

Bob Burlew Giving it All for Fellow Hurricane Sandy Victims



Union Beach, N.J., Nov. 4, 2012—The small town of Union Beach was hit hard by Hurricane Sandy, nearly every street was affected in some way.

PHOTO BY LIZ ROLL/FEMA

Bob Burlew was among the millions of Hurricane Sandy victims when the superstorm hit the Eastern seaboard in late October 2012.

Sandy didn't care Burlew is the construction official in Union Beach, N.J. The superstorm took his home, as it did about 1,000 others in the town of some 6,800 off Raritan Bay, just south of Staten Island, N.Y.

And as with all disasters, what the storm itself didn't take was eaten away by the tremendous task of salvaging and rebuilding—lives as well as homes and other structures swept away by Sandy's storm surge.

That's what Sandy brought to the Union Beach/Keyport area: not devastating winds, torrential rain or even flooding.

By Nick Reiher

Bob Burlew Giving it All for Fellow Hurricane Sandy Victims *continued*

It already was high tide when the storm hit, Burlew remembered. Sandy hit southern New York City, he said, and winds from the north pushed water from the bay into a 13-foot-high wave that smashed into businesses and homes with such force that they were torn from their foundations, colliding with and destroying homes several miles inland.

"Some we never found," Burlew said as he stood in a long line at Disney World with his grandkids. "It was like a violent washing machine." The vacation was one of the few times he has allowed himself to relax since the days before Sandy hit.

A year after the storm, Burlew hoped federal monies would help rebuild those 1,000 homes in two or three years. Most recently, he heard that it will be five to 10 years before the federal government has the funds to complete the work.

So, for now, he is thankful for what is: that Sandy



Union Beach, N.J., Nov. 4, 2012: A roof lies in the spot where this home once was located. The couple that lives here had to swim away during Hurricane Sandy as the tide came in.

PHOTO BY LIZ ROLL/FEMA

claimed no lives in his area, as most of the residents heeded the storm warnings and left their homes to venture farther inland. "If there was no early warning system," he said, "we wouldn't be here."

When the storm surge receded, Burlew said, many of those residents returned. And found nothing.

"They had nowhere to go," he said, inching closer to the Disney ride. "Everything up and down the coast was affected. People lost not only their homes, but possessions and credit cards. Power was out, so hotels and other businesses could take only cash. If you didn't have cash, you were out of luck."

Burlew said they also took a measure of pride that many of the newer homes and structures built to code were "high and dry."

Now, they just had to figure out how to get the rest of them rebuilt. "You want to rush in and make everything nice. FEMA doesn't have the money," he said. "It's all about money."

Years ago when he worked for a pharmaceutical company, Burlew was a builder at heart. He loved building homes, but he hated that proper codes and enforcement often were lacking and definitely inconsistent among towns in the same area.

So he began helping towns with their codes and enforcement, often for free. Eventually, he landed in Union Beach.

And he's helping to rebuild the area with empathy of a fellow victim. Initially, it nearly killed him: 12 hours a day, seven days a week for months, helping people who had nowhere else to go. He became irritable and depressed, and at one point, he wasn't able to see colors.

Then, a couple things happened: He took a much-needed vacation, and he got some major help from former Code Council Board President Stephen D. Jones, CBO, Construction Code Official at Millburn, N.J., and Robert LaCosta, head of the New Jersey Building Officials Association.

"They really got their butts handed to them," Jones said of Union Beach. "He worked tirelessly for the residents, trying to get them back to some type of normalcy, or maybe just providing a shoulder to cry on. They still have some work to do, but they have done much better

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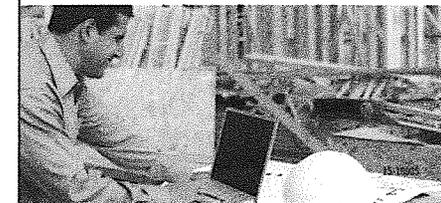


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Bob Burlew Giving it All for Fellow Hurricane Sandy Victims *continued*

than if Bob Burlew wasn't there."

Jones also gave major kudos to New Jersey's Madison Borough, which "adopted" Union Beach, providing thousands of hours of help from its inspectors, even though they were nearly an hour away.

Russ Brown, Construction Official in Madison, initially thought his superiors were addled when they ordered him and the entire building department some 40 miles south to help out Union Beach. Madison lost power for a week, and a bunch of trees, he said.

But that was nothing compared to what he saw when he turned onto Union Beach's main street for the first time.

"It was a war zone," Brown said. "People with vacant looks in their eyes, just lost. There were upwards of 50 people living in their cars. I was in Louisiana following Katrina. That is the only thing that compares."

With help from Madison, Union Beach residents were able to get their electricity up and running much faster, especially since Union Beach is small enough they were doing permits by hand instead of computer or fax.

Brown proudly says people in his town also donated semi-tractor loads of building materials. Madison government officials also donated old police cars, computers and anything else that would help get Union Beach back on its pins.

Brown also was amazed what Burlew was able to accomplish.

"Every day, there would be 50 people lined up at the municipal building for help," he said. "You knew where to find Bob. He was in the middle of all of them, helping and providing a shoulder to cry on. He gave all of himself. He is amazing."

The number of new homes is inching toward the magic 1,000 number like that ride line at Disney. Burlew said there are nearly 300 new homes going up this year, 78 funded by the feds.

"I hope this is a mild hurricane season," he said, "so we can get some more federal funds."

Burlew said it's been tougher to rebuild from the emotional devastation from Sandy. "Every time the sky gets dark, people get nervous, wondering if they should leave or go into their homes and get some possessions," he said.

"There is an entire generation who is never going to forget what happened with Sandy."

For the younger generations, Burlew said he's been busy talking to students—as he did during Building Safety Month—about the need for good construction and knowing how to be prepared for emergencies—before they happen.

The New Jersey Building Officials recently named him their Building Inspector of the Year, and more industry accolades could be on the way. Jones believes the kudos are well-deserved.

"Usually, you hear about a building official when something goes wrong," Jones said. "But Bob Burlew epitomizes the selflessness of code officials and their dedication to their communities."

Burlew said he's going to be back hard at work after his Disney time with the grand-kids, getting as many more homes built as possible with the federal monies available.

"I'll give it another year and a half," he said. "Then I'll pick my life back up." **BSJO**

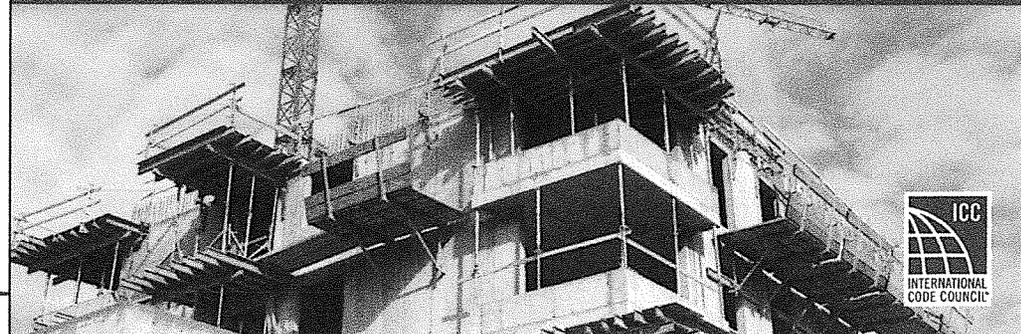


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