

NJ Sandy survivor helps after Helene

Life-changing coffee led to man's new calling

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OCEAN GATE, N.J. – A few days after superstorm Sandy leveled his home in Ocean Gate, New Jersey, which took on four feet of water from the surging Toms River, Mark Haug was sifting through the wreckage. His family had lived in the house for four generations.

"I was standing there, hands on your hips, wondering, 'What's next?' " Haug recalled.

What happened next would change the course of his life – and impact many others.

"A guy came up from behind and tapped me on the shoulder," Haug said. "He had a cup of coffee in his hand and said, 'Do you need this? Are you good?'"

Haug doesn't drink coffee, but he took the cup anyway.

"I don't know," he told the stranger, who had pulled up in an unmarked red van. "I guess we'll see."

Haug never did drink the coffee, but he absorbed a powerful lesson from the encounter: the simple gesture showed, in a most tangible way, that he wasn't left alone in the wake of disaster. Someone cared.

"When I got back on my feet I was like, 'I want to be that guy,'" Haug said. "I have no idea who he is, but I would love for him to see what that cup of coffee became."

It became Hold On I'm Coming, a disaster relief charity. Since 2021, the 54-year-old Haug, who is a teacher and girls volleyball coach in Bayville, New Jersey, has made nine trips to disaster zones to provide necessities to folks reeling from large-scale calamities. His latest and biggest undertaking yet took place in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

After driving their mini-bus and trailer loaded with 3,500 pounds of food, drinks and supplies all night through the storm, Haug and longtime friend Brian Fisher arrived in the hard-hit town of Vidalia, Georgia. For three days they handed out goods in the parking lot of a Walmart. Haug said they fed 3,400 people who were displaced or living in homes without power.



In 2012, Mark Haug lost his house to superstorm Sandy. Now he travels the East Coast helping provide storm relief. DOUG HOOD/ASBURY PARK PRESS

After Sandy, it took the Haug family two-and-a-half years to rebuild their home in Ocean Gate. Nearly a decade passed before Haug put his long-gestating idea into action. In 2021 he purchased a trailer and did a test run in his high school's parking lot, with teachers as handout recipients.

The trailer is always packed and ready to go. As Helene struck, Haug and Fisher – who met years ago as lifeguards at Island Beach State Park – hitched it to the bus and drove south.

Their original destination was Florida, but as Haug called around to first-responder contacts he's made over the years, he was directed to Vidalia – a town of 10,000 people located three hours southeast of Atlanta. Wind gusts topping out at 70 mph caused an immense amount of damage, leaving residents without power and running water.

The Hold On I'm Coming trailer had reached the scene before any relief agency, and it contained a treasure trove for the weary. Using a solar-powered generator, Haug and Fisher cooked and served hot dogs and chili in crock-pots. They gave out chips, hot coffee, iced tea, Gatorade and cold water. They offered

toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, deodorant, razors, socks and hats, plus cleaning supplies like garbage bags, rubber gloves and facemasks.

They set up a charging station with eight electrical outlets and universal charging cords, and arranged tables and chairs so visitors could sit, eat and catch their breath.

"I'm trying to give them a few minutes of peace," Haug said.

He also engaged recipients in conversation, mostly listening as they unburdened themselves.

"Every time I looked up, Mark was talking to somebody," said Fisher, a middle-school teacher and active member of the National Guard who was making his first disaster relief run with Haug. "He gets people talking and feeling good."

Everything was free, and unlimited. When supplies dwindled, Haug or Fisher bought more.

"One family with five young kids, it was the first hot meal they had in three days," Fisher said.

One woman passed out in their presence. "She hadn't eaten in two days," Haug said.

Using their lifeguard training, Haug and Fisher revived her and then called police over.

"We're very ready for just about anything," Haug said.

There is one aspect of all this, however, that he hadn't anticipated.

Hold On I'm Coming is fueled entirely by donations – donated goods, money, gift cards.

"At first I was in debt for a little while, doing this," Haug said. "Now everything down to a Sharpie is the product of a donation."

As Haug geared up for Helene, some of his high school students showed up at his door to drop off food.

Haug's influence goes beyond his students.

"Last summer I was in Vermont (after flooding there), and when the people of Vermont heard that I was going (south for Helene relief), they donated over \$1,000," Haug said. "I couldn't go to Vermont this summer when another flood hit the same town, but somebody else set up kind of what I did there. They saw how it worked and they did it on their own. That's what it's all about."

As Haug packed up to head back to New Jersey, "the churches were up and running with their meals and the Salvation Army rolled through the parking lot when I was there, so the big dogs are starting to show up," he said. "Once they show up, my hot dogs don't really go as far as full-on barbecue dinners. I know it's my time to step out."

The profoundness of Haug's mission was captured in one encounter on his final day in Vidalia.

"This guy came up to me and he's like, 'Thank you for doing this. I've been in the neighboring towns and you're the only person helping.' " Haug said. "I really felt bad that he felt so alone."

The man, who Haug estimates was in his 40s, asked Haug how much damage he'd sustained at home.

"I said I'm from New Jersey; we didn't get hit by the storm," Haug said, "And he's like, 'Why are you here? Why did you come?'"

Haug's response: "Because you guys needed me."

Tears welled up in the man's eyes as he gave Haug a hug.

"That's the stuff that hits," Haug said.

"That guy is going to remember me. I'm his coffee guy."

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