

Severa Soto and Ariana Mohsenzadeh

Interviewed by Jessica Thompson
October 8, 2016
Corpus Christi, Texas

Jessica Thompson: Okay, today I am at the residence of Severa. It is a Sunday afternoon, at 2 o'clock, and I am here to interview Severa and her daughter, Ariana, about Hurricane Harvey. The interviewer is Jessica Thompson. Do I have y'all's permission to record?

Severa Soto: Yes you do.

Ariana Mohsenzadeh: Yes.

JT: Can you both state your names, please?

SS: Severa Soto.

AM: Ariana Mohsenzadeh.

JT: Great. Thank you ladies. Um, so Severa can you let us know where you are from originally?

SS: I was originally from, uh, Edroy, Texas, a very small town thirty miles north of Corpus Christi, and I moved here when I was twelve years old, and so I've been in Corpus Christi for most of my life, and I just recently moved out to the island.

JT: And so I'm guessing, Ari, that you've been in Corpus all your life as well?

AM: Um, I was born in Houston, but I was mostly raised here. I've been here since I was like nine years old.

JT: Okay. So from my understanding, y'all chose to stay and ride out the storm, is that correct?

SS: That is correct.

JT: What factors influenced you guys to stay?

AM: I think the fact that our family, as a whole, decided stay except for like my mom's sister who decided to leave last minute, but other than that we all stayed.

SS: Uh, my major deciding factor was that my mother had decided to stay. My mother's house was built in 2010, so it was the newest, it was, my father was there watching the whole build out of the house, and made sure they put extra nails, and not skimp on the nails so we knew the house was solid. We knew that they were not in a flood zone, and they had a generator ready in case the electricity went out, and my factor to stay, my main reason to stay was for my mother. I just could not leave her behind, and my husband and I decided that we would both go over there

and spend the night. We boarded up our house, and then went over to my mom's house, and um, my brother, Mario, and his wife were there, and my sister, Grace, and her husband live next door, so we just decided to ride out the storm, and it was very windy at first, but I fell asleep, because it seems like what they were expecting at least where I was in this part of town, uh, we didn't get the winds that we were expecting.

JT: Did y'all have any prior experiences with hurricanes before?

SS: I actually have PTSD, and if it wasn't for my mother staying behind, I'm the first one that is usually gone when there's a hurricane in the gulf that is even projected to, to come to Corpus Christi. When I was, uh, seven years old, uh Hurricane Celia, 1970, came and hit Corpus Christi. It was a direct hit, and we were thirty miles out, and there was no weather channel. It was basically the radio saying there's a hurricane coming. What does that mean? For me, I'm a child. I'm playing, all I know is that we're all getting in, in dad's truck, and we're all heading into Odem, because we're going to stay at one of the elementary school, that's a shelter that they've opened up, and little did we know that the storm as it came, as the hurricane hit Corpus Christi, it came right to where we were in Odem, and the winds that first came where it blew out windows; it shut down the electricity. By then it was five thirty in the evening, and everything calmed down. The sun was shining. Little did we know that we were in the eye of the storm. So some people left because we didn't know any better. We stayed, but some people left, and then here comes the back end of the storm, which is supposedly, in my experience, that's when it really got scary. The rain, it sounded like a – you know how they say, uh – it sounds like, uh, it sounds like a train? It sounded like a train times ten, and then the rain, the wind. It was flooding inside the elementary school. Mind you, everybody's crying, some people are screaming. This one lady had a picture of a Virgin Mary, and she was praying her rosary, and it was – by then it was dark already. No light, we're standing in water, we're in a – in the elementary school restroom, because there was tile, and they felt like that was the most secure area to be in the center of the, of the school, and, uh, it was very traumatic, because I felt like we were gonna die, and I was seven years old, and I didn't even know what death was, but it was very, very scary, and uh when it was all over we went back to our home, and uh, all I could see, is my, my toy that I loved was across thirty seven highway, and I couldn't get to it, I could see it, but that's what I lost. Not knowing that we didn't have electricity for four to six weeks. We were eating out of can – you know all the potted meat, the Spam. We were drinking powdered milk, and it was just – and there was five kids, and my parents, and our house was intact but our washroom blew away, and um, it was, it was hard times for a lot of people because there was no FEMA, there was no nobody bringing us trucks of water, and ice, and food, and there wasn't that awareness. So we had to fend for ourselves, and we got through it, but I do believe that I have PTSD because when the storm was coming, I could feel myself getting very anxious, and my husband convinced me, you know, it's gonna be okay, nothing's going to happen, and I didn't want to leave my mom behind.

JT: Okay, um, so how many days did the storm last? Do you remember?

SS: Hurricane Harvey?

JT: Hurricane Harvey. Yes ma'am.

SS: Hurricane Harvey, uh, well we knew about it when it was coming, way out in the Bahamas, you now in that area, where, "Okay there's a hurricane coming." We all just, we knew the drill, but we also knew that we had not been hit in a very long time, and it was just a matter of time. So, when, you know, you're my age, I'm fifty-four, you're just thinking, okay, this could be the one. We thought Katrina was gonna be the one, but that was the one for Louisiana. So Harvey became more serious when all the projected paths were heading straight to Corpus Christi where we were making national news, and the Weather Channel was camped out here, five days out from when it landed, uh, made landfall on Friday, so they were here Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. By Thursday we were shutting offices down. I work in a medical facility and "heads up, it's coming straight to Corpus." So, we had to, uh, board up our windows. We had to load up on water, and the people that wait for the last minute, a lot of these things were gone. You would go to the store, and there was no water. You would, there was no ice, uh, not everybody had a luxury of owning a generator. My father had invested in a generator, just, because that's just the way he was. He passed away two years ago, and, and, and you know, he was just a well prepared man, but for the most part we had plenty of warning, so for us to choose to stay, it was really us gambling with our lives because people died with this storm, and you know the ones that survived it, that stayed in Rockport will never stay for another hurricane again because they thought they were gonna die. I don't want to die and if a hurricane is projected to ever come to Corpus Christi, uh, we're definitely evacuating. There's no question. We're taking my mother with us. There's no question about it, because the devastation that I have seen in Rockport, and Port Aransas, all of that reminds me of Hurricane Celia and the devastation that it took on, our, on our, where we live.

JT: Um, what was the scariest part of the storm for you guys?

SS: The winds.

AM: I think the wind for sure.

SS: Ari and I were outside; she was recording me. I was going against the wind. My husband, of course, was inside upset because he said stay indoors because

AM: My grandma was mad too.

SS: Yes. What am I doing outside? Well, it was, (Severa laughs) just how many times do you get to go out there, and uh, the winds at that point were probably about, what? Sixty? Seventy? Miles an hour, and we came inside, and uh, at that point uh we knew that the storm was coming.

JT: Did y'all have a Plan B if things got really bad? Was there another location that y'all were gonna move to?

SS: No! We did not have Plan B.

AM: That was it.

SS: That was it.

AM: That's kind of scary to think about now.

SS: And we thought if it flooded, we would go up to the attic. The attic is huge. We could've all fit up there, but we didn't have a Plan B. We did have a rope from my sister's house to my mom's house, and it was a rope that my brother and my brother-in-law tied. I guess that must have been the Plan B.

AM: In case

SS: In case one of the houses got really, you know, we would probably go to the other and use that rope as a guide against the wind.

JT: Was there any point during the storm that made y'all wish y'all had evacuated?

SS: No!

AM: I did for a while. Just cause like the news made it seem that "oh yeah we thought it was gonna hit us," and even my dad had offered, well he went to Houston, and he wanted me to go with him, and I said no, I'm staying with my mom, and then sure enough what happened in Houston, it's kind of better off that I didn't go.

JT: Was there any fears that y'all had during the storm, and if so, what were they?

SS: My fears, uh, really wasn't for my own personal safety. I was more concerned about my mother. I would not want anything to happen to her or for me not to be there. Um, that was my greatest fear. Uh, other than that I felt like whatever happens at this point is gonna happen. We're hunkered down, and the, the windows were all boarded up. We've got enough supplies to last us two weeks, and uh, we just have to see what happens and I, to me, the scariest is when a storm hits at night because you can't see.

AM: See, yeah.

SS: And it's almost a good thing, but you don't know what's going on out there. So you can, you could be in the, but the storms - it seems like the wind never got stronger, and then watching the news, when it made the turn to the right we, we knew, "okay this is, this is not coming towards us, its gonna come-" I mean we are literally twenty miles away from where it did hit. So Mother Nature is unpredictable. Rockport never saw it coming. They thought - everybody thought it was coming straight for Corpus, but that is Mother Nature for you. You don't know where she's going, and we were spared, but we won't stay again.

JT: Uh, what, uh supplies exactly did y'all have?

SS: We had a lot of flashlights, water

AM: Flashlights, water

SS: Flashlights, batteries, uh, we had, uh, frozen food, that we were not gonna open up the freezer, as long as we lost power. We would have the generator, so of course it would be for the important things like the, the refrigerator, and an air condition, but um, we had, my mother had made chicken salad, and just all of us had brought food that was prepared already, and we had ice chests. Big ice chests.

AM: Air mattresses

SS: And we had air mattresses, and uh, I brought probably about four sets of clothing. I brought a suitcase just in case I wasn't able to leave. Um, I think for the most part, we prepared ourselves as best as we could, but I think had we been hit like Rockport, we weren't prepared enough.

AM: Mmm hmm.

JT: Was there anything that you did that calmed your, uh, y'all's nerves during the storm?

AM: We reminisced, like we looked at old pictures and videos. I think that kinda like took our minds off

SS: Yes, we made the best of it; it was like a slumber party

AM: Played poker, played card games

SS: We played cards, and we joked around, and uh we, we just tried to keep it as light as possible. I don't think anybody was really neurotic about what was going on. We were all very calm, and it was like, we just kept everything as usual.

JT: Um, how would you describe the storm? Our maybe like compare it to Celia? Was it, I mean obviously it wasn't as intense, I guess, but did that, did your prior experience maybe give you a little more faith that y'all were gonna be okay?

SS: I think, uh, not my prior experience that led me to believe that I was gonna be okay, its more my spirituality and I felt safe. I felt, I never felt threatened; I never felt unsafe. I felt like the Lord was going to take care of us, and I felt that sense of security. I was not worried about it, but Hurricane Celia was one hundred and seventy mile an hour winds. This hurricane was right up there so their pretty compatible and that damage, if you look at the areas that Harvey hit, is pretty much the devastation that it caused in Corpus Christi back in 1970. Where it flattened buildings, it tore everything, lifted uprooted plants and trees and bushes, and it was a mess.

JT: Was there anything y'all wished y'all could've done before the storm?

SS: I wish we would've thought about it more, and all of us collectively as a family decided to leave.

AM: and all go to one place.

SS: And go somewhere else, uh, that would've kept us out of danger, and at least uh, I think we had, this, this also anxiety of leaving our personal belongings behind because of course situations like this become opportunities for bad people, that they, well they know that you're not home, "well let me go ahead and go in there and break in and take whatever I can." The looting, it happened, but it didn't happen to us, and I think because we stayed behind. Now there's a lot of people that left and their biggest concern was either they were in a flooding zone, if they went to an area like, Ariana's father, went to Houston, well he went straight into the flooding, not necessarily the storm. It was the after effect of the storm, and all the water, but uh, I think that for the most part, I felt safe.

JT: Was there any damage done to y'all's property?

SS: Uh, our home, we had a huge tree in the backyard, that my husband has been talking about for the last four years, about he needs to get rid of the tree, the tree's old already, and you know, one of those things that you talk about, but you don't do. Well guess what? That tree came down, and the circumference of that tree, it's the size of a refrigerator. So it's a big tree, I mean it literally just fell to the side and landed on our roof top, and it caught the corner of it. Unfortunately our neighbors, uh, garage got more damage than our house. Our house didn't hardly get any damage. We never lost electricity. For, uh, a lot of people that was not the story, in fact.

AA: Across the street

SS: Right across the street from us they were without electricity for five days and here we are on our side of the street and all of us did not skip a beat. So the damage for us was having to hire someone, first we had to get the electricity company involved because the tree had downed some live wire and if my husband started cutting on the tree, number one, he can get electrocuted, number two it can snap, and we would really be without electricity. So AEP was very adamant about don't touch the tree until we go over there, and we assess the situation. Of course, we are one of thousands of people that needed help, and I applaud all of the people that came in from out of town, out of state, to come and help us because there's no way that the man power in this local community could've handled the demand. So for us, we were very lucky that, that was the only damage, and it damaged our fence, and uh, the neighbors garage, and we had to have someone come and remove the tree, and we had to shop around because you have people that are price gouging, which is unfortunate, but their maximizing, they see it as maximizing on an opportunity, that you're desperate, and people take advantage of that, and to me, that has probably been the most disappointing part of this because I saw it firsthand.

JT: If y'all could only use one sentence to describe your experience during the hurricane, what would it be?

SS: It was exciting and scary, and I'm just grateful that it wasn't devastation where we were hit. Um, I'm just happy that I'm alive, and I'm happy that my family and my mother is doing fine, and that my family is safe.

AM: I think mine would be, it could've been worse.

JT: Okay, and obviously, you had said earlier y'all would not stay again, correct?

AM: Correct.

SS: That is correct.

AM: Actually, I think last minute, as it got closer, we started looking up rooms in um the valley, but all of them were booked, so we were like, "okay we have no choice; it's too late. We have to stay at this point." Like to get on the road at that time would be too dangerous. We'd probably get caught in the storm.

JT: So, my last question for you guys is, do y'all have any advice for people who stay behind during hurricanes?

AM: (Ariana laughs) Be prepared, be prepared.

SS: Be prepared and even when you think you're prepared

SS & AM: You're not.

SS: Because you don't know how long – for example, right now – the people from Hurricane Harvey – it's been what? Six weeks? It's been awhile.

AM: Yeah

SS: And there's, there's some homes that are still without electricity; there's some homes, that uh, don't have a roof top, you know, they're having to find other places to live, and that could've been us, and had we had the damage done to us the way it happened in Rockport, Port Aransas, I don't know where we would be right now. Uh, we would probably be in temporary housing until we could get our house back in order, and what's happening is, that there's so many contractors from out of town I can feel the energy when I'm driving on the freeway, and I see all these people in town, these are not your local people. These are lot of people coming from out of town to help and rebuild and it's appreciated, and at the same time if it wasn't for them, I don't think that we would be as, uh, as situated as we are right now.

AM: Even at work, I work at The Yardarm Restaurant, and a lot of our clientele live in Rockport or Port A, and they come and eat at our restaurant, and a lot of them are staying at the hotels here

because their houses got destroyed, and a lot of our clientele is also from out of state or out of wherever trying to help with their companies and engineers.

JT: Um, is there anything that I didn't ask, that y'all would like to share?

SS: I think, uh, it's very hard, uh – our clinic, uh, Well Med, is a company that, uh, we have medical clinics, and we cater to senior citizens. We have a mobile unit that we set up, the Monday, actually it was the, we started the Saturday after, the hurricane hit Friday. Saturday it was determined, “oh my gosh, there's a need.” Monday the mobile unit was there, and the mobile unit is like a mini clinic, and it's got a generator, and its air conditioned, and they were seeing a hundred to a hundred and fifty patients a day. And these patients were, they were just walking in and where somebody stepped on a nail, somebody stepped on glass. Uh, they needed a tetanus shot. We gave out so much tetanus shots it was incredible. Um, there were, our clinic our mobile unit was there, the only mobile clinic available to the Port Aransas area period, so had we not been there it's concerning where they would've had to drive all the way into town, and the traffic going back into Port Aransas is much busier because of all the contractors that are coming in. So it would've been an inconvenience, so I feel very fortunate that I work for a company that was able to provide those services, and uh, do our part to, to help the community, but what I also saw is there's a lot of people still very destitute. Where they didn't have the food; they didn't have water. It seems like the workers were there, but they weren't getting really all their needs met. I know that a lot of people came in and they set up, you know, food stands and water stands and to this day, you know, we've all gone back to our normal lives, and they're still suffering, and are in the middle of this. In fact, one of our patients, uh, he, his trailer, he stayed in his RV trailer, and he will never stay again, but he injured his foot, and it just progressively got worse, and had the hurricane not happened, this would not have happened to him. So he's very angry, you know about the storm because of what he's going through, but for the most part, he's getting the medical attention that he needs, and for me what I saw was the beauty in the energy of everybody coming in to help, and make everything normal again, which is going to take a very long time.

JT: Okay, well thank you ladies, I think that concludes my interview and all of my questions, but I do really appreciate y'all sharing y'all's experiences with me.

SS: Well thank you.

JT: (Jessica laughs) Okay, I will stop recording.