RISING TIDES: COOP PHOTOGRAPHER DOCUMENTS LOCAL CLIMATE RESILIENCE

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By Leila Darabi

Photography by Caroline Mardok

In this special photo essay feature, longtime *Gazette* photographer Caroline Mardok shares images from two local waterfront communities—one in Brooklyn and one in Queens—that illustrate New York's resilience in the face of rising water levels and efforts to restore the communities hardest hit by Hurricane Sandy.

The NY.gov site recalls the impact of Hurricane Sandy:

Hurricane Sandy hit New York City on October 29, 2012. Over the course of 48 hours, wind, rain and water destroyed approximately 300 homes, left hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers without power, damaged critical public and private infrastructure and left many New Yorkers vulnerable with limited access to food, drinking water, health-

care and other critical services.

More than a decade later, Mardok's images capture the creativity and perseverance of some of the New Yorkers most affected by this superstorm: the residents of Red Hook and Far Rockaway.

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THE BROOKLYN WATERFRONT

Mardok began documenting neighborhood response to climate change in Red Hook during another moment of community resilience: the COVID-19 pandemic. In April of 2020, Mardok started an Instagram account she named "ny.strong." It documented daily life in New York City during a global pandemic. Since then, she has uploaded hundreds of images of NYC and its residents, photographing everything from Black Lives Matter protests to masked neighbors during COVID-19 lockdowns to surfers in Rockaway.

PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDOK



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Scenes from Murdock's photography, including (clockwise from left) surfers in Far Rockaway; a Black Lives Matter protest; and a masked woman and child during the COVID-19 lockdown.

It was doing this work—photographing and interviewing New Yorkers for social media features—that Mardok met Tiffiney Davis, the managing director and cofounder of Red Hook Arts Project. Launched in 2009, Red Hook Arts Project coordinates volunteers to provide art classes and mentor students in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn.

Their website states: "Our classes are intentionally small, and we strive to give each student individual attention during each class. Our pedagogical approach is rooted in responding to our students' interests and needs with special attention to activities that build self-confidence and problem solving skills."

During COVID-19 lockdowns, the organization expanded its community work. When in--person art classes were no longer possible, they pivoted to distributing hot meals, diapers, personal protective equipment (PPE), and other necessities to their struggling community.

Mardok's relationship with the Red Hook community deepened when she began a 100-foot mural there: a project that engaged neighborhood teachers and youth, including some of the same young people who participate in Red Hook Arts Project's programs. The resulting mural, titled "American Dream," featured images of the Red Hook Houses housing projects from the 1930s to today, and stood for one year on a wall at 590 Clinton Street. It depicted the waterfront community's resilience in the face of climate change. The nonprofit Artbridge gave Mardok an award for the project.

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Images of Mardok's 100-foot mural in Red Hook.

Her documentation of Red Hook's resilience in the face of rising water levels and exposure to the elements didn't stop there. Mardok discovered that the Red Hook Arts Project had helped to design a ship for the annual Barnacle Parade, a community gathering held on each anniversary of Hurricane Sandy. "We participate as people who are part of the community," Davis said, describing herself as someone who "works in the community, lives in the community and is part of the community." Davis explained that Red Hook Arts Project got involved "to ensure that the Barnacle Parade was accessible to everyone [redacted] lives here."

> THE BARNACLE PARADE USES THE ANNIVERSARY OF THIS DEVASTATING EVENT TO CREATE A JOYFUL EVENT FULL OF COSTUMES AND ART AND TO RAISE MONEY FOR RECOVERY EFFORTS.

Organized by a network of local volunteers, the Barnacle Parade celebrates the community's resilience to Hurricane Sandy, which in 2012 devastated the neighborhood. According to a report by the Red Hook Initiative, a nonprofit focused on community recovery, the superstorm left thousands of Red Hook residents without power, heat or running water, damaged homes and businesses, and left an impact from which the neighborhood is still recovering.

The Barnacle Parade uses the anniversary of this devastating event to create a joyful event full of costumes and art and to raise money for recovery efforts. In the years since Sandy, the parade has expanded to raise funds for communities facing similar effects from natural disasters.

The 11th annual Barnacle Parade will take place at 4 p.m. on October 29, 2023, at the corner of Pioneer and Van Brunt streets in Red Hook.

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Images from past Barnacle Parades.

DUNES AND PROTECTIVE PLANTING IN QUEENS

Mardok connected with RISE, the Rockaway Initiative for Sustainability and Equity, through a long-term photo project she has embarked on in the Rockaway neighborhood of Queens. RISE runs a number of programs to engage youth in their coastal community around the looming threats of rising tides.

> WHILE SHE FELT KIDS OF EARLIER GENERATIONS FELT SOME SHAME IN THEIR HUMBLE ROCKAWAY BEACH BACKGROUNDS, PROGRAMS LIKE RISE HAVE INSTILLED A SENSE OF LOCAL PRIDE.

Their executive director, Jean Dupont, explained to the *Gazette* that the block where she lives "was the only block not devastated by Sandy," something she attributes to the protection provided by "a series of dunes created by a community group."

Mardok met with and documented RISE's youth engagement program "Shore Corps," which is part of the Greater Rockaway Coastal Plan. Through this work, RISE hires local youth as gardeners and has built up five miles of sand dunes and local plants to protect the eroding shoreline that has long left the community vulnerable to the elements.

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Local volunteers work on the Rockaway sand dunes to protect the eroding shoreline.

“The average kid stays through summers of high school,” Dupont shared. “And they often return during summers in college.” Graduates of the program, she said, have gone on to study marine biology and food systems, with 98 percent of program graduates attending four year colleges.

“We use this land as a living classroom,” she said. “A very large proportion of our students end up going into medicine or biomedical engineering.” She added that while she felt kids of earlier generations felt some shame in their humble Rockaway Beach backgrounds, programs like RISE have instilled a sense of local pride.

For local residents, RISE provides more than paid internships. “Stewardship [of local land] ended up becoming a big deal after Sandy,” Dupont said. When she saw an influx of federal recovery programs in her neighborhood, Dupont asked, “Why are all these government agencies not doing the small stuff, like the planting?” She calls building out the naturally protective dunes part of the “soft infrastructure” needed to complement formal infrastructure projects, such as the construction of jetties.

The results of the program go beyond protecting the physical environment. “The first thing kids say [in program evaluation surveys] is that they made great friends,” Dupont remarked.

Mardok’s images documenting a dune planting last year capture this friendship in action.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette *as a reporter in 2016. She cohosts the feminist TV podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients via @persian_ish on Instagram.*