

When Harvey Comes to Town; A (draft of a) South Texas Story

By Justin Bucholtz

[Justin Bucholtz] Coming to you from Corpus Christi, Texas, this is Justin Bucholtz. I'll be your host for tonight's South Texas Story of tragedy, destruction...and recovery. We'll see what the human spirit is capable of tonight, when Harvey comes to town.

[JB] Port Aransas is a relatively small island town just a little way outside of Corpus Christi, situated on Mustang Island. Its population is just above 4,000 people, and it makes most of its money through fishing and tourism.¹ Like many small towns, it has a close-knit community of people who are all familiar with one another.

[Elena Crawford] "A lot of us knew each other, a lot of our parents went to school together, so naturally we all grew up together and got along like that. Um, you just kinda know everyone in the entire town, you know? I'd say I know a very large amount of people. If I don't know them, I know their siblings, I know a cousin of them. It's, it's, that's just kinda how the town works."

[JB] Enter one Elena Crawford, a born and raised citizen of Port Aransas, Texas. Today she's a biomedical sciences major at Texas A&M's Corpus Christi branch. Her childhood, however, was spent on the same little island, attending the same little local school.

¹ "Port Aransas, Texas Population 2020." Port Aransas, Texas Population 2020 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs). World Population Review. Accessed October 14, 2020. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/port-aransas-tx-population>.

[EC] “[...] my family has lived in Port Aransas for thirty-three years. Lived in the same house, we'd owned the property for many years. Just a little house I grew up in, and when I was in the third grade, my family rebuilt an even bigger house in the space.”

[EC] “[...] there's only one school there. There's an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. They're all literally right next to each other, they're all connected. [...] I graduated with about 29 people, I want to say? A lot of them I'd actually grown up with since Pre-K.”

[JB] It sounds like the picturesque ideal of “island time.” An easy-going community of friendly neighbors where you are never too far from the beach. A life that's easy, gentle, and routine. But those routines were turned on their head in 2017 with the formation of Hurricane Harvey. It began as a tropical depression on the 17th of August off of the east the coast of Barbados, and began a rapid westward march across the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico.² Harvey was coming to town, but the residents of Port Aransas didn't take the storm seriously in its early stages. Storms had come to the island before and the town had weathered them just fine. Why would this one be any different?

[EC] “Not a whole lot of us were really worried about it, we were kinda just talking about it in class, it was kinda just something that was kinda just on Facebook. We say it just on social networks. It was kinda just what people were talking about through the classrooms. [...] At first we honestly just thought it was going to be a few days off from school. [...] I do remember as a child, I had to evacuate two or three times for hurricanes that were coming near by. It

² Blake, Eric S, and David A Zelinsky. Rep. “National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Harvey.” NOAA, 2018. From https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092017_Harvey.pdf

wasn't anything - but that was why I never freaked out whenever I heard about Hurricane Harvey or the tropical storm buzz at the time. Because we had evacuated and it was just something that came and went, and everything was fine."

[JB] The idea that everything was fine would leave just as fast as the storm arrived. The people of Port Aransas got a rude awakening when the storm began to rapidly escalate. Harvey was officially declared a hurricane by NOAA on the 24th of August, and would reach Category 3 by the following day.³ Harvey was coming to town, and he was coming hard. Soon it became obvious to the authorities that the only way to protect people was to evacuate.

[EC] "We heard about it and as a family, we decided to evacuate just to be safe. I think at that point it was already a category two, but within an hour I'd say everything kinda escalated. They had everyone send us out of school. Everyone was letting out. I want to say it was after lunch, they told us "don't come back to school, don't come back to school," [...] there were literally police men driving around the town, using a megaphone to tell us to evacuate, which is probably the craziest thing I've ever experience. [...] It might have just seemed that way because I was in highschool and just not thinking about it as much as some adults might have been, but from what I remember and what I'd say a lot of my friends remember, within a few hours, it just got a little bit worse and a little bit worse and a little bit worse until, next thing we knew, there were just cops driving around telling us to get out, knocking on people's doors, telling them they need to evacuate."

³ Blake, Eric S, and David A Zelinsky. Rep. "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Harvey." NOAA, 2018. From https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092017_Harvey.pdf

[JB] The people of Port Aransas loaded into their vehicles and spread out across southern Texas, going to friends, family, or anywhere that would take them. Elena and her family were lucky to have a place with an uncle in Brownsville. They could ride out the storm in peace and comfort. They could even enjoy themselves while Harvey blew through.

[EC] "We figured that would be the safest place, and it ended up being incredibly safe. We didn't get even an ounce of rain. It was perfect weather over there. So it was a good choice. It was a safe area. A little different, and it had everything we'd need. Stores there had all the necessities that we would need, and my uncle has a house that could house all of us for a time. So we chose there. [...] with as many siblings as I have, it's easy to say we kinda drove ourselves crazy. If you have siblings, I'm sure you know that in a room full of that many people, you'll start to bicker and get on each other's nerves. I think that only comes with stress, but I'd say it was a good time."

[JB] The idea that everything was going to be fine slowly began to creep back into Elena's mind. At least for a short time. While she and her family were safe outside of Harvey's reach, a handful of people chose to stay behind on the island. They were recording and reporting on the progress of the storm as it closed in. Their reports brought the grim reality of the hurricane to everyone who left.

[EC] "we have a Facebook page that the entire community uses, and there were a lot of people who actually voluntarily chose to ride out the storm. A lot of those people were posting on facebook up until they lost power, and they were slowly starting to mention, "wow it's starting to get kinda bad," "wow it's worse than I thought it would be," and some people were slowly

posting pictures as they could. You know, people were slowly losing power at the time. So that was kinda what we were left with, was just these random images and random messages from people who decided to ride out the storm, and...and then everything just kinda went quiet for Port A.”

[JB] Harvey had come to town. It made landfall near Rockport, Texas in the early morning of August the 26th as a category 4 hurricane.⁴ Elena, her family, and the other citizens of Port Aransas were left in the dark until they could return home almost a week later. The sights they beheld when they arrived on the island again were shocking. Homes destroyed, cars buried in sand, streets choked with debris. Everywhere you looked, destruction. For Elena and her family, they had to face the shock of seeing the only home they knew torn apart.

[EC] “We thankfully didn’t get any water damage because our house is up hill, but we got direct, straight wind damage. My entire siding was ripped off from one house, all you could see was plywood. My balconies were ripped off, many of our doors were ripped off. Some of our windows we couldn’t even reach to board up, so many of our windows were ripped out. [...] The barriers on the balcony were flung all over, the mailbox was gone, my bedroom door was gone, our shed doors I think were pulled open, if I remember correctly. Fences were all down. [...] it didn’t look like my home anymore.”

⁴ Blake, Eric S, and David A Zelinsky. Rep. “National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Harvey.” NOAA, 2018. From https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092017_Harvey.pdf

[JB] The wake of the storm was wide. NOAA estimates an approximate \$125 billion in total damage, with 300,000 structures and 500,000 cars being flooded.⁵ Power was out across wide areas of the state. Everyone in Texas was shaken by the scale of the impact.

[JB] But despite all the damage, this was not the end for Port Aransas. The people would rebuild, reestablish their homes and businesses, and get their lives back on track. The process was not easy, but the entire community came together to pull each other up. Old rivalries were left behind as everyone looked to the struggles of the present, and the hope of the future.

[EC] “we all became more friends after the hurricane. That was when a lot of the petty stuff really came to an end and we kind of came together as friends. Like I said, there were some people I graduated with who I'd known since Pre K and I still even love to speak to some of them nowadays. We looked at each other's houses, and we just, [...] it was like everything we'd all known for each other was just gone.”

[JB] Even strangers came around to give a helping hand. People from all across Texas and beyond came to the aid of communities like Houston, Rockport, and Port Aransas that were hit hard by the sheer power of Hurricane Harvey. They gave the community just the boost they needed to get back on their feet.

[EC] “[...] everyone started setting up the food trucks, the camps, a lot of people came to Port A to feed all the locals. It was crazy. There were people everywhere, cooking and feeding us.”

⁵ Blake, Eric S, and David A Zelinsky. Rep. “National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Harvey.” NOAA, 2018. From https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092017_Harvey.pdf

[EC] “a college, professional basketball team lent our basketball team a basketball court that they set up in our civic community center, and that was what we were practicing on. They loaned it to us and we sent it back, and that's how we were able to practice for basketball again. [...] I didn't realize you could just set them up like that.”

[JB] Though for Elena and her family, they preferred to stick mostly to themselves, even when help was offered. They needed their space, but had spirit aplenty. As rough as things were, they kept on working and refused to give in to despair.

[EC] “I believe I got a few meals from them, but we kinda kept to ourselves. [...] a lot of people were coming in and they were doing demo and helping out, but we kinda kept to ourselves during that period because we wanted to heal, [...] other than that we didn't have a lot of people coming in and out of our house.”

[JB] Coping with the destruction was not easy, but Port Aransas would not be broken. The people kept themselves in high spirits and found ways to laugh, even in the midst of devastation. They refused to let even the strength of a hurricane shatter their spirits.

[EC] “...at first, whenever the hurricane first started, we were extremely defensive with people making jokes and making memes, I mean we hopped on that. We went through a definite anger phase in the healing process. So we were super defensive about anyone who tried to make a joke for a while, but that's just kinda how you heal. After a while I think we started to laugh at just the little things that happened, we started to slowly laugh at things we lost. Because in a way, you lose things you kind of wanted to lose. You kind of get things off your

shoulders that you always wanted off your shoulders when a hurricane wipes it out. So we were able to laugh at memories that we no longer had, in a way.”

[JB] Today, Port Aransas is back to business as usual. The spirit of the people refused to be broken, and their determination paid off with the return of their town to the island life. The recovery of Port Aransas is a tale of spirit and determination for the citizens of that small island town. Now they do their best to bring that spirit to other people in need.

[EC] We recovered, and we were pretty strong about it, I think. To this day, we look at other people when they get hit by hurricanes and we all do as much as we can to help. With Hurricane Lura, we had lots of people bring in trailers over to Louisiana because we know exactly what that's like. We know exactly what it's like to be a small town that no one really thinks about. A lot of people focused on Houston for Hurricane Harvey, but Port A was rough. So you know, we always take that into consideration for other places when hurricanes hit, we think about them a lot. Just don't take anything for granted.

[JB] If there's something that can be learned from the tale of Elena and the other citizens of Port Aransas, it's that as mighty as a hurricane might be, it can't match the spirit of a community coming together. From Corpus Christi and for South Texas Stories, this has been Justin Bucholtz.

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