

By Alexandra Ben Othman (Volunteer)

Over two hundred volunteers from the tri-state Muslim community met on Sunday in the community of Midland Beach to help residents affected by Hurricane Sandy. The event was a part of a citywide volunteer effort organized by Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) Relief, Muslim American Society (MAS), Muslim Ummah of North America (MUNA), and The Islamic Center at New York University (ICNYU).

In many areas of Staten Island and other parts of New York, it took several days for agencies to reach the island and begin relief efforts due to inaccessibility to the area. On Sunday, the groups dispatched several teams of five to homes across the neighborhood to deliver food, conduct needs assessment, and help with cleanup. Over one thousand plates of hot food donated from Sumac, located in Elm Park on Staten Island, were delivered to residents throughout the neighborhood. While many residents had received non-perishable food items from local charities, for several it was the first hot meal since the storm began.

Volunteers also went to several homes throughout the neighborhood to conduct needs assessment and assist residents with removal of items destroyed in the flood. Most residents were happy to have a presence in the neighborhood, but had already gone through item removal. However, there were several homes who had only just begun to clean their homes and were elated at the outpouring of support from the broad New York community. One team came across a man who survived the flood. As waters rushed through the streets and past his home, he told us he began to throw items out of the window of his elevated one-story home. When waters reached the top of his front steps, situated five feet above the ground, he jumped out of the house into the waters in hope it would save his life. He was swept into an adjoining fence where he withstood the rest of the flood. Objects from the surrounding area, including those that were displaced from his home, swept past him as they hit his legs while he grasped onto the fence, a move which ultimately saved his life. He watched beyond belief as cars sailed past his home with each wave of seawater.

In the aftermath, his home and family ultimately survived but the items within the home were destroyed. Clothes, appliances, furniture, family photographs, and a yearbook lay strewn across the yard. A small team of five volunteers helped to move items from the yard onto the curb. As bags upon bags were filled, more volunteers began to help. Two high school students from another part of Staten Island found our volunteers moving the belongings and wanted to help. An hour later another team of volunteers joined in the effort and soon twenty volunteers from

different faiths and backgrounds worked together to help their fellow New Yorkers. The owner was overcome with relief and kept repeating the words “you guys are going to make me cry.”

One of the most touching stories that came from the experience was that a neighbor asked one of the volunteers where he was from. He responded that he was a part of MAS Staten Island which was located a short distance from the cleanup site. She quickly admitted that she was against the mosque being built in the neighborhood but admired the work that was being done to rebuild and apologized for what the group was put through two years ago. It was best said by Queens-born DJ Jay Dahbi, “Unfortunate circumstances bring people together and break down the wall people put up that prevent them from knowing one another. Sandy tore down walls, let's build them back up together with unity. I love NYC.”