

From 'Total Devastation' to Salvation in NJ

About every fifth light was running off a generator at a Toms River, N.J., high school that has been transformed into an emergency evacuation shelter.

It's dark in there, but not just because of the lighting.

Homeless Ocean County residents are sleeping on cots, mostly displaced from the Seaside Heights community, where a roller coaster now sits in the Atlantic Ocean.

They swap devastation stories and share pictures from their phones as they wonder who had it worst.

Mounds of donated goods—books, toys, dog food, even contact solution—line the school hallways and gymnasium that hundreds are now calling home.

"I was stuck in my attic for three days," one teenager said, still fidgety and coughing. "No food or anything."

"I knew it was going to be bad," another Seaside Heights woman said, sitting dejectedly on a cot. "But I never thought it would be *this* bad."

Billy Graham Rapid Response chaplains, alongside Samaritan's Purse, have responded to the great need in New Jersey, where more than 1.6 million people are still without power as of Friday morning.

"It's hell on earth," another woman said, talking with the chaplains.

But amid this disaster—one of the worst in recorded U.S. history—one man's life was changed Thursday night for all eternity.

'I Feel Like a New Person'

John didn't know where to start.

As Barb and Leo Grabowski meandered around the shelter, conversing, listening and praying with **Sandy** survivors, they came across John, a Seaside Heights resident whose life was on a perpetual downward spiral.

His car was buried under four feet of sand, he was suddenly **homeless** and he just lost his job as a cook at a local hospital.

As the Grabowskis were talking with John about his **spiritual life**, he had few answers.

"If you wouldn't have survived the storm, do you know where you would be going?" Barb asked John. "Would you be going to heaven?"

"No, I don't know," John said bluntly. "But I don't think I've been good enough."

Barb responded, "If it was about being good enough, why would Jesus have had to come down and die on the cross?"

John, a man in his 40s, endured a tough upbringing. When Barb talked about how he could have a heavenly Father, he quickly interjected: "I've never had a dad."

"Now you will have a Father who will never leave you," Barb said.

The Grawbowskis offered to **pray** with John to accept Christ into his life, right there in the middle of the dimly lit gymnasium.

"I told him it means repenting of your sins and making God the Lord of your life," Barb said.

Broken, tired and out of answers, John was ready and made a

decision to follow Jesus.

“John said he felt lighter inside,” Barb reported. “That he felt like a new person.”

After the chaplains prayed with John, they presented him with follow-up materials and a Bible and recommended he started reading in the book of—you guessed it—John.

“This is one of the most exciting things that we do,” Barb said, still pumped several hours later.

Leo knows it has nothing to do with the chaplains. Or **Billy Graham**. Or the Rapid Response Team.

“The best thing to do is say a few words stand back and let the Holy Spirit take over,” Leo said. “It’s amazing.”

‘Houses Are Just Gone’

Diane VonStetten didn’t know what to feel after the rushing waters of **Hurricane Sandy** came right up to the edge of her street in the Silverton area of Toms River before receding.

Lucky. Blessed. Fortunate.

As one of the administrative assistants at The Church of Hope and Peace, which is hosting the Rapid Response Team and **Samaritan’s Purse** in Toms River, VonStetten knew right away that those on the north end of Silverton did not fare nearly as well.

“We were outside and we saw this young couple walking down the street,” she said. “He was carrying clothes and food, and she was carrying the car seat with a three-month-old preemie baby inside all bundled up.”

Officials warned those living in the north to evacuate, but not everyone did, including this couple.

“People I talked to said within 10 minutes of the flood

rushing in the floor was lifting up," VonStetten said. "Tile floor, linoleum. ... It just happened so fast."

The damage in Silverton was massive, but nothing compared to the loss of life. As of Thursday, eight deaths were reported and many were missing.

"They've found people floating in the river," VonStetten said. "People's houses are gone. Just gone. Roads are gone. Total devastation."

Similar scenes can be found along the Jersey Shore barrier islands of Point Pleasant, Seaside Heights and Seaside Park.

"Houses are just gone. Foundations are the only thing left," she said. "They were cutting holes in roofs just to rescue people. My neighbor went down the road in a canoe to try to help people."

But Seaside Heights may be the worst scene of all. Residents are reporting that you still can't get in without an escort from the National Guard and that explosions from gas pipes were still happening as of Thursday.

"The roller coaster is in the ocean," VonStetten said. "Washed right off the pier."

Moving to New Jersey from Maryland more than 20 years ago, Von Stetten hasn't experienced or heard about a worse natural disaster. She prays this will get many people's attention.

"I think it will shake people up for the short-term like 9/11," she said. "They'll start going to church. I'm hoping it shakes people enough so they get to a revelation of who the Lord really is."

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