

Superstorm Godzilla

Storm simulation exercise teaches one high school class and their teacher the value of being “Semper Paratus”

By Maggie Favretti, with contributions by ADM Thad Allen '71

Superstorm *Godzilla*, bearing down on the New York Bight with destructive force three times the magnitude of Hurricane Sandy, made landfall on January 7, 2015. 75 people representing Unified Command and Functional Operations Groups of agencies stepped up and oversaw a safe evacuation of 75% of the residents of Lower Manhattan and other low-lying areas, by banning the use of private vehicles and relying on public transportation’s heroic staff. To make room for people, pets got left behind. While 100-mph winds tore at the fabric of New York City’s infrastructure and 23-foot storm surges submerged rescue vehicles and drowned power stations and sewage treatment plants, 300 citizens representing PETA protested outside City Hall, and launched their own risky “Save the Animals” rescue plan. And then there was the problem with the Main Receiving Hospital...and the recovery....

This wasn’t your average tabletop exercise. The 75 people who stepped up to save New York City from the

nightmare that made Sandy seem like a bad dream were 17 years old, and had no crisis management training at all. From 0745 to 1445, with no break for lunch, they struggled to do their best, using the problem-solving and decision-making skills they had learned, and the scraps of information about infrastructure, government agencies, and crisis management they had researched. They had no choice in the matter—the Storm Crisis was part of their Public Policy class in Urban Issues and Complex Problem Solving. By 1445, they were exhausted, and needed an overnight in a safe space to begin to answer the question “What did *Godzilla* teach me about *what I can do* when problems seem too big to solve?”

Connecting the Dots

On a sparkling fall evening, after a long day working homeland security issues at his firm Booz Allen Hamilton, Admiral Thad Allen '71 opened an innocent-looking email with the subject line “Paul Duddy’s wife’s class.” ADM Allen knew both of them. He and Paul had been in the same class at CGA, and played on the same football team. He had met me, Paul’s wife, a few times and had helped my Public Policy students when they had questions about the Deepwater Horizon crisis and environmental issues in the Gulf of Mexico. He wrote me back right away—“This sounds like a great project,” and scheduled a phone call. I once again discovered that *Semper Paratus* ALSO means “always ready to help out a classmate, no matter how busy I am with pressing matters of international importance.”

In the half-hour phone call, ADM Allen quickly discerned that I needed some basic help, like figuring out which agencies to include in a high-school tabletop exercise, and also some more complex assistance, such as figuring



Scarsdale High School “Unified Command” tackles simulated Superstorm Godzilla. ADM Thad Allen assisted author and Scarsdale High teacher Maggie Favretti, with the initial plans for the full-day exercise, “like figuring out which agencies to include in a high-school tabletop exercise, and also some more complex assistance, such as figuring out what was the right balance between reality and fiction.”



L-R: Mass. Maritime Academy Cadet Connor Pascale, LCDR Marc Sennick currently stationed at USCG Sector New York, and Noah Goldberg from the Westchester County Office of Emergency Management monitor the students' response to Superstorm Godzilla. Their primary role was to provide perspective on the reality of the experience. "LCDR Sennick frequently answered the critical "how real is this?" question — "you might not realize how often this very thing happens."

out what was the right balance between reality and fiction. His response: "You DO understand that we will get as much out of this as you and your students will. Here's what I can do to move this along for you...." Within a few days, Admiral Allen had discussed the project with RADM Linda Fagan, the First District Commander in Boston, and she was fully supportive. He then put me in touch with Brad Penuel, (NYU Engineering, Co-Chair with ADM Allen of the NY Sandy Commission, and Director of NYU's Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response) and CAPT Gordon Loebel (USCG Sector New York). They each responded right away and spent time talking through the project with me and discussing the details of what I needed. They then introduced me, under the subject line, "Thad Allen's Invitation," to InterCEP's Bill Raisch, FEMA's Sean Waters, NY OEM's Ira Tannenbaum, and LCDR Marc Sennick, USCG Sector NY.

LCDR Sennick, whose favorite quote is "It's amazing what a team can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit," opened his first conversation with me by saying, "I want you to know that I love working with kids (he has four of his own) and I look for opportunities to teach." He became a full partner in the design, helping to determine the right balance between reality and fiction ("sometimes fiction helps us to grasp the reality better"),

success and failure ("we don't want them to get paralyzed and quit"), and engagement and exhaustion ("we want them to be able to look up at the end and say, 'I can't believe I did that, but I did.'") His first "student" was me. LCDR Sennick runs the Incident Management Division in Sector NY, and clearly explained how important it is to have an organized planned response system, yet how the organization evolves through the real-life incident. Together we created a structure for students to make some decisions about how to organize their agencies into functional teams to face down *Godzilla*.

Moving "forward together," LCDR Sennick and I created a plan for the exercise that challenged the students to use their decision-making and problem-solving tools in a high-impact, high-energy, agency role-play. There were 25 government and private sector "agencies" represented in the "Command Center," sorted (by the students after their agency research) into Functional Operations Groups and Unified Command. Students invited the Social Studies Department Chair to play the Mayor. "City Hall" students had to prepare him for regularly scheduled press conferences. Local media played the press.

Godzilla Hits New York

Fortunately, there were no actual storms on January 7, when Superstorm *Godzilla* was set to strike. Students filed in groggily beginning at 0745. At 0800, we framed the day and introduced our guests. LCDR Sennick and I made a few remarks. Full disclosure: most students at Scarsdale High School (NY) did not know what the Coast Guard is, even if they *had* heard of it. To them, studying *Katrina* and *Sandy*, and then referring to the only uniformed, and tallest person in the room, as "Commander" was enough to put them in awe of LCDR Sennick *and* the Coast Guard. His presence made a lasting impression. Ira Tanenbaum (NYC OEM), Noah Goldberg (Westchester County OEM), and Gerry Stoughton (ret. Port Authority) fleshed out the team. A Massachusetts Maritime Academy cadet (and Scarsdale High alum) doing a Coast Guard internship in Sector New York observed and pitched in.



The author assists some students during the exercise. In reflecting on the experience, one of the students stated, "I believe that I am a more fearless student now, because it's always intimidating to approach a stressful situation that is nothing like you have ever done before, and I did not back down."

LCDR Sennick's team created the "injects" that moved the storm crisis and the day along. More guidance for the students was needed at the beginning of the day, but soon the team's input settled into moving around the room watching and provoking and offering encouragement. They shared their observations during the press conference breaks, helping the students to make the connection between their actions in our "Command Center" and the realities of crisis management. LCDR Sennick frequently answered the critical "how real is this?" question—"you might not realize how often this very thing happens." He helped the students to see where their own organizational system had to evolve and respond. Students quickly realized that they needed a Shelter committee.

City Hall made promises the agencies then had to keep. Embarrassing public statements ("Ultimately, the animals don't matter very much") led to dangerous situations that required complicated negotiated responses. The Transportation Department refused to risk its staff and equipment to "save the pets," in spite of the Mayor's assurances that he would see to it. LCDR Sennick gleefully pointed out, "These kids are drinking from the firehose, now!"

Lessons Learned

In the days following *Godzilla*, the students worked on their agencies' After Action Reports, and reflected on the simulation:

I learned that not all problems are one-dimensional. Some require multiple solutions to fix. I see now the complexity of how solving one problem can cause more. I had to be patient to be persistent. —Robyn

Although this has always been a trouble of mine because of my learning disabilities, I feel that I have improved my ability to think flexibly. —Charlotte

I really liked the teamwork among people/agencies with different objectives, and understood for the first time how many people you have to talk to in order to get things done. —Nicole

I learned to be more humble...During the simulation, I learned that even though we all pretty much had the same information, we all used it differently to come up with different ways to help. —Tina

I believe that I am a more fearless student now, because it's always intimidating to approach a stressful situation that is nothing like you have ever done before, and I did not back down. —Ali

I loved the full-on exhaustion...and the sense that you have to keep going because people depend on you. —Lawrence

17-year-olds love to think about what they might like to do next, and now abstract pursuits like public service, leadership and contribution have become real. There was a cascade of questions about the Coast Guard. Students deepened their understanding of the essential relationship between real collaboration (based on listening and appreciation for diversity of approaches) and solving society's thorniest problems. They added to their awareness of their personal resources. In the end, the students could all identify something that made them feel stronger, even "fearless" in their knowledge that if they know how to work together, and to find within themselves the skills and attitudes to contribute, there is no problem too big to solve. When confronted by the "big issues" of our day, these students will lean in, put their shoulders to it, and make something positive happen.

Developmental breakthroughs happen primarily because of family support, and secondarily because of institutional support. In the Coast Guard, family and institution are mixed in the knowledge that the loyalty and commitment Academy alumni and other Guardians feel for each other, both in service and out, extends not only to each other, but applies to their care for the communities they live in and the world. ADM Allen's encouragement and enthusiastic introductions set the tone for the event, and LCDR Sennick's natural talent for teaching (or is it leadership, really?) carried all the way through. ADM Allen felt this exercise had the potential to improve community-based emergency exercises and relayed the results to retired RADM Joe Nimmich, Deputy FEMA Administrator. And the Coast Guard Family passed on to a group of 75 17-year-olds the deep satisfaction that comes from working together and giving one's all for the public good. *Semper Paratus. Go, Bears.*

Maggie Favretti teaches history, public policy, and complex problem-solving at Scarsdale High School (NY). She has won teaching awards from the World History Association, the Organization of American Historians, and from the Environmental Protection Agency. Maggie is married to Paul Duddy '71 and is honored to be part of the Coast Guard family.