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# 'ROUND HERE



Tracey Towne (right) and her sons Justin Griffith, 16 (left), and Dylan Champine, 10, live in an apartment in Waterbury after they lost their home during Tropical Storm Irene. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS

## A flood victim finds her **VOICE**

### VERMONT LIVES

After Tracey Towne lost her home to Tropical Storm Irene she found a path to a new life



DAVID GOODMAN  
Free Press Correspondent

An acrid gray cloud billowed over downtown Waterbury. I followed the smoke back to its source, driving across the Winooski River and down Main Street in the small town of Duxbury. I could see a large, orange bonfire roaring under the light rain. A group of about a dozen people were going back and forth adding things to the pyre.

As I walked toward them, I finally made out what they were feeding the voracious fire: their homes.

A large excavator prowled across the lawns, tearing off pieces of mobile homes like a primeval creature feasting on carrion. Only in this case, the carcasses were the remnants of people's homes, dreams and lives. Tracey Towne stood amid the ruins, her face

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VERMONT LIVES



Tracey Towne is working to rebuild her life after she lost her home during Tropical Storm Irene last August. She and her two children now live in a new apartment. GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS

*“Irene may have been one of the better things to happen to me. That may sound bizarre. But I’m a happier person. I’m a stronger person. And I know that I can get through anything..”*

TRACEY TOWNE

Voice

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streaked with soot, rain and tears. “It’s sad. It’s really emotional,” the 41-year-old mother of two told me as she clutched some photographs that she had just salvaged from her blue trailer.

“We moved here when Dylan was 1 year old.” Her 9-year-old son clutched her sweatshirt. “I felt safe because I knew that people here were watching him. Everyone here,” she said, motioning to the ghost town of empty trailers around us, “was part of his family.”

This was the scene that I encountered last October in Patterson’s Mobile Home Park. When Tropical Storm Irene tore into Vermont on Aug. 28, 2011, Duxbury’s half-century-old mobile home park — it began as cheap lodging for workers building the interstate highway — was dealt a fatal blow.

The Winooski River, which bounds the mobile home park on its north side, overflowed its banks, sending up to six feet of water into the 19 mobile homes that comprised the tight-knit community. On the night of the storm, desperate neighbors helped one another to flee the rising waters, and park manager Ed Patterson rescued a number of residents in his canoe. Many had less than 15 minutes to escape.

The families were burning their homes on this day because they couldn’t afford the \$1,500 that they were told it would cost to dispose of them. Resident Mike Lavigne, a heavy equipment operator, borrowed an excavator from his employer for the weekend, and dealt the final death blows to his and his neighbors’ mobile homes. The Dumpsters overflowed quickly, so they burned everything that didn’t fit.

“This house took months to build,” Towne said, motioning to the mobile home that she renovated and was now dismantling, “and

minutes to destroy.”

Starting over

I run into Towne recently at a Vermont Mountaineers baseball game in Montpelier. She is at the ballpark with her son Justin, 16, sharing an activity they both enjoy. I ask her how it’s been going.

“It’s been a year of changes,” she says with a weary chuckle. She offers to fill me in a few days later.

We sit in Towne’s comfortable second floor apartment above a pizza parlor in downtown Waterbury. She has the day off from her seasonal job at Harrington’s in Richmond and has just dropped off Dylan, now 10, at the local summer rec program. She relaxes on a flowered love seat in front of an open window. A mild breeze catches her short brown hair and periodically tosses it into her eyes. She shows me some school portraits of her kids that her ex-husband gave her to replace all the photos that she lost.

She is quick to smile and laugh — one indication that she has come a long way since the flood.

Towne, now 42, was born in Waterbury, but moved to Fayston when she was 6 years old. For seven years, she lived with her mother, stepfather, five siblings and two half-siblings in a hunting camp with no running water. “We hauled in water in buckets, did laundry in the river, and I remember waking up to very cold mornings before we got the wood stove lit. I had a rough childhood,” she says, seeming to marvel at her own story, “but it was fun. Life was simple back then.”

Towne graduated from Harwood Union High School in 1988 and married her high school sweetheart soon after. I first met her in the mid-1990s when we she and I were both EMTs on Waterbury’s volunteer ambulance service. I admired her skills and confidence as she tended to patients from our

community. Unlike me who was a relative newcomer to town then, Towne seemed to know almost everyone we cared for. Frightened patients would often smile in relief when she would bound through their door with a smile or friendly comment.

After having a child and getting divorced in 2001, Towne was thrilled that she could buy her first home at Patterson Park in 2004. She bought a 19-year-old three-bedroom mobile home for \$23,000. Her mortgage and lot rent came to \$400 per month. Working at a local supermarket and later at a gas station convenience store, she could afford her home, which now included Dylan.

Towne enjoyed the tight-knit community of Patterson Park. “It’s a great little community and a great place to live,” she recalls. “Everybody took care of everybody and people looked out for each other.” She even helped a neighbor undergoing cancer treatment by giving him shots, saving him trips to the doctor.

Tropical Storm Irene wiped out Patterson Park with breathtaking speed. With her terrified 9-year-old son waiting in a truck, Towne raced into their home to grab a few things. “Within the 15 to 20 minutes that it took me to pack an overnight bag and make a couple of phone calls, the water was up to our knees... but I told Dylan the water wouldn’t get into the trailer.”

The morning after the storm, Towne swung by to check on her home. Water had risen to the middle of her living room windows. Slimy gray mud coated everything inside and out. She burst into tears.

“It was just devastating... I grew up with nothing. I didn’t have much. But what I had was what I earned and we worked so hard for it.”

Disaster targets the vulnerable

Mobile home residents around Vermont took the hardest hit from Tropical Storm Irene. Sixteen mobile home parks and more

than 500 mobile homes were damaged or destroyed in the flooding.

“The flood impacted mobile home dwellers disproportionately,” says Jen Hollar, deputy commissioner of Vermont’s Department of Economic Housing and Community Development. She notes that while only 7 percent of the state’s houses are mobile homes, 15 percent of the homes damaged or destroyed by Irene were mobile homes.

In the wake of the storm, mobile home owners have been especially vulnerable. “In many instances, owners of mobile homes don’t have as many resources with which to recover,” says Hollar.

While other flood victims have been able to repair their homes and move back in, flooded mobile home owners have faced the total destruction of their homes and communities.

The plight of mobile home owners after Irene has highlighted the shortage of affordable housing in the state. Vermont has one of the tightest rental housing markets in the country. Vermonters pay the seventh highest rents in the country among residents of non-metro areas, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. Affordable rental units are scarce: The state’s rental vacancy rate in 2011 was 4.2 percent — the second lowest in the country.

After being dislocated, Tracey Towne and her family stayed in local motels before finally finding an apartment to rent in Waterbury. The price is relatively steep: Her two-bedroom apartment costs \$950 per month — more than double what she paid at Patterson Park.

Immediately after the storm, Towne and her Patterson Park neighbors confronted other challenges. They tried to save money by renting a Dumpster for \$589 each and demolishing their own trailers, only to receive a bill totaling more than \$12,000 for the five Dumpsters. No one told them they would have to pay per pound of trash.

As the indignities piled up, Towne decid-

VERMONT LIVES

ed to fight. She joined a new group, Mobile Home Residents for Equality and Fairness, which was organized by the Vermont Workers' Center to help mobile home residents advocate for their needs after the flood.

Suddenly, Tracey Towne discovered her voice.

Towne became a regular at meetings with local and state officials. She helped lead a group of mobile home residents to negotiate with the trash removal company to waive what they considered to be unfair fees for their Dumpsters. After months of stonewalling, the trash hauler waived the fees.

Towne, once a victim, was becoming a victor, winning back her dignity and control of her life.

"It was totally clear the first time Tracey came to a meeting of mobile home residents that she was a leader," recalls Sarah Weintraub, an organizer with the Vermont Workers' Center. "She was ready to fight. She understood that ... this is a struggle for working class people." The Workers' Center made a film, "Strength of the Storm," that featured Towne and other mobile home residents that "tells the story of ordinary people coming together to make change."

Towne tells me, "People needed to know what we were going through. People need to know that to this day, 11 months into this, people are still struggling every day."

"I wanted my voice — our voices — to be heard."

And that is just what has happened.

Shortly after Towne and her Patterson Park neighbors disposed of their own homes last fall, Lt. Gov. Phil Scott and Commerce and Community Development Secretary Lawrence Miller announced a program to remove mobile homes at no cost to residents. (Towne and her neighbors were ultimately reimbursed for their removal costs.)

This spring, Gov. Peter Shumlin invoked emergency powers to condemn hundreds of destroyed mobile homes, which has resulted in nearly \$1 million in additional FEMA benefits for mobile home residents. The state also passed a tax exemption for mobile homes that are purchased to replace ones lost in last year's floods.

"This is about the future," Towne says with urgency. "It's about my kids. It's about equality. It's about making the world a better place. Someday, I hope my boys don't have to struggle."

A new strength

Towne brings out a box to show me some of the family photos that she salvaged from her destroyed trailer. Many are damaged and stuck together, but volunteers helped her save a number of the images. She thumbs them slowly, pausing as she peers at some of the water stained photos.

"I miss my old place. I miss the past," she confesses as she sifts through images of her life. "But I think in the long run — this is an awful thing to say — Irene may have been one of the better things to happen to me. That may sound bizarre. But I'm a happier person. I'm a stronger person. And I know that I can get through anything after that episode. A lot of us felt it changed our lives for the better."

Seeing my surprise, Towne offers some insight. She tells me that she recently broke up with her longtime boyfriend, something she says was overdue.

"Sometimes you are in a situation that you don't feel you can get out of those situations. ... There are people who would have just walked away. But a year ago I wasn't that type of person. Today I am that type of person."

"It's not easy to just up and move with two kids. When Irene forced us to leave, that was my opportunity to say, 'You know what? It's time to start my life over.' To see my life with a different perspective. And that's what I'm doing."

Her family still copes with the after-effects of the storm. Her son Dylan

"still fears water and floods." She confesses that she "had a meltdown" a few days earlier when she realized she may have lost her only photo of her biological father, who she never met.

"That's another thing I learned," she interjects with a soft laugh, "keep your pictures on a disc."

Last week, the town of Duxbury issued a conditional permit for Patterson Park to reopen, though mobile homes will have to be elevated above the 100-year flood level.

"I had planned on mov-

ing back there," she says with a sigh. "But being separated, I don't know if I will. I'm comfortable here right now. My boys are comfortable. I don't wanna move again."

I ask about her plans for the future. "I don't have plans. Someday I'd like to have my own home again with my own yard, a barbecue grill, my own washer/dryer. Someday. But give it a little time."

"I have learned that life can change very quickly," she reflects. "My life has taken a 180. I don't sweat the little things. I don't

sweat the big things anymore, either. I just try to live day by day."

"I just go with the flow." She breaks into a hearty laugh at what she just said. "Literally."

David Goodman, an author and journalist in Waterbury, writes the bi-weekly Vermont Lives column. He can be reached at dangoodvt@gmail.com, or follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/davidgoodmanvt.

DAILY CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

- 1 Buckle
- 6 Countertop section
- 10 Biodiverse habitat
- 14 Funnyman with a horn
- 15 Spot of wine?
- 16 Pioneering polster Roper
- 17 Listing
- 18 Maryland beach town
- 20 Press and such
- 21 Good location for a fault finder?
- 22 Paula of "He & She"
- 24 Carol opener
- 25 Rotational force
- 27 Saw
- 30 Mobile \_\_\_
- 33 Losses control
- 35 Book before Nehemiah
- 36 Waters near the South Pole
- 38 Like the Talmud
- 40 Wingless parasite
- 41 Dances in the end zone, maybe
- 43 Ultimate
- 44 \_\_\_ cabbage
- 46 Woolly
- 48 A lot of noise
- 50 Stressful lifestyles
- 54 Brightness detector
- 57 1986 rock memoir
- 58 Uncovered, in a way
- 59 Santa-tracking org.
- 60 Astronomical dist.
- 61 Low
- 62 Fashion giant with headquarters in Florence
- 63 "Lost in Space" child actor Billy
- 64 Common gp.
- 65 Averb

DOWN

- 1 Contender's target
- 2 "Hasta la vista!"
- 3 Bad thing to be taken for
- 4 Support piece
- 5 Fries, say
- 6 Whiteout cause
- 7 Prepares to take the ice
- 8 Barbary beasts
- 9 Party whose name means "renaissance" in Arabic
- 10 Tivo, e.g.
- 11 Co-founder of the Actors Studio
- 12 Lifesavers, briefly
- 13 Four-time Indy 500 winner
- 19 Nonprofit sports org. with \$846 million in revenue in 2010-'11
- 23 Discount rack abbr.
- 26 Patriot who led the capture of Fort Ticonderoga
- 28 Moxie
- 29 Every partner

- 30 Lab sounds
- 31 President who oversaw the issuance of the first U.S. postage stamp
- 32 Ellis Bell, to Emily Brontë
- 34 Assailed
- 37 Antiseptic
- 39 Guitarists' buys
- 42 Like a motorboat
- 45 Massage target
- 47 Avoid dishes, in a way
- 49 Gear for shipwreck hunters
- 51 Dating qualifier
- 52 Pass
- 53 "Sexy" Beatles woman
- 54 Where to get a date
- 55 Rwanda native
- 56 They may span decades

ANSWER TO PREVIOUS PUZZLE:

JAW STOP IN ROSE  
 ERA HERETO EBON  
 BET EVENAS ALOT  
 CLAYON THE LINE  
 BEHAVES NIGER  
 OLDIE BLOGGERS  
 CLOTSTOLEARN  
 KEG HTEST EPA  
 CLOONEY TUNES  
 ANCHORED SPEAK  
 SERIF COHORTS  
 CLEFT CLEANING  
 OLAF HALTER IFS  
 TITO IMBEAT ZOO  
 SEEN PEARLS EXT

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By Barry C. Silk  
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**UNIVERSAL Sudoku Puzzle**

Complete the grid so every row, column and 3 x 3 box contains every digit from 1 to 9 inclusively.

Previous puzzle solution

5	6	2	8	9	1	3	7	4
8	1	7	3	4	5	2	6	9
4	3	9	7	6	2	8	5	1
2	9	6	1	5	3	4	8	7
3	8	5	9	7	4	1	2	6
1	7	4	2	8	6	9	3	5
7	5	1	4	3	6	9	2	8
9	2	6	1	7	5	4	3	8
6	4	3	5	2	9	7	1	8

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

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**JUMBLE** THAT SCRAMBLED WORD GAME  
 by David L. Hoyt and Jeff Knurek

Unscramble these four Jumbles, one letter to each square, to form four ordinary words.

TAOFO

ZEDDA

KCTESH

TAMUNU

Answer here: [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]

(Answers Monday)

Yesterday's Jumbles: ADMIT LATCH SURVEY SWAYED  
 Answer: The octopus made such a good security guard because he was always this — HEAVILY ARMED

I'm going to ask her out.

AFTER SEEING HIS NEW CO-WORKER AT THE CALENDAR FACTORY, HE WANTED TO —