



Hurricanes and Hearing Loss

Surviving the Storm

By Lise Hamlin

Lois Johnson was fast asleep in the early morning hours of September 13, 2008, when her children woke her, shining a flashlight on her face. It wasn't just any night, it was the night Hurricane Ike hit Houston, Texas.

It's possible you don't remember Hurricane Ike that hit Houston, the largest city in Texas, in 2008. We all remember Hurricane Katrina, whose images are seared in our collective consciousness. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was the costliest hurricane (more than \$81 billion in property damage), as well as one of the five deadliest in the history of the United States with well over 1,500 lost souls.

What you may not remember is that Hurricane Ike was the third costliest hurricane to ever make landfall in the United States at an estimated property damage of \$7.3 billion. It's true that it's difficult to remember all the details about all those hurricanes we've heard about. Unless, of course, you find yourself in the middle of one.

Lois Johnson knew that a hurricane was on the way. Living in Texas, there is no getting around the fact that hurricanes do make landfall. Just three years prior to Hurricane Ike, many residents remembered the preparations for Hurricane Rita when chaotic attempts at evacuation turned highways into parking lots, with many running out of gas and abandoning their cars in 90 degree plus weather.

According to Wikipedia's description of Hurricane Rita:

Evacuees fought heavy traffic Wednesday afternoon through mid-day Friday... Many motorists ran out of gas or experienced breakdowns in temperatures that neared 100°F. Traffic volumes did not ease for nearly 48 hours as more than three million residents evacuated the area in

advance of the storm. This was the largest evacuation in U.S. history...

In some areas, the effects of Hurricane Rita were not nearly as severe as anticipated. The storm surge feared in Galveston and Houston struck farther east as the storm's center...

The combination of the man-made disaster that was the evacuation of Houston, with the fact that Rita had far less impact than anticipated, gave authorities reason to pause before ordering a similar evacuation in advance of Ike's arrival. While there were counties that did issue evacuation orders for Ike, the evacuation warnings were nowhere near as extensive as that for Rita. In fact, Houston and the surrounding areas North of Galveston were told to "hunker down" and shelter in place.

According to Associated Press, as reported by FoxNews.com on September 12, 2008:

Ike's eye was forecast to strike somewhere near Galveston late Friday or early Saturday then head inland for Houston, but the sprawling weather system nearly as big as Texas was already buffeting the Gulf Coast and causing flooding in areas still recovering from Labor Day's Hurricane Gustav.

Because of its ominous size, storm surge and flooding were the greatest threats. In unusually strong language, forecasters even warned of 'certain death' for stalwarts who insisted on staying in Galveston; most had complied, along with hundreds of thousands of fellow Texans in counties up and down the coastline.

But in a move designed to avoid highway gridlock as the storm closed in, most of Houston's two million residents hunkered down and were ordered not to leave.

Lois "Hunkers Down" As Advised

Lois, like many in Houston, decided to shelter in her own home before the arrival of Ike. When Lois' children woke her that night, she had no idea how bad it really was. With her cochlear implant off, she was deaf. But she could see the fear on her children's faces as they checked in on her. Still, it wasn't until she put her cochlear implant processor on that she could hear what they were hearing. What reached her ears was the ferocity of a storm that was ripping shingles off the roof of her home. Her children woke Lois just before the rain started pouring into almost every room.

They began to fear the roof would collapse around them. They decided to pack a few things and dash to the home of Lois' daughter, leaving at daybreak and when the storm died down. By the time they left, the wind had subsided. They made it safely to her daughter's home. When Lois returned to her own home the next day, she found the ceilings had, in fact, fallen in. Her home had become a total disaster.

A tropical storm with thunder and lightning followed Ike, adding to the misery. Galveston and several islands along the coast were almost completely wiped out. It took months before her home was livable again. Lois says she feels very lucky to have survived and have her family there to help her ride out those storms.

Lessons Learned

After the storm, Lois was struck by the fact that she very nearly slept through what she calls "the wrath of Ike." In fact, she heard from other people with hearing loss who really did sleep through the storm. One person told her about sleeping through the storm,

continued on page 16

Hurricanes and Hearing Loss

continued from page 15

then finding herself isolated in a house without power. Without power, there was no television, radio, or cell phones, no way to communicate with the outside world or find out what was happening in the outside world. Even those old TTYs wouldn't work without power.

Lois was lucky that her grown children were with her during and after the storm and the night after all power had been knocked out when the wind downed power lines. They had no access to television after the 9 p.m. news broadcast on September 12, 2008, the evening before the storm hit.

Her daughter happened to live near the power station, so they were again lucky that her daughter's home was among the first to have electricity restored. Others were not nearly as lucky—a huge swath of Texas had no power for two weeks. Stores, schools, gas stations, and banks were shuttered during that time. People had to make do in the intense heat and without power.

Planning Ahead

We shouldn't depend on our lucky stars to see us through the storm. We need to plan for emergencies.

If you have a hearing loss, be sure you have your communication needs covered. Do you have the back-up technology to ride out the storm without electricity? With the National Weather Service sending out reports well in advance, hurricanes are one of those emergency situations that we are given ample time to prepare for. If you make sure your car's gas tank is full and you have a car charger for your phone or portable captioned television, you are in a good position to get the information you need. Here are some of the things you can use during a power outage:

- Cell phone, PDA, or Smart Phone that accepts text messaging with a car power adaptor to charge your cell phone
- Portable captioned television with

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- car power adaptor
- Personal assistive listening system with batteries
- Extra hearing aid and extra batteries
- Extra cochlear implant processor and car charger for the rechargeable batteries
- Battery-powered radio—even if you can't hear it, your neighbors might
- Battery back-up for a laptop computer with Internet access

If you are not prepared when a storm is on the horizon, it may be best to move to a shelter with others who can help you survive the storm and the aftermath.

Lois also reported that while the TV was on, the captioning of the emergency broadcast was great. For those of us who live in areas that provide live captioning of local news programs, having good captioning in an emergency can be a lifesaver.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) does not require captioning, but they do have rules requiring visual display of what is said during emergencies: "emergency information that is provided in the audio portion of programming must be provided either using closed captioning or other methods of visual presentation, such as open captioning, crawls, or scrolls that appear on the screen." <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/closedcaption.html>

If you live in a community that does not provide real-time captioning for their regular news broadcasts, contact your local broadcast station to encourage them to provide live captioning for emergency situations.

There are alternatives to getting your information from television broadcasters. State and local communities are now turning to the

Internet to post their community emergency information. If you have access to the Internet, check to see what your community plans to post, if anything, during an emergency. In some communities, text messaging of emergency information is available to residents who sign up for that. Know what's available in your community in advance.

Hurricane Season 2010 Begins June 1

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Most communities have emergency preparedness websites that can give you the kind of general information you need to prepare for emergencies. Check your community's website for that information.

However, you will have to think beyond the basic supply kit (food, water, medical supplies). You need to be sure that your particular situation is covered. Besides your communication needs, have you prepared for having any medications that need to be kept refrigerated? Do you have copies of documentation you might need if you need to evacuate?

Do you have pets or service animals to take care of? Service animals are protected by law and should stay with you whether you shelter at home or need to evacuate. But also remember to check on your pets and keep them close to you. Do not leave them locked up in a room by themselves or locked in your home if you need to evacuate. In fact, since the experience of Hurricane Katrina when many abandoned their pets or conversely refused to evacuate without pets, local authorities now plan for sheltering of pets. You can find out what your local plan is by contacting the local emergency management agency or the local branch of the Humane Society or ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has information to help you prepare for

a hurricane: http://www.fema.gov/hazard/hurricane/hu_before.shtm. You can also find information on the website for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on how to prepare for a hurricane.

Lois is back in her home, with a new roof and a new attitude. She'll be the first to tell you that you need to prepare for a storm. She wants to be sure no one wakes up in the middle of the night the way she did—a flashlight in her face and fear in the eyes of her children. You don't have to. You can be prepared. **TTM**

Lise Hamlin is the director of public policy for HLAA. She is HLAA's representative on the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Consumer Advisory Committee and the FCC's Communications Security, Reliability and Interoperability Council. She has also served on the U.S. Access Board's Passenger Vessel Emergency Alarms Advisory Committee, the E9-1-1 Stakeholder's Council, the Maryland State Task Force to Study Visual Smoke and

Evacuation Alarms, the Montgomery County (MD) Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task Force, and the Montgomery County Maryland Committee on Emergency Preparedness.

Ms. Hamlin was a member of TDI's Community Emergency Preparedness Information Network team that drafted and delivered the course, "Emergency Responders and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community: Taking the First Steps to Disaster Preparedness." She has presented that course and emergency preparedness talks around the country alerting consumers and professionals alike to the needs of people with hearing loss in an emergency. She can be reached at lhamlin@hearingloss.org.



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HLAA is Working for You: HLAA's Public Policy and Advocacy Blog: <http://hlaa-advocacy.blogspot.com/>

HLAA's Initiative for People Ages 18-35 with Hearing Loss

HearingLossNation is a non-profit online community designed specifically for hard of hearing individuals between the ages of 18 and 35. Go to www.hearingloss.org and click on **HearingLossNation** on the home page.



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