



Grantmakers in the Arts

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## **Sandy versus NYC**

*Syd London*

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**Grantmakers in the Arts**

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## Sandy versus NYC

Syd London

*Sandy versus NYC* is a photodocumentary about the fight for survival that transpired behind closed doors following Superstorm Sandy's assault on the northeastern United States in late October 2012. My goal in telling the stories of those who were left behind was to raise awareness and get more people the help they urgently needed. The broadly



12 Days After: Mermaid Avenue, Coney Island.

distributed and now legendary photos that came out of Sandy show the incredible mass destruction outside. I was concerned about the stories we weren't being told and what the city didn't want us to know. No power for weeks or months at a time meant no flushing toilets in many places and no elevators, vital means of freedom and the difference between self-care and no care for many elderly people and those with mobility issues. After Sandy hit and the power didn't return, I knew this would rapidly become a problem for those who needed medication in particular. So I embedded with volunteers from Mount Sinai Hospital and Medical School and moved from location to location across New York City.

Six weeks after the storm I photographed at the Action Center, a community center established in the Rockaways thirteen years earlier, and immediately knew I had to stay to get the center's story out. As other communities recovered, this community was far from stability. The mayor's office pressured the center, along with many other distribution sites, to stop providing supplies and medical services despite

serving 1,000 people a day with basics such as baby formula, diapers for adults and kids, and clean water, hot food, and more. Statistically, 65 percent of this community lived 200 percent below the poverty line prior to the surge. We are talking about 40,000 tenants of an enormous complex of projects. If you lived on the first floor you likely lost everything. One week after the surge, moisture had seeped up to the fifth and sixth floors, the top floors of the complex. I found people who were keeping moldy piles of clothes on the floor because they were afraid to throw out the little they had left, having no idea how it would be replaced.

Despite the damage clearly shown in my photographs, those people were declined any support from FEMA or other government outlets. The form letters they received stated that the decision to deny them support was due to there being "no visible damage" to their buildings. Little kids slept on the floor with their parents because their beds and bedding were gone. Parents cried privately, desperate to move their children to safety but having no options. Old paint peeled off the walls in sheets because of mold, and a few kids started testing positive for lead poisoning; the doctors suspected the old lead paint was the source. It felt like a forgotten country as our mayor continued reporting in press

conferences that everything was back to normal. It was back to normal for some. Many others were still fighting for their safety and health. Months later, some still live with the mold and respiratory issues, waiting for help as they try to navigate through many bureaucracies.

Syd London holds a deep reverence for the potential power of the photographic image. Her passion is telling the stories of subcultures that are often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented. She strives to communicate the visceral moments of what is ultimately a shared human experience. Her studio is based in Brooklyn, New York. Follow the developments of this documentary as it's introduced nationally to EMS and emergency shelter operators for future problem solving. Part two of the documentary, launched at the end of May 2013, follows a community of disabled people as they continue to work on rebuilding: <http://www.tumblr.com/blog/unfilteredandsandy>

View more of *Sandy Versus NYC* here: <http://sydlondon.com/documentaries/album/sandyversusnyc>





12 Days After: Mary, eighty-six, in her Coney Island apartment. Mary is originally from Italy and a former seamstress in the New York fashion industry. She has no heat, no elevator, no water; work lights were set up this day, giving minimal light for the first time since the storm. When the power went out Mary thought she had gone blind. Her husband died when she was sixty, and she's lived alone ever since. Mary says she prefers to use a rolling shopping cart rather than use Medicare money for a walker because she wants Medicare money to go to people "who really need it." Living on the fifth floor, she now relies on volunteers from People's Relief to bring her water, food, and medication.



31 Days After: First floor of the Ocean Bay complex, which was completely submerged in water. This is the wall next to Jovan Torres's bed. The white film on the walls is mold; black mold also is growing. FEMA denied any assistance to the Torres family, citing "no visible damage" as the reason. Four young children live in the apartment, including Jovan.

31 Days After: The Red Cross distributing bottles of clean water and hot meals in Far Rockaway, Queens.





31 Days After: INSPECTED — Lawful Occupancy Permitted. Far Rockaway, Queens.



40 Days After: As streets are cleared local residents return to their homes to pull out the wet drywall before the moisture and damage spread. Rockaways, Queens.

42 Days After: The second of four local community meetings held by the New York City Housing Authority at the Ocean Bay Apartments, Far Rockaway, Queens. While there was a huge turnout for the first meeting, only a fraction of residents came to the second meeting because residents felt lied to and unheard.







50 Days After: Trina, who runs the medical clinic out of the Action Center in Far Rockaway, organized a free flu vaccination clinic for local residents.

60 Days After: Ms. Doe, director of the Action Center, walks through the gym that was turned into a distribution center after the "protest diaper" delivery. Immediately following Sandy, the Action Center transformed itself into a distribution center and a medical center from a community center. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the mayor's office applied pressure to the Action Center as tried to shut down numerous distribution and medical centers during December 2012. Outdoor distribution centers were successfully closed across Staten Island and the Rockaways despite local outcry. As tensions grew, the Action Center, a licensed indoor community center, received huge pallets of donated diapers. They served as a reminder of what basic, urgent needs there still were in this neighborhood two months after Sandy.



66 Days After: The New York City Housing Authority subcontracted out cleaning its many residential buildings (the projects) damaged by Sandy.