Why disaster victims tell stories of survival to reporters

Amanda Gearing
Master of Arts – Research (student)
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane
gearingap@bigpond.com
The seconds that separated life and death

INSIDE STORY

AMANDA GEARING
HEDLEY THOMAS

WHEN the water in the living room of Steven and Sandra Matthews’s Spring Bluff home reached ankle deep on Monday, they began to discuss how to save their furniture from being waterlogged.

The couple, who were home with their son Sam, 20, and daughter Victoria, 15, were oblivious to the danger that was surging towards them.

As the water level in their house rapidly rose, they realised the only escape was through the ceiling.

By the time they helped their children through the manhole, the water was up to their necks.

Victoria went first, then Sam. By the time he had turned around to help his parents climb into the roof cavity, they were gone, swept to their deaths.

Another daughter, Sarah, who lives across the creek from them, saw the 100m-wide, tsunami-like wave hit the home, ripping a massive hole in its side and carrying a shed and five cars down the valley. She watched horrified, not knowing whether her parents and her siblings had escaped.

Once the water subsided, Sam climbed on to the roof and Sarah saw him signal a V to let her know Victoria was all right.

Steven and Sandra Matthews were swept away by the flash flood in Toowoomba after they pushed their children to safety

Bruce Warhurst, who has been missing since Monday

He then wrote M and D in the air and waved sadly down the creek, indicating their parents had been swept away.

Neighbours immediately began a search for the couple. They found their bodies before nightfall, several kilometres down the creek.

Family friend Mandy Adams said the couple were wonderful parents and foster parents who had given their lives to helping others through their pastoral work and Teen Challenge.

“As a couple they were childhood sweethearts,” Adams said. “The fact they died together is almost poetic. They were really generous people with their time and with caring for people.”

Adams said many other families living in the valley were still missing, and she feared many more have died under the onslaught of the flood.

About the time the wave smashed into the Matthews’s home, Samantha Warhurst was driving out of the family home at Postmans Ridge, further down the Lockyer Valley.

With her were her two-year-old daughter, Hailey, and mother-in-law, Wendy Warhurst.

It was supposed to be just a short trip to Toowoomba.

Warhurst wanted to buy baby wipes for Hailey at the supermarket as well as gumboots for husband Paul to wade around the muddy grounds of their property.

They had left Wendy’s husband, Bruce, to hold the fort in their house in the Lockyer Valley.

When they began the 15-minute drive to Toowoomba, the enormity of Queensland’s floods disaster, hundreds of kilometres to the north and west, seemed remote from the Lockyer’s rural communities and farms, which are famed for their fruit and vegetables and roadside market.

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Finding people who are ready to talk
Practice-led research

Lessons from media reporting:
Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley floods
10 January 2011
Research question

Why did you decide to talk to me about your experiences that were at times very frightening?
Plato wrote in 400 BC

Yesterday evening I returned from the army at Potidea, and having been a good while away, I thought that I should like to go and look at my old haunts . . . My visit was unexpected, and no sooner did they see me entering than they saluted me from afar on all sides; and Chaerephon, who is a kind of madman, started up and ran to me, seizing my hand, and saying, How did you escape, Socrates?
(I should explain that an engagement had taken place at Potidæa not long before we came away, of which the news had only just reached Athens.)

You see, I replied, that here I am. There was a report, he said, that the engagement was very severe, and that many of our acquaintance had fallen.

That, I replied, was not far from the truth.
I suppose, he said, that you were present.
I was.
Then sit down, and tell us the whole story, which as yet we have only heard imperfectly.

Reasons to be interviewed

1. Lessons need to be learned from what happened
2. Desire for the public to know what happened
3. A sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future
4. Personal recovery
1. There are lessons to be learned
I’m surprised that so few died. There are lessons to be learned from all this. It had the potential with rain falling in a wider catchment area to be five or six feet deeper in Grantham. If all the creeks had flowed at the same time and at the same rate, I wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you. Simple as that.

Gilbert Kilah, Grantham
If someone else can learn just one lesson from what I’ve told you then that might save someone’s life. It was horrible for me. Yes, I survived though. If I can save someone else’s life from them hearing this, then that’s great. And being able to tell your story, makes you think that people care and they want to know what’s going on which is also great.

Angela Emmerson

Helidon
2. Desire for the public to know what happened
‘I think history is history and it’s got to be told hasn’t it? I think if history is going to be recorded it’s got to be accurate as well. I’ve told you what I believe happened. Talking to you helps me honour Sylvia. To get emotional about Sylvia honours her.’

Brian Willmett, Postmans Ridge
If people don’t tell people what happened, the next time it happens there will be just the same awful consequences. We will be in the position again where too many people will die for stupid reasons.

Jean Warr
Helidon
3. A sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future
'I think it’s so important that we look at ways of preventing this horrible thing happening ever again. If I can give one little bit of information that helps a bit, that would be great.'

Withcott publican Neil Simpson
I’ve got no problem with talking because if my story is out there then maybe the state can look back and say ‘there’s a person who didn’t get warning, like everyone in Murphy’s Creek and all the poor people in Grantham who lost their lives. Maybe they should do something else about it.'

Nelly Gitsham, Murphys Creek
‘There has to be a level of accountability for local governments to adhere to frameworks that are determined at a state level. To say that they will get it right for the future holds little comfort for my family; they should have had it right to start with. This was one of the biggest floods to take place in Queensland’s history and yet no-one knew about it.’

Matthew Keep, Grantham
4. Personal recovery
I think talking to people and telling my story helps me a lot. You relive it again but it helps me get over it. Talking to reporters and other people has helped me get through it.

John Mahon
I think it’s very beneficial to be able to talk it out. I think that as you talk it helps you sift through things in your own mind. It’s very healing.

Sue Patterson, Murphys Creek
I hope with all my heart that my story is going to help somebody. I need people to know that out of horrible things, good things can come.

Marie Van Straten
Grantham
You can help people more when you’ve been through something like that but if you withdraw into yourself and don’t talk about it, you don’t help yourself and you don’t help anybody else either. I’m really happy to be able to do this.

Marie Van Straten
Grantham
People did die. For a long time I wouldn’t laugh or even smile because I felt, what gives me the right to enjoy life when people around us died? I need people to hear my story and know that you can be a better person by having something really horrible happen. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy much less someone that is close to me. That’s why I want to tell the story now.

Marie Van Straten
Four reasons why disaster survivors spoke about the flood

1. Lessons need to be learned from what happened
2. A desire for the public to know what happened
3. A sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future
4. Personal recovery
The day that changed Grantham

15 October 2011

DOWNLOAD AUDIO

'Within two minutes it went from being no water out in the street to being waist deep inside the shop.' When Queensland went under water in January this year the tiny town of Grantham suffered the greatest loss of life: 12 people died. The locals cling to fences, floated on top of cars and supported each other to survive the unexpected and sudden wall of muddy water and debris that inundated their town. You'll hear tales of fear, bravery and loss in this moving radio feature.

Videos

Select a video from the playlist below.

Playlist

The floodwaters arrive in Grantham

Katherine Godley, a young resident of Grantham, video the rapid rise of the water from her doorstep.

Helmet descent in Grantham

Dramatic footage of a family being hoisted up from the roof of their house. It is filmed...
The Torrent
Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley Floods 10 January 2011

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Questions?

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