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Neighbors unite amid sandbags, memories

FIRST PERSON

By Emma Dawson
of The News-Sentinel

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Along with the water, there has been a flood of curiosity in my neighborhood. Since the flood, neighbors I never even knew had opted to turn off the television and walk around the streets of West Central, doing their best Shelley Winters impersonations. ("Wow! Look at all that *water!*")

Last Tuesday, that's just what I intended to do. But then I changed my mind.

As I watched the volunteers lining up around the pile of sandbags on the corner of Nelson and Berry streets, I thought about the Flood of 1982, when my family was forced to evacuate our Edgewater Avenue home. The eight of us - crammed in a van with our spinet piano - left our house in the middle of the night and drove to my godmother's house on the north side of town. We stayed there for more than a week. But, thanks to sandbagging, our house never got wet.

I figured it was my turn to help. So, I sat down my beer, walked toward the pile of sandbags and stood next to one of those mysterious neighbors I'd never met.

Once I was calf-deep in the murky water, my husband, brother and a couple of our friends agreed to help, too. We lined up next to about 20 other volunteers and spent the next hour stacking sandbags across Nelson, protecting it from the water that was slowly pouring onto Berry.

The gritty bags were heavy, soaked with recent rain and river water. Every time I picked one up, I made a noise that sounded like something Al Pacino would say. ("Oooooo-ugh.") And when I tossed my fourth bag into the arms of the man standing next to me, I realized that one of the pink flip-flops I had mistakenly worn was no longer on my foot and was probably sailing somewhere down Berry.

By the time we'd blocked Nelson, the front of my shirt was covered in dirt. I had been using my arms, stomach and chest (and probably my legs, head and pancreas) to lift and throw the heavy

bags. My biceps (or, at least the area where my biceps *should* be) were aching.

My neighbor Phil Bristow was the only volunteer who stayed completely clean - although there was a wicked-looking rash spreading across his forearms, which had been rubbed raw by the burlap-type material of the bags.

About 11:30 p.m., a representative from the Army Corps of Engineers told us to move all the bags we had stacked to a different location, a piece of lower ground in front of a house. As you can imagine, we complained.

"Who are you and why should we be listening to you?" someone asked.

"Where's the free coffee and visit from Ronald Reagan?" I asked, in reference to Reagan's visit to the Summit City during the 1982 flood.

Pretty soon we were at it again - tossing sandbags from one pair of skinny arms to another. By midnight, we had cleared the street. I felt like Rosie the Riveter - muscles (if I had any) flexing, filthy from head to toe, a grim look of determination on my face.

Then, my neighbor Ethan pulled up his Jeep to the water's edge, opened the doors and turned up the radio. Over the conversation of the volunteers - most dressed in T-shirts, jeans and sandals - I could hear jazz. My friends and I sat on the curb, bottles of beer and dirty flip-flops placed next to us.

Our work was done for the night, although another load of sandbags would arrive the next day and the cycle would begin again. We knew that tomorrow, more neighbors would turn off their televisions, wander in small groups toward Berry and Thieme Avenue, and, again, end up wishing they had worn boots.

Emma Downs' column normally appears Wednesday. This column is the personal commentary of the writer and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinion of The News-Sentinel.

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