed cops at guard and create anxiety.

That at GRB and NRG people are treated with such a lack of dignity, people prefer to sleep on the streets than be subjected to the shelter's processes for keeping order.

That the Salvation Army serves food we've heard multiple times compared in detail to dog food. That they're giving out regular dust masks instead of N95 (mold-grade) respirators. (Not one of the corporate disaster response charities we ran into were distributing N95 mold respirators in the first two weeks. N95 respirators: That's the kind of mask you need immediately following a flood to protect yourself from the onset of black mold, which starts spreading in walls a couple days after the water goes down. I'll remember 'N95' for the rest of my life. Why didn't they bring N95s when they trucked in from headquarters?)

That FEMA is telling people they are denied a grant by providing them a denial code, and that the only way to find out what it means is to call them and stay on hold for 45 minutes while you're also trying to figure out where you and your children are staying in two days and you don't know where you'll get your next meal and you can't find out what dates in Harris County you can go get disaster food stamps because locations are still TBD while other counties' dates have already passed.

WE TRY TO TAKE DEEP BREATHS. WE GIVE OURSELVES SPACE TO LEARN AND WE GIVE EACH OTHER TRUST TO ACT. WE HOPE WE ARE DOING BETTER THAN OTHERS, BUT WE QUESTION OURSELVES TOO.

Questions from all of us:

Time is gradually relaxing back into patterns again. Life gravitates toward something more routine, even if that means expecting to be hungry. The flood's fissures in the humdrum of daily society shiver and sand sifts in to fill the cracks of the city; it smooths the ride to work for the man with the automobile. And inside the home that's been cleaned of a person's things, (like the things of their wife who is being lost to Alzheimer's in a nursing home), a home that's been gutted of what makes it homey and fills its occupant's stomach, life smooths into a different reality.

Why don't the public libraries have flyers about how to apply for FEMA, how to rid your house of mold, or the schedule for when people can apply for disaster food stamps, which is based on the first letter of their last name? What does this city's disaster preparedness plan look like if it took Salvation Army nearly a week after the roads were cleared to get any food to the most low-income, devastated communities? Are the companies crippling the state? Or is the state failing because all it cares about are companies?

What message does the city send when it depends on people taking care of each other in a time of crisis while on any other day of the year it keeps a law permitting the police to slap you with a \$2,000 fine if you share food with more than five people without their permission? Why do they get to decide when we're allowed to autonomously organize and when it's against the law?

Will the city, in its own view, benefit from an exodus of the poor who have no choice after Harvey? How close does the city sleep with the real estate investors that have been waiting for such an opportunity? Didn't this city have an opportunity to learn from Allison? Why were they so unprepared for this disaster? Or do they prepare to be withholding in an effort

to preserve the resources they know won't be enough to cover future disasters?

What is grassroots organizing in a crisis? What happens when we do the job the government professes it is paid to do without its support?

*What forms of solidarity can span the time between crises?
What will we do differently next time?*

What are we learning from Hurricane Harvey?

TOWARD SOLUTIONS

Alycia and I have lunch and talk about our lives before Harvey for the first time. I try to pick her brain over our casual conversation by slipping in open-ended questions. She answers them like she was just thinking about that very topic.

“We’ve learned to expect the city will be unresponsive. Let’s enable ourselves to be responsive in *our* best form, not theirs,” she explains. “Let’s empower communities to build their own disaster response systems. Let’s go to the CERT trainings and find out what they’re missing and then go teach neighborhoods all that. Let’s get neighborhood-specific magnets printed with the phone numbers and information they’ll need in the next disaster. Each neighborhood can have rally points, hubs where they can expect supplies to be... In between disasters, this networking can be the foundation for other community projects: they can build gardens, share food...” She goes on like she’s been meditating on this for much more than a month.

I love Alycia’s ideas because they intertwine immediate action with long-term, power building solutions. Solutions which aren’t pre-built and prescribed. Instead they’re dependent on an organic development process, infused with a community’s needs and desires and molded to its unique expression of agency.

In the time that we’ve had for processing, a lot of West Street’s discussions have revolved around two main understandings of how to best be allies in a crisis situation. There’s first a strong desire to get as many resources to the people who need them as efficiently as possible. 90% of our immediate efforts have been focused on this tactic, and while we had some interesting conversations about the importance of efficiency versus cautious, conscious action, we engaged in this immediate form of relief full-heartedly.

But there’s also an awareness of the long-term issues that cannot be addressed by material or economic aid. These forms of immediate

relief only do so much before they begin to serve the restoration of the status quo that existed before the storm. But in a larger picture, this crisis and all other manmade disasters are proving themselves to be fuel for the very consumerism that created them. We have to take time to ask ourselves how are we are building power in marginalized, underserved communities if we're buying in bulk from Wal-Mart and Home Depot to replace what the flood washed away. And we should consider why it is that the government structures and charities look so comfortable sitting back and withholding their resources while we do the footwork that keeps the peace.

We have many questions that we are ready to ask. And we have even more that we cannot yet articulate. There is no limit to the number of solutions that can grow. But before we have the confidence to inquire, let alone act, we know we must restore our individual and collective agency by believing in our potential and each other's potential to act. To try. To fail better.

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*crisis and
opportunity
in hurricane
harvey*