

Nockamixon author discusses book about 1955 flood

Hurricanes brought devastation, but area residents persevered.

By Kelly Madsen

Special to The Morning Call

Mary Shafer's book is titled "Devastation on the Delaware" but this Nockamixon author's work is ultimately about hope and the human spirit.

"I talked to 100 people who were involved somehow," she said of the flood of 1955 that cut a swath of destruction through communities along the Delaware River and Neshaminy Creek in Bucks County.

"I found out a lot of people were traumatized. But not one person was bitter. I wanted to tell the story in a way that was hopeful."

Shafer, who self-published the nonfiction book, wrote it to

commemorate the 50th anniversary of the flood last year and to tell the uplifting stories that came out of the disaster.

She has been making appearances locally to talk about her book and the record-setting flood. Thursday, she spoke to the Riegelsville Kiwanis Club at Palisades High School.

The story starts on Aug. 12, 1955, when Hurricane Connie came ashore in North Carolina and was followed days later by Hurricane Diane. The "sisters," as Shafer calls them, barreled up the coast and through the river communities of Bucks by Aug. 18. But, it wasn't until they moved further north the next day that the trouble started.

"What falls in the Poconos is our problem," Shafer said.

Connie dumped 17 inches of rain there and Diane contributed another 12.

"It was an awesome amount of water," she said.

The narrow Brodhead Creek in the Poconos swelled to as much as 30 to 40 feet above its banks and rushed downstream to the Delaware, but not before killing 74 people there.

On Aug. 19, the flood waters of the Delaware covered everything in and around its path.

In Bucks, one woman, a 19-year-old nurse from Doylestown, died when she fell into the Neshaminy Creek.

But while the flood took everything from some people, it gave to others.

Bob Herman of Stroudsburg told Shafer that he learned that day what he is made of.

For almost 50 years, he never told anyone the story of what happened to him Aug. 19. He finally shared it with Shafer.

Herman, who was then 14, saw a man, whose name nobody ever learned, struggling in the rushing waters and Her-

man plunged in to save him.

"Bob said he could only see the man's fingers and he tried to grab them, but they slipped away. He said to me, 'I learned that night that I am brave.'"

The unknown man did not survive.

Further downstream, A.M. Heritage, the civil defense director of Bucks County, coordinated the evacuation of 400 children and counselors from the camps on the islands in the middle of the Delaware using only a party-line telephone from his farm in Central Bucks, which was also under threat from the rising river.

Heritage called to surrounding states to gather as many

helicopters as he could to fly to the islands and rescue the children. "Not one of them died, or was even injured," Shafer said of the children.

Less dramatic, but still heartwarming, is the story of Ruth Gruver.

Her Upper Black Eddy post office was lifted off its foundation and washed down the river. But first, the tiny postmistress gathered all the mail and valuables and carted them back to her house to keep them safe and dry. "She later got a commendation from the Postal Service. People were very proud," Shafer said.

The flood of '55 remains the worst in terms of death, property loss and water levels in Bucks County.

Information on the book and Shafer's appearances can be found at www.55flood.com.

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Shafer