

**Reverend Stephen Shullanberger  
Narrator**

**Chelsea Shullanberger  
Interviewer**

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at the Stephen Shullanberger House  
Corpus Christi, Texas**

**CS:** The first question I have for you is, had you experienced a hurricane before Hurricane Harvey?

**SS:** No, this was the very first one.

**CS:** Have you experienced any other major weather disasters in your life?

**SS:** Yes, I have; numerous tropical storms, numerous earthquakes when my family and I lived in southern California, as well as close proximity of a number of tornadoes.

**CS:** How long have you lived in this area?

**SS:** I and my family have lived in Port Aransas a little over two and a half years.

**CS:** How did you first hear about Hurricane Harvey?

**SS:** I first heard about the impending storm via the media, largely television media and secondarily through radio programs, who were monitoring the storm as it approached the island [Mustang Island].

**CS:** Did you use any social media to find out what happened with the storm?

**SS:** Most of the media that I did utilize, other than just television broadcasts, were the local radio stations as well as my cell phone that I also picked up updates on the close proximity of the storm and what was happening.

**CS:** Did you evacuate or did you stay during Hurricane Harvey?

**SS:** My family and I evacuated to the community of Austin approximately twenty-four hours before the storm hit the island.

**CS:** Why did you choose to evacuate when you did?

**SS:** The media, which was monitoring the storm and its severity, noticed a very drastic increase in the winds, with approximately thirty-six hours before it hit Port Aransas. That caused great concern, not only to me and my family, but to most of the residents of Port Aransas who chose voluntarily to leave the island.

**CS:** Did you know of anybody that stayed in Port Aransas during the storm?

**SS:** No, not personally. I did hear secondarily about a number of people who chose to stay.

**CS:** Since you left, how did you prepare for the evacuation?

**SS:** I prepared pretty much the same way that my wife, Ginger, as well as my daughter, Chelsea, did. We all took a look at our various possessions, including—obviously—clothing and pictures and the like, but evaluated as quickly as we could, what had the greatest sentimental value to us and what things we decided we could leave behind, and just take the risk of wait and see whether those possessions would be usable again when we returned.

**CS:** You mentioned that you first went to Austin when you evacuated. Did you stay there throughout the storm?

**SS:** Yes, we did. We stayed there for approximately four days before we started journeying south.

**CS:** When you first came back, what were your initial impressions?

**SS:** I was struck by just the sheer devastation that was rendered by Hurricane Harvey on the island itself. It effected not only private dwellings, but all of the local businesses, as well as personal property that was outside the homes, such as boats, and other pieces such as lawn furniture. The amount of devastation caused by the storm was much more drastic than I had ever seen before.

**CS:** When you first came back into Port Aransas, was it difficult to maneuver through town?

**SS:** Yes, it was. We had to be escorted into Port Aransas by local law enforcement, and this was true not only of our family, but other families, due to the number of power lines that were down, and in many cases, blocking the roads' access.

**CS:** Do you have any regrets about evacuating when you did?

**SS:** No, I don't have any regrets about evacuating. I'm glad that we did. I just believe that physical possessions are not nearly as important as people are. Physical possessions can

be replaced—if that is something that we find is important to us—but the loss of a human life is something you can't replace.

**CS:** When you first returned to your home, what was the first thing that you remember seeing?

**SS:** I remember seeing the remnants of how high the water level got inside our home. My family and I lived in a condominium, where the garage, or the bottom level, included the garage. The living level was the second story of the home and the bedrooms, for the most part, were on the third level. There was severe water damage, not only in the garage that destroyed both of our automobiles, but much of our other personal possessions kept in the garage. There was also significant water damage that entered the home via the ceiling and caused great water damage in the walls as well as the ceiling and, secondarily, some of our personal property.

**CS:** Is there a particular memory of when you returned, about what you saw after the hurricane that strikes you the most?

**SS:** One of the things I think I will always remember is seeing boats in places you should never and would never expect to see a boat, such as in the middle of a street or in the middle of a parking lot. Or out in the middle of an area completely filled with sand but no water of any kind. I also remember seeing a boat up in a tree.

**CS:** After surveying the damage, what were some of the first steps you took to begin the recovery process?

**SS:** My family and I began to look throughout our home and our personal property that we had to leave behind, and ascertain what, if anything, we would be able to salvage. Unfortunately, most of our personal property on the bottom level of the home was irretrievable due to the amount of water damage it sustained. There were some items on the second and third levels of our home which were salvageable, but even then, there was so much water damage that we did lose a significant amount of our personal property.

**CS:** Were you able to stay safely in your home when you returned or did you have to seek other lodging?

**SS:** No, like most people, we were not able to stay in our home or our condominium. But, like most people who left the island, we had great difficulty finding a place to stay when we were allowed to return. In many cases, this was up to three or four weeks after the storm had hit the island, but due to the fact that so many people were returning and not having homes that they could live in, there were no, or very little, rooms available at local motels and many of us had to stay outside the area for an extended period of time.

**CS:** Do you remember how long you had to stay out of the area before you could return to the Port Aransas area?

**SS:** Well, my family and I were not able to continue to live in Port Aransas itself and that period lasted for a period of roughly five to six weeks. Our first and closest opportunity to live within twenty miles of where we previously lived was almost seven weeks after the storm, and that was a cottage that we lived in on the island of North Padre Island, where we stayed initially for several weeks until we found our present domicile, which is a home, where we live on North Padre Island.

**CS:** Throughout social media, we've seen many inspiring acts of human compassion and kindness, in helping not only people's loved ones but also strangers. Have you personally witnessed any acts of courage or anything that inspired you in the midst of the aftermath?

**SS:** I've seen many acts by many different people, many of them volunteers who came to the island from places far away. Many of these individuals came individually or with other family and friends or from other churches to try to render whatever assistance they could. I saw a number of instances where food and supplies were provided for local residents who were in the midst of trying to clean up their residences and ascertain whether they would be livable or not.

**CS:** What organizations have you contacted, or contacted you, or did you deal with during the recovery process that were helpful?

**SS:** Personally, my family and I, after contacting our insurance company and beginning that process of submitting insurance claims, we also had personal contact with the federal government agency FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. In addition to that, there was also the Red Cross, which was on the island, which I had some limited contact with. In a secondary role, the Salvation Army of Corpus Christi.

**CS:** As the pastor of the Community Presbyterian Church in Port Aransas, how did the hurricane impact your church members?

**SS:** Most of my church members were similarly affected, as I was, in addition to my family. While some of them have been able to continue to live in their private homes or condominiums, in most cases, their physical property sustained significant damage and they are waiting, as I and my family are, for our insurance companies to make their settlements so we can move ahead and either rebuild or make other arrangements for our long-term.

**CS:** Do you know any church members or people that regularly attend your church that lost most or everything from their homes?

**SS:** I do not know of anyone who lost everything, but I do know that the vast majority of all the people in my church sustained major damage to either their physical property—and I mean by that specifically their homes—or other personal property, such as automobiles, pickups, and the like. In some cases, boats, which also, in many cases, were blown out of their moorings and landed in places they should never have been.

**CS:** How did the hurricane impact your church structurally?

**SS:** The church of which I am pastor, Community Presbyterian Church, is comprised of four buildings, one of which is the church sanctuary. One houses our food pantry, one houses our office buildings as well as our Christian education rooms, and the fourth building is a larger area that we normally use just for special occasions. All of those buildings sustained major damage. Three of the four sustained damages of eighty percent or more. Only one of the buildings sustained damages of, what the insurance company called or referred to as, fifty-five percent.

**CS:** Is the church currently unable to be used in any manner?

**SS:** Yes, the church sanctuary, as well as the three additional buildings, are completely unusable in their present state. It is physically dangerous to enter these pieces of property at the present time, until such time that they either are torn down and new structures are built or, in the case perhaps where one building may be able to be rebuilt. This whole process will take us at least a year if not more.

**CS:** Since you aren't able to use your office from the church, where have you been working?

**SS:** Approximately two months after Hurricane Harvey hit the island, the Board of Elders of the church where I am pastor were able to obtain a mobile home that we put on the parking lot on our church property. That trailer allows me to have an office, my secretary, and our church treasurer to have a third office.

**CS:** After seeing the damage to all of the different church buildings, how did you and the other leading members of the church, such as the Session and the Elders, begin the recovery process for the church itself?

**SS:** Well, like most private families and individuals, we made contact with our church insurance, as well as hiring a public adjustor, to assist us in this process. That has been helpful and is still ongoing at the present time.

**CS:** How did the hurricane impact your ability to hold church services?

**SS:** Initially, we, in addition to the other three churches in Port Aransas, were unable to have any worship services for a period of at least the first four weeks after the storm hit.

Since that time, three of the four major churches have been able to have some limited worship activities in their church facilities. I, as pastor of Community Presbyterian Church, we have been fortunate enough to hold our worship service in the First Baptist Church of Port Aransas shortly after they finish their worship service.

**CS:** Have there been any entities that have reached out to the church to be helpful?

**SS:** There are a number of both federal and individual people who have reached out. Many of those are individuals, families, as well as churches scattered throughout the remainder of the United States, many of which have actually sent teams to Port Aransas to help us in our initial cleanup. That process continues right up to the present day.

**CS:** Have there been other churches in the surrounding areas, such as Corpus Christi, that have been helpful to your church and others in Port Aransas?

**SS:** Yes. The one church that is called Parkway Presbyterian Church, which is in Corpus Christi, Texas, is at present housing some of our church property in one of their buildings, until such time that this property can be brought back at some point in the distant future. Additionally, we lost, due to the water damage, our church hand bells. Those hand bells were literally shipped out of our area to another community in central Texas, who is repairing them. At some point in the future they will be returned to us.

**CS:** How would you gage the level of success in the recovery process for the town of Port Aransas, in general?

**SS:** I would surmise that the success is significant, but not as good as it could be or should be. Most of the things that I have observed personally, that I am grateful for, is the cleanup of all the debris left from homes that have been dismantled, as well as personal property that has been set out on the curbs on the streets. A good deal of this has now been removed, but there is a lot more that I think can be, should be, and I hope will be done in the future.

**CS:** Is there anything else that you remember about your experience or anything that you think that we should know about that we haven't touched on?

**SS:** Well, I hope that I will always remember the goodness of the people that came to the island after it was over, simply because they care and they wanted to render assistance in whatever way they could to help provide hope to residents, many of whom lost so much of their livelihood and now wait, trying to obtain a new normal in their life, which is not anything resembling what they used to have prior to Hurricane Harvey.

**CS:** Thank you for allowing me to interview you today and I appreciate your willingness to participate in the Hurricane Harvey Oral History Project.