

Spirit of community rose higher than water

I have more than four feet of water soaking my basement as I write this, and I don't even recognize my once tranquil backyard as a torrent of muddy water gushes through it, taking with it my two boathouses, a canoe and part of my fence. Ask me why I'm feeling blessed. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't be feeling very lucky right now. But considering I just survived the flood of the century, I am.

Television coverage featured a series of aerial shots showing floating boathouses, submerged homes and gushing waters. But for me, the flood of '96 will always replay as a series of images that couldn't be captured unless you were there.

Scene I begins on Thursday afternoon when I suggest to my husband that we might want to get some sandbags to secure our home on the main canal. At this point the water in the canal is below normal level as the Lake Corporation, in preparation of the pending Tualatin River overflow, starts lowering the lake. "We won't need them," he tried to reassure me. "And besides what good will they do?" I didn't know for sure, but in the face of my first pangs of helplessness I decided I wanted to get a few anyway to barricade the sliding glass door off our sunken basement. When I visited the city maintenance office in search of 30 sandbags, I was fully prepared to



HOME WITH A VIEW

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fill them, tie them and deliver them. "Oh, you can't take that many by yourself," the woman in the office explained. "We'll have them delivered." And 15 minutes later I had 30 filled sandbags in my driveway. Little did I realize that would be the first of four deliveries in the next 24 hours.

Scene II is later that night when a police officer knocks on our door suggesting we evacuate because of concern about the integrity of the gate trying to ward off some of the Tualatin River's wrath. We decide

against it at the moment but pack our bags just in case. And in those bags go the photo albums and the videos. The "what if" scenario we had imagined, should we ever be faced with a disaster, was actually playing itself out.

Scene III came at 11:45 a.m. on Friday when I walked in the house after picking up our daughter from preschool to hear my husband running the Shop Vac downstairs. Although the canal water was still 15 feet from our door, we had started to flood from the groundwater seeping up and in.

Scene IV takes place after our third call for more sandbags — 100 this time, to build a second wall stacked three to four feet high. Following the city truck that delivered the bags were close to 15 vehicles filled with volunteers ready to help. They lined up alongside our house and formed a chain to hoist the bags in our defense. Despite the fact that the water at this point was only 10 feet from my house and rising, I found myself laughing and feeling lifted in spirit by the good will that surrounded me. Some of that human chain were neighbors who had been checking in with us all day. But most of them were strangers hailing from Portland and Tigard, just responding to televised calls for help. I hope they realize how much more they bolstered than just our home's safety by showing up at our

doorstep in our hour of need.

Scene V comes at 7 p.m. as I'm packing food to carry up to our third story as the water begins inching its way up our basement steps, threatening our main floor where all our furniture has been stored. There's a knock on the door, and I look up to see more than 15 neighbors and friends coming to our rescue, moving couches up our staircase, taking my kids home for the night, rescuing my cat, emptying our shelves and moving the contents up to higher ground, bringing over food, bags, boots. I keep on working as we feel we're racing against the clock, but that image is what brings tears to both my husband and me after everyone leaves.

Unfortunately, the Flood of '96 was not a disaster I had the luxury of watching on TV in the comfort of my own living room. Instead I was one of the victims the rest of the nation could be grateful they were not. And while our comeback is a formidable task that carries a steep price tag with it, we have been touched by so much human kindness that right now with more than four feet of water flooding our basement, the most vivid image I am left with is not one of rising waters but one of rising human spirits.

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