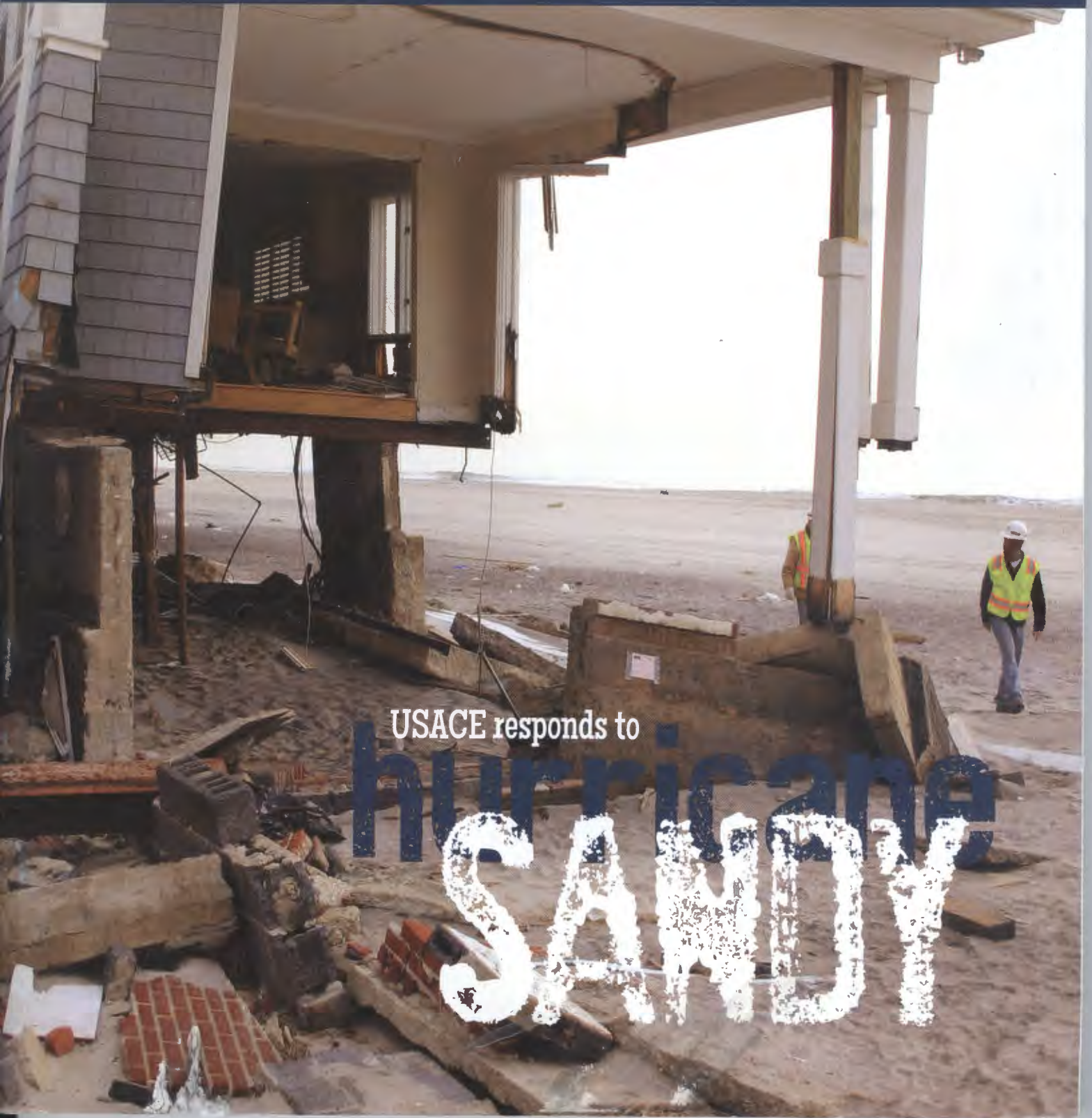


Army Engineer

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USACE responds to

hurricane
sandy



ABOVE: Elbin Mena visits the Soundview Park Project. PHOTO BY JOANNE CASTAGNA

Ecosystem vision fulfilled by USACE

by JoANNE CASTAGNA, Ed.D.

safe place for residents. The 205-acre Soundview Park is located in the South Central section of the Bronx. The park lines one and a half miles of the Bronx River, and visitors have a clear view of the nearby New York City skyline.

The park was built on a former landfill. Before it became a landfill it was a network of 80 acres of salt marsh, 40 acres of open water, upland meadows, and oak-hickory forests. In the early 20th century, it was a common practice to fill in marshland with soil and man-made debris. This destroyed most of the park's marsh and open water areas and degraded and hardened the shoreline. In the second half of the 20th century, the park basically turned into a public dumping ground.

In the fall of 2011, USACE began construction on the project in collaboration with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. Additional agencies providing support include the New York State Department of State, which provided funding; the New York City Department of Sanitation, which provided mitigation funding; and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The project is taking place on a 15-acre portion of the southern end of the park that sits next to Mena's property.

USACE excavated about 52,000 cubic yards of soil and fill material from one area of the site to create a 3-acre marsh where there hadn't been one before. This material was placed northwest of the marsh area to create an upland meadow and forest. The material was placed on 6 acres of what will be a 12-acre upland meadow and forest. The soil in both areas was graded to proper elevations; invasive plant species were cleared; and then a bed of clean compost, soil, and sand was placed.

The marsh area was planted with six species of grasses as well as several species of upland shrubs, trees, and an herbaceous mix. The upland meadow

and forest will be planted with 1,000 upland shrubs and 5,000 upland trees.

New York District project manager Ronald Pinzon said, "It's rewarding to perform an ecosystem restoration project in a densely populated urban area because there are few opportunities to perform this type of work where millions can benefit."

Improving the ecosystem will provide a habitat for birds and marine life and will improve the water quality. Wildlife has already been spotted. "We regularly observe the site and we've already spotted mud snails, fiddler crabs, horseshoe crabs, great blue herring, and egrets," said Catherine Alcoba, project biologist with the New York District.

The portion of the park where the project is taking place is expected to be open to the public within two years after all of the plants' roots have taken hold.

Recently, the region was severely impacted by Hurricane Sandy, but the project area survived the blow very well. "We were pleased that the new marsh at Soundview, which had just been planted in July, was completely intact aside from some debris that had washed up. Damage only occurred on the upland slope, planted a bit later, and it was far less than I feared for such a recent planting. When the team met on site after the storm, we all breathed a big sigh of relief," said Kathleen McCarthy, wetland and riparian project manager, Natural Resources Group, New York Department of Parks & Recreation. "It's these types of projects that are what builds resilience into our coastal areas."

Today when Mena looks out at Soundview Park he has a much better view. "This is a beautiful sight now for everybody. I spend hours in my backyard just looking at the egrets. I can just imagine when the plants are fully grown; it's going to be a haven for wildlife," said Mena. "I can't wait until this portion of the park is open." **AE**

Thirty years ago, Elbin Mena was repairing a hole on his father's roof in Harding Park, Bronx, New York City. "I looked out at neighboring Soundview Park. It was filled with abandoned cars and burned-out shacks, and I said to myself, 'Boy, this park could look beautiful if given some money and attention,'" said Mena.

It was at that time that he decided to make Harding his home and Soundview Park the place he envisioned. He used his own Jeep to pull out debris from the park and beautified the grounds by planting seeds and painting benches.

Mena also became a park warden, president of the community's homeowners association, and friends with local officials—basically the face and voice of his community. "When I start something, I don't leave it until I'm finished!" said Mena, today a retired New York City police detective. Mena is witnessing his vision become reality. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), New York District, in partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, is completing the Soundview Park Ecosystem Restoration Project.

The project is returning some of the park's lost marshland and creating an upland meadow and forest. This will provide a healthy ecosystem for wildlife to flourish and an aesthetically pleasing and