

Hurricane Harvey Cleanup and Open Source Technology

(Author Unknown)

I looked around and couldn't believe my eyes. Molded clothes rested on frayed couches. Abandoned toys sat next to damaged compressors. Damp letters seeped through mailbox doors. It surprised me how quickly appliances rust. Two weeks after Hurricane Harvey departed, homeowners still milled about in shocked disbelief. We drove past the lives of so many families, contained in trash bags at the end of their driveways, waiting to be picked up and dumped in a landfill.

When Harvey hit two years ago, we were fortunately spared. I still shudder at tornado warnings and fear the next big one, but my best friend Davis's life would never be the same. He lost his house, not in the initial deluge, but when the army corps of engineers released a levy by his neighborhood that was overflowing with storm surge. His family didn't have flood insurance, but I was thankful that FEMA eventually awarded them about \$40,000 to help rebuild.

Davis and I played club and high school lacrosse together since we were ten, and our parents are close friends. During the two weeks it took for all the water to recede, the police blocked entry to his subdivision to prevent looting and theft. As soon as possible, our lacrosse teammates and I mobilized and went to his house.

Harvey poured problems on hundreds of thousands of families. Our efforts were hardly a drop in the bucket compared to the overall catastrophe, but an accumulation of individual effort eventually filled buckets for Davis and his family. We removed everything from the first floor: drywall, insulation, flooring, appliances, furniture, and memorabilia. It took our team of thirty over ten hours to finish the demolition and sort the debris into piles on the front lawn for eventual removal.

We were all a little nervous about talking to Davis because we thought that we'd struggle to find words that would provide emotional support. In reality, sincerity and support came naturally. It's surreal how we talked about new plays for the upcoming season while shattering tile and ripping out drywall. We took turns straining ourselves to smash the water-soaked floor tiles, making sure no-one got too exhausted. Our parents found it just as natural to support Justin's. What can you do besides make small talk about Houston sports and the heat and humidity?

For most of my life, sports began and ended with proving I was the best, winning championships, or earning a college scholarship. I competed in Division 1 showcases before breaking my wrist twice, limiting my future athletic opportunities. After Harvey, I realized that teamwork and camaraderie go beyond the field, and our relationships mean more than state rankings.

Although it felt great to be there with my team helping Davis, I couldn't help but think of the other 30,000 displaced peoples, many of whom lacked flood insurance. Our 300-man hours merely demolished a home they still needed to rebuild. Witnessing nature's power made me feel smaller and weaker than I ever had before, but it's clear I wasn't alone in feeling that way.

Harvey inspired a team of computer scientists to found Organization, Whereabouts, and Logistics (OWL) to aid with natural disasters. They won IBM's inaugural Call for Code challenge. OWL offers

a hardware/software solution that provides first responders with a simple interface for managing natural disasters. Their system could have provided better information to the Army Corps of Engineers to better inform whether flooding Davis's neighborhood was necessary.

Even as the next lacrosse season started and Davis, along with our other displaced friends, returned home after almost a year of rebuilding and renovating, I didn't forget about project OWL. It's open-source, meaning anyone can visit with and modify the code. I started to try and contribute to the project but felt too intimidated to do much because I didn't understand most of the code, let alone have the competence to improve it.

Throughout junior year, I focused on personal projects to improve my skills. I finally developed the confidence to contact the project OWL founders. It turns out one of them lives a few minutes drive away. We connected, and he gave me complete access to the source code and hardware challenges. I've been both working on the user-interface part of the software and creating new enclosures for the hardware. Wherever my college journey or career takes me, using technology to help society will remain at my forefront.

Source:

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