

Tera Elwell

Category 4 Reporting

<<fade in rain and wind sound effects>>

[Ruben]: I didn't feel safe. My reporter didn't feel safe cause we saw parts of the roof flying around.

[Me]: On August 13, 2017, a tropical wave formed off Western Africa. Twelve day's later; it grew into a category four hurricane with wind speeds up to 156 miles per hour.¹

[Ruben]: I'll never forget this like, you could feel the building sway.

[Me]: With strong wind and harmful flooding, Hurricane Harvey caused an estimated 125 billion dollars worth of damage, which ranks as the second-most costly hurricane to hit the US since 1900.² While most people packed supplies to either ride out the storm, or to leave the city, first responders, and news media made different plans.

[Ruben]: It wasn't just the local media. There's the weather channel folks doing their thing. They're well insured, so, they could have a little more fun where I was a little more cautious, but yeah, no, we had, there was um, you had your locals, uh, out there doing stupid things. You had other news crews uh, out there.

<<cross dissolve sound effects with light, upbeat music>>

[Me]: Welcome to South Texas Stories. My name is Tera Elwell and when I was 27 years old, Hurricane Harvey made landfall in a city about thirty miles away from my hometown. As a native Texan, I've been through my fair share of hurricanes, but Harvey will always be high on my list of memorable experiences.

In 2017, my friend Ruben and I worked at a news station in Corpus Christi. He was a photojournalist, aka a photog, and I was a video editor. Ruben and I met when we were both students at Del Mar Community College. I started school with the intent of earning a history degree, but after assisting Ruben on a handful of his video projects, I changed my path, and majored in communications. Ruben moved to New York City to continue

¹ US Department of Commerce, NOAA. "Hurricane Harvey Info." National Weather Service. NOAA's National Weather Service, April 24, 2021. <https://www.weather.gov/hgx/hurricaneharvey>.

² Blake, Eric S., and David A. Zelinsky. "National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report." 2022 Atlantic Hurricane Season. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, May 9, 2018. <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/>.

his media journey, and earned his bachelors degree from the School of Visual Arts. When Ruben moved back to Corpus, he was ready to jump into any, and all media scenes.

[Ruben]: I ended up back home, and you were working at channel three, and uh, yeah, you were like, "Hey, do you need a job?" I was like, yeah (laughs). I really need a job. I'm in a ton of debt, and I need to, I need to get a job so, yeah, I ended up working at channel three in the summer of 2014 as an editor, and then uh, our news director one day was like, "Hey. Do you know how to operate a camera?" and I was like, "Uh, yeah," and I've been doing, shooting news for, man yeah, since 2014 so, it's almost eight years.

[Me]: Just like any job, working in the news industry has its highs and lows. It can be challenging to keep yourself in a healthy mindset when your entire day is spent surrounded by police scanners, TV's on various news channels, and having to repeat the same tragic stories for the morning, afternoon, and evening shows.

[Ruben]: Journalists get a bad rap to begin with. You know, we already face a weird reputation. You grow up hearing the term, "If it bleeds, it leads." People kind of, I feel like, the general public maybe don't have such a—they don't, they don't feel bad for us. They don't have a sympathetic view towards us. Never been told, yeah, if you need to go talk to you know, our grief team, here's the number. You just kind of have to go home, and you know, you'll think about it for a little bit, and some people develop coping mechanisms. You hear about a lot of people like, that have drinking, and drug problems within, the news industry, and I'm not kind of surprised at that because aside from like, the day-to-day stress of like, making your deadline, you're also like, juggling like, you know the crazy things you'll see, or hear. I will tell them like, hey yeah, I got to go to Universal today and we got to ride the VelociCoaster before everyone else did, but at the same time too, I always kind of—as you get a lot of people saying, "Oh, that must be easy," and it's like, well, yeah you have your easy days, but then you know, you—the one day you're at Universal doing the VelociCoaster, uh, media preview day, and then the next day you're covering a, kind of like a gang-related shooting where like, you see like, the bodies of like, you know, teenagers, kind of on a rainy day, and then like within ear shot you know when the families arrived because—not everyone's heard the noise I'm kind of going to describe, but it's like, there's this very specific noise that comes from a human being when they find out that, you know, a loved one was just killed in cold blood. That, yeah, there's stuff, you know, your week has it's extremes.

[Me]: The news never stops. There's never a break. Any day of the week, you could get a call at 3am with a story to cover. Instead of celebrating the holidays, it's more likely you'll have to work extra hours. The same can be said for natural disasters. Before Harvey made landfall, the city of Rockport had a mandatory evacuation, but Corpus Christi didn't. Even if there was one, as a journalist, leaving Corpus for your own personal safety meant possibly losing your job.

[Ruben]: I didn't feel great about it, and it's tough. My significant other, she had shelter, so she wasn't evacuating, but like, I still have my, my folks, my family, that I worry about. It's tough, you know. It is a crappy feeling to know that I have to go, a lot of times going out (laughs), doing the opposite of the idea of an evacuation is going right into it uh, while the other, well, either my family, or friends have to stay behind, and it's not, it's not an easy feeling.

[Me]: Despite feeling uneasy, we had a job to do. We needed to keep people informed with accurate, up to date information about the storm. Journalist from our sister stations in Austin, Houston and San Antonio came to Corpus to help. Some were out in the field while a handful stayed at the station to answer phone calls and reply to comments left on our social media pages. Our weather team made sure to keep our people in the field informed about how close the storm was getting at all times.

[Ruben]: We got a call from the station saying, basically reeling us back. We were about like a ten-minute, fifteen, twelve minute drive from the station. Half way through that trip they were like, "We need you to like, take shelter now," and it's kind of weird because it wasn't—all hell hadn't broken loose yet, but I guess they were anticipating it. We're like, "Okay, what do you want us to do?" so they were like, go to, I forget what hotel it was. I think it was the Omni, uh, in downtown Corpus, so we're like okay. I didn't feel safe. My reporter didn't feel safe cause we saw parts of the like, roof, like flying around. Uh, they were like, that's fine. You know, go, go live from the covered kind of awning outside, so we did a couple live shots there. So the stress is kind of starting to, kind of compound, and build, and then coupled with that we have like weird work requests where they're like, "We saw something on Facebook that the roof of the Omni blew off. Go look. Go check. I'm like, okay (laughs). Where? How are you supposed to do that? You're telling us the roof of the building we're staying at just blew off. Do you want us to go like, up there, where the winds, you know, it's, I'm sure, it's like a vacuum situation. I mean, I'm not, I'm not a scientist, but I'm assuming, you know, it's not the safest environment. Okay, yeah, go, go with my camera out there? It was just—things were starting to get a little crazy, and then they're like, "Oh, we need to go live," and they did a phoner with us, so we're doing a phoner, like, a phone call on, on-air, and then like, I think we were in between phoners when you know, the wind—if you've ever lived through a hurricane or spent time in a hurricane you know like, that very distinct wind sound that comes with like, the wind just rushing by the window, so we start to hear that, and then, I'll never forget this, you could feel the building sway.

Me: Although the eye of Harvey made landfall 30 miles northeast of Corpus Christi, strong; damaging wind gusts were felt throughout the city. The Corpus Christi

International Airport reported wind gust of 63 miles per hour before getting knocked offline.³

[Ruben]: We're like, okay we need to go to the bathroom. Um, I think I put the like, propped up the couch against the window too, just in case like, sealed the door. Continued to do phoners (laughs) with the station. That weird, ridiculous, like, you feel so ridiculous. It's like, several times that's always with weather that I've like, felt as like, a journalist where I'm like, I want to look at the sky, and be like, what am I doing with my life? That's kind of how the night went, and then eventually the weather kind of died down a little bit to the point where we felt comfortable like, being back into the main room. Uh, ran into, oh my god, was it Dave Muir? From ABC News. He was out there doing a live shot in front of the hotel, and uh, of course my reporter went, and like, hogged the camera. I was like, okay whatever. I also didn't want to be on Good Morning America, so I let her take care of that. Then I looked up at the truck, and realized that my, my dish on my live truck was gone, so I was like, great (laughs).

[Me]: While Ruben and his reporter were out in the field, I stayed at the station for a couple of nights. It was my job to receive anything our photogs were getting, then edit everything together not just for our newscast, but for other stations who were also covering the story. During my interview with Ruben, we reminisced and laughed about how those days ended for us.

[Ruben]: It was just so weird cause I hadn't really heard a whole lot from you guys, and uh, a car is parked by the window, because the window busted open. No one was at the station, like I think, it was like, the worst of it obviously had passed, and it was like, I don't even know how to describe it. It was just like, the people that were there were zombies. No one really, no one was really like, coherent.

[Me]: I don't remember a lot about it. I was really sick. I was jacked up on cough medicine and (laughs)—

[Ruben]: Yeah, you—I mean this in the nicest possible way; you looked like death.

[Me]: Yeah, everyone—no one showered. We were using baby wipes. No one knew what to do because you know, there wasn't a game plan other than stay on-air. We need wall-to-wall coverage, but I, I like how the station called, and said, get back home, but also go to the roof because it (laughs) blew away.

³ US Department of Commerce, NOAA. "Major Hurricane Harvey - August 25-29, 2017." National Weather Service. NOAA's National Weather Service, August 26, 2022. https://weather.gov/crp/hurricane_harvey.

[Ruben]: Which was false by the way. That was a false report. There was a lot of, I hate to use the term "fake news," but there's a lot of fake, there's not—there's a lot of misinformation on social media, and so that, well, that didn't help things either.

[Me]: In the news industry, the way we covered Hurricane Harvey was a success. After the storm died down, everyone individually celebrated the work we had done. That celebration lasted about fifteen seconds because as I said before, the news never stops. It was time to switch from the destruction Hurricane Harvey could cause, to the destruction Hurricane Harvey did cause.

<<short music break>>

[Me]: Working in news is tough. It doesn't matter what your title is, journalist, photog, producer - the job requires long hours, patience and understanding. While I would never want to work through another natural disaster, it is gratifying to know that we helped people during a tough time.

<<short music break>>

[Me]: Before wrapping up, I would like to add an editor's note. A few weeks after our interview, Ruben was hired as a video specialist for a healthcare company. Finally, a media job with a set schedule, and hopefully, fingers crossed, less stress. To Ruben, congrats friend. You did it.

<<gradual gain of music for a few seconds and then fade out>>⁴

⁴ Dilating Times, "Life Of This Man,"

https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Dilating_Times/outside-the-box/life-of-this-man/.

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