

# Thanksgiving Tribute:

## Finding hope in Harvey & The Houston Astros

BY BRANDI SMITH



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Growing up in rural Southern Oregon, there wasn’t much in the way of TV to watch as a kid. Our giant antenna, which was mounted to our house, only picked up two channels: the local CBS affiliate and PBS. As a result, my after-school TV programming was usually some combination of Sesame Street, Reading Rainbow and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood.

I gleaned important messages from each of those shows, but what might be the most influential piece of advice came from Fred Rogers when I was older. He recalled that when faced with scary situations, his mother told him, ‘Always look for the helpers.’

As an adult, I pursued a career in journalism, and Rogers’ words resonated with me. In the most terrifying of circumstances, I kept an eye out for those who helped. Sometimes, they were the obvious ones: first responders to a scene. They were often neighbors or strangers who stepped up. Most recently, I’ve witnessed the truly unexpected: a handful of athletes who buoyed a city’s spirits after a historic disaster.

If Texas is home, you no doubt remember where you were when Hurricane Harvey made landfall as a category 4. As a reporter for KHOU 11, I spent that Friday night sitting in a hotel room in Wharton, watching my incredible coworkers cover the storm as it nailed the coastal town of Rockport and slowly inched inland toward Victoria.

The next day, my managers deemed Victoria too dangerous for us, so we reported from Louise, a small community of roughly 1,000, about an hour southwest of Houston. Even on the fringes of the now category 1 storm, we felt its power as we reported live for hours on end. The wind gusts took down trees and power lines around town while the constant rain filled up ditches and streets.

My work day on Sunday, Aug. 27 started at 2 a.m., when I received a call from my news director. Our conversation was short, but the message clear: I and

Mario, the photographer with whom I was working, needed to get on the road back to Houston while we could still get into the city.

It wasn’t an easy process. The hotel’s elevator was already shut down, anticipating a power outage at any time, so we hauled all our gear – cameras, live units, tripods, audio equipment and gear – down three stories to our live truck. Once we were loaded, Mario navigated the already very wet U.S. 59 to get us to Houston.

Unsure of where to go, I remembered Doug Miller’s outstanding coverage of the Tax Day Floods in the Greenspoint area. Mario and I found our way to the Greens Road bridge over Hardy Toll Road, where our vantage point allowed us to see the floodwaters overtaking the Arbor Court Apartments. It was around 4 a.m. and the water was already chest deep in some areas, prompting Houston Police dive teams to go door to door evacuating residents from their apartments.



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Only an hour or so after arriving on scene, a police officer commanded that Mario and I leave because the situation was too dangerous for us to stay on the bridge. We did as we were told, eventually making



our way onto the westbound lanes of Beltway 8 near the Hardy Toll Road. Here, the main lanes of the freeway were closed due to high water. Drivers kept attempting to make it through; some succeeded, most didn't. The feeder road wasn't an option as it was under at least six to eight feet of water in the most shallow of spots.

What happened over the next few hours ended up going viral online. Mario spotted a semi truck stuck in water several feet deep, its driver stranded in the middle of a flooded feeder road. As I detailed the increasingly dire conditions, our KHOU 11 coworkers were being forced to evacuate from our station along Allen Parkway as Buffalo Bayou made its way into the first floor of the building. The floodwater would eventually reach the generator, killing the station's signal for several hours.

Back on the Beltway 8 overpass, two Harris County Sheriff's Office reserve deputies drove by in a truck towing an air boat. It took less than an hour for them to get the boat into the water and rescue the driver, whose name is Robert Roberson. After a stint at the shelter in the George R. Brown Convention Center, he finally made it home to Durant, Mississippi a week later.

The crew at KHOU 11 was tireless, rebuilding a station from the ground up at Houston Public Media, which kindly let us take over a significant

portion of the facility's first floor on the University of Houston campus. Engineers didn't go home for days to ensure our signal held and that we could continue to provide 24/7 coverage of Harvey's impact and aftermath. Reporters and photographers

stayed out in the elements, first showing rescues, then the recovery. Our station managers, including our general manager and news director, supported and encouraged the team as we fought through a situation no other TV station had ever faced.

It was the same challenge so many Houstonians tackled head on. Thousands of homes flooded, the

city proved it was Houston Strong, as we saw those helpers jump into action. In Kingwood, I watched a swarm of volunteers, relative strangers to those they helped, gut flooded home after flooded home. In Dickinson, I met a group of moms who delivered lunches

and dinners to flood victims. In Friendswood, I was there when students returned to a flood-damaged building, covered in messages of love and support from other schools.

While we struggled to return our lives to normal, there was another battle underway. The Houston Astros, a team that had only made it to the World Series once in franchise history, was having an

historic season and fighting to make it back. This was a team full of underdogs for whom it was easy to cheer, especially when they completed a 101-win season, moving on to postseason play.

Once again, I got to go along for the ride. From gutted homes and temporary hotel rooms, Houstonians rooted for their team to go all the way. I saw smiles for the first time since the storm. These weren't forced 'I'm going to smile because I'm tough' smiles; they were true, sincere smiles, expressed by folks who hadn't felt real joy in too long.

We celebrated when the Astros beat the Red Sox in the American League Division Series. We gave each other high fives when the 'Stros knocked out the Yankees to become American League champions. During the seven-game World Series, we alternately held our breath and screamed with joy as we



watched the team forge a new kind of history for the city of Houston. We weren't a city broken or beaten by a catastrophic natural disaster, which might be the most costly on record. Instead, we were the home of the World Series champion Houston Astros.

And so it was the helpers – in all different forms – who guided Houston through tragedy; helpers in the form of boat owners who jumped in to rescue strangers; helpers in the form of first responders who worked days straight to save lives; helpers in the form of neighbors who offered food and a place to stay for flood victims; helpers in the form of the Houston Astros, who gave us something for which to cheer. ■