

# CLIMATE DISASTER PROJECT




Photographer: Phil McLachlan

THEIR STORIES, THEIR  
WORDS: THE CLIMATE  
DISASTER PROJECT



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# Introduction

Ten people affected by last year's flooding and landslides tell their individual stories as part of a collaboration between the Climate Disaster Project and the Fraser Valley Current.

By Fraser Valley Current

Contributor | December 8, 2022 | 5:00 am

*The Fraser Valley Current has partnered with the Climate Disaster Project to publish a collection of 10 eyewitness narratives created in commemoration of the devastation wrought by last year's atmospheric rivers. You can read each account here.*

By Aldyn Chwelos and Sean Holman

A year ago, British Columbia's most expensive storm rained down on the Fraser Valley.

It was as though the ocean itself was being wrung out above our heads. The torrent severed supply routes and the arteries that connect loved ones. It destroyed homes; drowned livestock and pets; threatened many lives and took others.

As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of such events, disasters will become the most reported news stories in the world.

Too often, the stories of those who lived through these disasters are confined to quotes and statistics about lives lost and damage done.

They become "some person that everyone shows interest in, but nobody knows much about," as the survivor of another disaster decades earlier described his experience to Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich. "We all turned into some kind of rare exhibits." Disaster stories too often fail to acknowledge lives lived before the disaster and all the ways that people continue living afterwards.

But as Fraser Valley residents well know, the stories of climate disaster survivors are about more than what was lost and broken.

They're also about the relationships and resiliency strengthened through this devastation, the healing after, and the hopes and demands that next time be different.

This is why the Fraser Valley Current partnered with the Climate Disaster Project, a new initiative coordinated at the University of Victoria that works with climate disaster survivors to share their full experiences, in their own words.

The work was sponsored by Overstory Media Group and undertaken by students and supervising faculty at post-secondary institutions across the country, including First Nations University of Canada, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Mount Royal University, and Toronto Metropolitan University.

Together, we created a series of eyewitness accounts that illustrate the range of human experiences precipitated by last year's floods and the impacts that remain carved into the valley.

To create these narratives, we worked with survivors of the flooding using a trauma-informed interviewing approach where storytellers work with journalists to develop their own interview questions. From those interviews, we created profiles using only the storytellers own words. Before anything was published, each survivor reviewed their story. This is because these are their stories, not ours. In doing so, this collection is an accounting of how ten people remembered what happened to them during last year's atmospheric rivers.

It's been a privilege to work with each storyteller in sharing their memories. As journalists, we're often taught we are the curators and custodians of other peoples' narratives. But this process has demonstrated that the people we cover know the stories they want to tell, and how to tell them. Our job is to support them in that process. We're grateful that these storytellers allowed our team the opportunity to listen — and to learn.

Because disasters and the emergencies they create are revealing—even more so in the face of climate change. In fact, the term emergency comes from the Latin *emergere*, meaning to bring to light. Its opposite, *mergere*, means to submerge in liquid. These disaster narratives have emerged from last year's floodwaters as testimony to the devastation and loss caused by the atmospheric rivers. But they also illuminate how we can avoid or mitigate such harm in the future.

As part of their interviews, survivors identified problems and solutions pertaining to both this specific disaster and climate change as a whole. In this way, the narratives exemplify not only great storytelling but also great reporting. The survivors told us about the help they did and didn't receive during the floods. And they each spoke about the ways they came together with the people around them, be it family, friends, neighbours and even strangers.

"If there's a silver lining to this flood," Sumas Prairie resident Alison said, "it is community." It's in these communities we'll find the hope that we can survive climate change together.



# MIKAELA ROBINSON

MIKAELA ROBINSON

Hope, Canada | Southern British Columbia Flooding , 2021

“Twenty-four hours without any food or water”

by Mikaela Robinson as told to Christina Rose Gervais

Mikaela grew up in the small harbour city of Nanaimo, where she lived with her parents, and two sisters.

As a child, she danced competitively, in styles ranging from contemporary and lyrical to jazz and ballet. This led to her interest in kinesiology, which she studies at the University of British Columbia. Recently graduated, Mikaela plans to continue her studies in physiotherapy school.

In 2021, when the atmospheric rivers flooded Southern BC, Mikaela had just finished spending her reading break visiting her twin sister in Kelowna. She was aboard a bus, making the five-hour trip home to Vancouver.

I had no troubles on the way there. On the way back I probably should have checked the weather before travelling. I should have noticed there was a storm coming and maybe chosen to take a flight or just delay my travels. But I had already got up to Kelowna and I needed to get back to go to my classes after reading break.

I was so stressed out for my midterm. I remember having the one light on above me in the bus, writing away on my computer. It was pouring rain. I was thinking, “Oh, it'll pass. We'll get home for supper.” On the way back is when the storm hit.

We first went to the Coquihalla. That's when we heard the first mudslide had closed that. So, we stayed at a deadstop on the Coquihalla for an hour or two. Then we turned back to go to Merritt, to take a different highway, the Crowsnest. It was very slow traffic.

My dad told me to send my location. I sent it to him. Based on the location, from what he had heard, I was in the middle of the mudslide. That really worried him. Being able to not directly help your kid is traumatic.

We drove through Princeton. Stand still again. There were two mudslides up ahead of us that locked in a lot of cars. Luckily, we were outside of that. Everyone was rerouted to Hope. It was very slow.

The bus pulled into a parking lot and we just sat there. I got stuck in Hope. I was travelling alone. I didn't know anyone from Hope and I didn't really have a view of it because I had never been there. I always pictured Hope as a rest stop on the way to Kelowna.

I ran out of food and water. Twenty-four hours without any food or water. The whole place had no power. It was dark. I just tried to go to sleep. I didn't want to think about where I was anymore or what was going to happen. I would wake up to the dark images of people on the bus. It was scary. A reminder of the situation I was in.

Once they had power, someone on our bus was super generous. They got off and went to 7-11 and bought a flat of water. I thought they were some search and rescue person coming in. Then, I found out it was another person on the bus who just wanted to take their time and money to buy a flat of water for everyone. Around 9am, the bus went to the secondary school. There were a lot of people who were stuck in their cars. There were a lot of buses there as well.

When we got there, volunteers were still setting up. They had very limited food. Some snacks, coffee, tea. I had a midterm on Tuesday. So I set up my little study space, a desk in a multi-purpose room. I was studying away, trying to distract myself from what was going on and to feel productive in some manner. There were no updates on the highway. We knew we weren't going to get out that night.

The staff of the school and the volunteers from the community came together to provide us food and shelter. I know they tried really hard to fly in cots and bedding but that fell through. They had those blue mats they have in schools, but no cots, blankets, or pillows.

I tried to walk around to source out something, but there were a lot of families and older people and I felt like I didn't deserve to take away a mat or a blanket from someone who might be more deserving of it. I took my big puffer jacket, zipped it up, and used my backpack as a pillow. I remember shivering in my jacket and not having the best sleep.

When I saw the families I was a little bit envious, because having someone with you would be really reassuring. At one point I was FaceTiming my mom on the brink of tears because I was alone. Mentally, it was tough. Being there alone. Not knowing when I could go home.

There were a lot of residents of Hope asking for ways they could help. I think they felt pretty helpless. They wanted to do something. If they couldn't donate their time, they wanted to donate something else. Lots of people with open spare bedrooms reached out, phoning the school saying they have a room or a bed if someone needs it.

One of the counsellors reached out to two of the friends that I met in the high school. I remember watching Netflix with them and playing some board games the night before to lift our spirits. I think us coming together really improved our situation. The counsellors said a family would love to house us. We were excited and grateful because the night before we just slept on the ground. That was very generous of them to open up their home to three strangers they had never met before. I think they rent it out as an Airbnb that is honestly nicer than my apartment.

They had a huge rain shower. They had a whole kitchen set up and TV. They were like, "Oh, here's the WiFi." In the school, there was no WiFi so I had a hard time connecting with people who were reaching out to me, making sure I was okay. It was nice to respond to all my messages and keep my teachers in the loop. I had to email some of them to get assignment extensions. That was calming mentally to know that I was able to respond to people if they were worried.

On the last day, there was a train that came and transported us all back to Vancouver. I struggled to get back into a routine of classes. I spent a lot of time reflecting on the experience. Honestly, I'm grateful that it happened in Hope. I think in a bigger city, there would be the diffusion of responsibility. I think small towns have greater connectivity. There's more people who know each other so they're more likely to band together and help rather than think "Oh, there's enough resources. We don't really need to do anything drastic to help them. People will find their way." It was probably better that it happened in a smaller city.

I have a renewed respect for myself that I had the mental capacity and strength to be there alone. That was good for me to know that when I'm in a situation like that, I do have the power to get through it and still bounce back. I'm resilient enough to get through it. I was honestly surprised I was able to get out of my comfort zone, talk to people, and make new friends.

I think experiencing something like this is very telling of the situation we're in right now in terms of climate change. Seeing how I was part of it. It does impact me. I should put more time into educating myself. It definitely was a wake up call.

We've been experiencing the impacts of climate change for many years now. But when you don't experience the first-hand effects, it's easy to think, "I'm just one person. It'll be fine." So to be in a situation where your life could be in danger and you don't know what's gonna happen, that's a whole different experience that opens your eyes to the situation we're in and what we can do moving forward. Or if there's even something that we can do. That's what I get anxious about. Is it too late? Because we're already experiencing these mass disasters. How can I, one person, do things when there's so much of a bigger problem with corporations, greenhouse gas emissions.

I think it has to be a community, nationwide, and worldwide effort. Increasing education about the effects of climate change and how we can do little things ourselves that will have a greater effect, even if it doesn't seem like it. We've reached a point of no return in terms of climate change, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't give up. We should still be very aware of the effects. And still do everything in our power to reverse what we've already damaged.



Photographer: Phil McLachlan



# RYAN KEHLER

RYAN KEHLER

Harrison Hot Springs, Canada | Southern British Columbia Flooding, 2021

“We were locked in there for four days.”

by Ryan Kehler as told to Aldyn Chwelos and Sean Holman

Ryan is a truck driver who picks up milk from the patchwork of dairy farms in the Fraser Valley, which is home to nearly 47,000 cows or half of British Columbia’s total herd. “You go from the little mom and pop places to the big boys that feed a big portion of the dairy industry,” he says. “I can legally carry 41,500 litres at a time, and I take it to one of approximately fifty plants in the Lower Mainland.”

But, when he’s not driving his truck, Ryan and his wife live in an A-frame just outside Harrison Hot Springs, a resort community made famous by its mineral baths. “It smells like a cabin, it looks like a cabin,” says Ryan, whose home has a vaulted ceiling, lots of wood, and is close to the shores of Harrison Lake. “I think we’re the fifth family to live here. Only the second people, full time.”

That rustic life suits Ryan, who spent a lot of time outdoors when he was growing up. It suits his wife too, who is half-Samoan, half-Norwegian, and owns a boho clothing business in nearby Abbotsford and Coquitlam. Together, the two of them camp, kayak, and take care of their dogs Winston, a French bulldog, and Makoa, a Heinz-57. They also enjoy cooking.

“That’s our idea of a good date, is to go to some ethnic grocery store, and go see what’s new or different. That’s probably one of our favourite things to do,” says Ryan. But, when the atmospheric rivers drenched Southern British Columbia, Ryan and his wife were enjoying a rare dinner out.

We were out with one of my sons, his girlfriend and her parents. It was sort of a meet and greet at a restaurant in Chilliwack. As we were coming home, it was raining really, really hard. It was nighttime, about 9:00 by that point. There was a police car blocking the road. We asked him what was going on, and he said there’s a little bit of a rock slide. They were clearing it, so maybe come back in an hour.

We drove around, hung out, and played on our phones. We came back and he told us the slide was bigger than they could handle. We were going to have to find somewhere else to stay that night. We're not in clothes to be outside or anything. So, we went back into Harrison and got a hotel room.

Then we found out through Facebook how bad it really was. People were just trapped by these landslides. We were quite worried about our dogs. We got a hold of our neighbours and asked them to take the dogs out and let them go to the bathroom.

The next morning is when the flooding started. It sounded like the whole world was coming to an end. The slides were a lot worse than anybody thought. So we just had to figure out a plan to get back to our house.

We found out two of our neighbours were trapped on the Harrison side as well. One was able to get a hold of his friend in town and made an agreement to boat us back to our house. So we sat by the public boat launch in our evening wear and waited for hours for him to show up, which he finally did.

By this point, it was still raining really hard. The wind came in. We were able to get the boat in the water and took one of the scariest rides we ever had, trying not to capsize. I've been involved with boats my whole life, so I know when it's bad to keep your mouth shut. It wasn't a power problem. It was just the waves were so big. It was probably a four to six foot chop.

I was trying to keep the window clear so the driver of the boat could see somewhat where he's going. My wife and one of the neighbours were just trying to stay in their chairs. The third guy was trying to keep his balance. When we got to the community dock down from our house, the waves kept throwing the boat around. It took us half an hour to get everybody out.

One neighbour had to walk herself home. The water was still coming over the road. The way the rock and debris had come down, it created a pool. There's a cliff on one side and a cliff on the other. We didn't want her to go through, but she insisted. She waded through, fell down a couple times, and almost drowned. Looking back, probably should have tied a rope to her, life jackets, and everything.

There was so much water coming down all the hillsides. There's a bridge behind us that washed out. We were locked in there for four days. There was cars parked all up our street because lots of people were trapped. You couldn't even drive down the road. You had to use a quad.

There were three slides. The one closest to us was the smallest. At its deepest point, it was almost three feet deep. The next slide came down the side of a mountain, went right through one guy's yard and proceeded across the road. It took out two properties towards the lake, just gutted everything. The third slide brought so much debris over the road and went through the guy's property on the other side.

Search and rescue tried to evacuate us. They didn't give us an evacuation order. They gave an evacuation notice. Every person said, "We're not going anywhere because we've got everything we need. We have power. We have water." You're living out in the bush here. You're pretty self-sufficient. There's no point sitting in a hotel somewhere.

A neighbour started clearing the road themselves. It took some pretty heavy equipment to move, especially the big slide. He chipped away and chipped away. He couldn't do nothing. It took them a week to clear our roads. All of a sudden it opens up. All the people got their cars out. The bridge took a while for them to fix. It's still only a temporary bridge. We're at the bottom of the list.

My wife, I think, has PTSD from it. She's never been in a situation before where she hasn't been allowed to come home. With the windstorms we had a couple weeks ago, she makes sure she's home. She gets off work early. She gets all the candles out. She wants to make sure she's not separated from the house.

I remember growing up in the prairie, you're always dealing with something like that. You're always dealing with tornadoes. At a moment's notice you could lose your roof. It's in the back of my head that that could happen. Now that it actually has happened, you're a little more prepared.

Everything now is ready to go. If something was to happen at the house, I could have my motorhome going in ten minutes. It's full of gas. It's full of propane. We've got ways of purifying water if we had to. My neighbours down the road, they're fortifying. He probably had \$100,000 of damage. It filled up his entire basement and wrecked half his house. He has got a barrier system now so the water doesn't come near their basement.

They were forecasting twenty years ago that changes like this could happen, where you have more precipitation, heavier precipitation. I'm not a pessimist. I'm a believer in climate change. How do we tackle something this big? It's a big question.

We have to stop burning fossil fuels. But if we don't burn fossil fuels, what are we going to do? Are we going to go back 150 years, burn trees and live on coal-burning stoves? We would deforest the Lower Mainland in probably three days just to cook ourselves some meals and heat our house. We can't go back to living in log cabins and teepees.



Photographer: Phil McLachlan



# DONNA RAE

DONNA RAE

Merritt, Canada | Southern British Columbia Flooding, 2021

“Everything else from my whole past was all gone.”

by Donna Rae as told to Geena Mortfield

Donna grew up in the Kitsilano area of Vancouver, “back when it was a working class neighbourhood.” The oldest of five siblings, responsibilities for looking after the younger ones often fell to her when Donna’s parents were on shift work: her father being a firefighter, and her mom working in an office at The Bay. Vacations as a kid were camping and her family would travel to places such as 100 Mile House or Prince George. She grew up fishing in the ocean with her father, going to parks and beaches, and walking around the neighbourhood with friends, staying out until dark. Donna’s best friend lived in the next block so they’d run back and forth to each other.

Donna worked as a bus driver in Vancouver, first for Greyhound, then for HandyDart. She moved to Merritt in 2018 after deciding to retire. The more affordable housing market allowed Donna to purchase her retirement home. And Merritt’s proximity to the Lower Mainland meant friends and family could still easily visit. Before the flooding, the bathroom in Donna’s home had just been redone with a new shower wall, a new vanity, a new sink, a new floor, and a fresh coat of paint. “It looked great,” she says.

When Donna isn’t tending her garden or working in the yard of her downtown home, she is out with her camera, looking for the perfect shot—usually a landscape or a flower. She would also go “day-tripping,” hiking and exploring local areas, such as lakes and old mines. Donna also quickly made friends in Merritt and, during the flooding, they helped one another out. One of them, Waneta, offered a room in her home and Donna helped out friends and neighbours too, including people that were staying on “the outside” of the barricaded flooded city and those who stayed behind in their homes on “the inside.”

It was 4:15 in the morning, I heard sirens outside. Woke me up. Noticed the flashing lights. I look out the window and I don't know what's going on. There's shouting with a bullhorn of "evacuate immediately!" I go to the front door to see what's going on. I saw water on the street, the yard and water up on my porch. "Holy cow." I quickly got dressed. I grabbed my camera bag, and my laptop bag. I had a satchel already ready with important papers, because we had been on fire alert before. So I grabbed that and my purse, phone and remembered the charger. On the way out the door, I picked up a pair of rubber boots and a raincoat. Then I just went to my truck and drove out through the two feet of water. I just drove up the hill and sat in the dark for a while to figure out what's going on.

Fortunately, the drive thru at Tim Hortons was open. I went up there and got something and a coffee and I drove back to the park and sat there just eating and drinking and thinking, "I don't know what to do next."

My neighbour and friend that I go exploring with then phoned me because he was up early and had driven his wife to work. Their office was not affected by the flood so he was still sitting at her office. I told him where I was, and he came up to meet me. I drove him up through the drive thru and we went and got more coffee. By then, it was starting to get light out so we took a drive around up the hillside over top of Merritt to take a look.

There was a lot of brown water. There was one guy there who goes, "I don't know what the big deal is, it's just water." He was an out-of-towner, and I went, "My house is under that water." He was very apologetic because there was a lot of out of town pipeline workers who didn't know. We stood up on that hillside just kind of agog and at how this normally dry little town is now just covered in muddy water.

Then we got shooed away by the police because one bridge was already broken, and the other one might have been getting broken. We had to go back. I dropped him off back at his truck. That was when Waneta phoned me and said, "I think you better come here." Because there were no roads open for me to get down to any friends or family at the coast.

I remember thinking that I had forgotten to get my medication. And so I was going to try to walk back. But the power of the water was so strong it would be foolish to try to walk there. I didn't go because there were search and rescue people there with their inflatable kayak things. They were getting people out of houses that hadn't yet left.

I thought I would just be another one of those people that need to be rescued. So I didn't go, figured I could try again another time. I tried again the next day. By then they had barricades up. I wasn't allowed to get back into town. I just turned around, sat on the side of the road and cried for a while because I don't know what to do.

A lot of police had been brought in to look after the situation. People were comparing them to SWAT team cops. You couldn't get through the barricades, because there was police cars and police officers there. We weren't asking to go live in it. We are asking to just go so we can get our stuff. I could have saved what was in my fridge and my freezer. I could have saved my bed.

Nobody was allowed back in. I took a drive to Ashcroft. I went to a pharmacy there and asked if I could get an emergency prescription. They gave me a month's supply. And then I bought a night gown, some underwear and some socks because I had nothing. I shopped for three families while I was in Ashcroft. There was no way for the people in the neighbourhood where I was staying to get groceries. I was able to come back with my truck full of groceries for three families. And I bought beer for the neighbour that stayed in town to protect his property.

When I was getting the groceries, I phoned him. "Hey, Gary. I'm in Ashcroft beside the liquor store here. Would you like me to bring anything back?" He said, "Well, if you can get me six flats of Budweiser, that'd be great." He would share with people on the inside. I bought the beer.

The woman who lived on the outside, met me on the outside. We transferred all the beer to her car so she could go inside and take the beer to people. They were very happy because they're also really stressed and anxious dealing with their own flood situation. It made me good to help them. I actually did three booze runs.

Then another day, because the local food bank in Merritt wasn't able to open. The people that run it lived on the outside. I went there one day and I said, "How can I help?" The next day, I had ordered some sandwiches for them from the local cafe that's on the outside, because they're volunteer workers there. They were providing sandwiches. I ordered all the sandwiches and picked them up and delivered them. The next day the person I'm staying with, the person who was the other evacuee, and me, we made sandwiches and bunwiches at the house, wrapped them all up, and I drove 'em over. We did that to help them. It was just a small part to play in the overall big picture. For people helping people, right?

It took almost three weeks before we were allowed back into our neighbourhood. My first sight going into the neighbourhood was a street full of mud. I had to use four wheel drive to go through it because it was so thick, and slick. As soon as you open that door, the smell was awful because the mildew had started, the mold had started. The first thought when I opened the door and saw the chaos and the mud was, "How will I ever pay for this?" Because everything was a jumble.

The waterline on the wall was about three feet high, you can see where the water had come in. You open the toilet lid and you could see where it had all splashed up from in the sewers. I didn't do anything that first day. It was so overwhelming. I just had to leave.

The dishes and the pots and pans that were on the bottom cupboards, they can be washed. The stove, fridge and dishwasher couldn't be saved. Three weeks with that water seeping up, all that bedding had to be thrown out and the mattress and the box springs. All of it had to go. That's pretty hard to deal with. My portfolio that I had with all of my prints is ruined. Everything else from my whole past was all gone. There were plenty of tears. Lots of sleepless nights. Lots of anxiety. Even now, you think you're over it, but then reliving it, it still brings tears. I'm still going through it.

In the beginning, I didn't really think about the fact that it had anything to do with climate change because all you are is shell shocked. And you're kind of walking around like, "I gotta do this, I gotta do that I gotta do this." "Oh, I gotta go buy this and okay, I have to do this." That's sort of all you think about for a while. But then, "Oh, yeah, this probably has something to do with climate change." Because it's a variety of things that brought it to that point, not just one thing. That fire was unprecedented. That rain was unprecedented.

The powers that be would like us to use heat pumps, electric or hot water on demand, or get electric cars. But all of these things are too expensive for the ordinary person like myself to purchase.



And you know, BC Hydro often sends out surveys. “Have you heard about electric cars?” Yes. “Do you think you might buy one?” No. Who's got \$40,000 to go buy a new car? My truck is paid for. And so if someone wants to give me the money to drive an electric car? Sure. I'll take a Ford Lightning, thank you very much. But the reality is that a great many of us don't have money to go buy new vehicles, or to install a heat pump. So you make do with your electric baseboards. Or a space heater in your room when it's cold.

I'm seventy-one now and I live on pensions. I just can't keep doing this. I had made it my retirement home. But it just doesn't feel like it right now. When I walk in there, it's just chaos. And having gone through two contractors that really let me down. I'm \$70,000 in and it's still not done.



Photographer: Phil McLachlan

# JORDI WILLIAMS

JORDI WILLIAMS

Chilliwack, Canada | Southern British Columbia Floods, 2021

“That trip was the most scared I've ever been in a boat in my entire life.”

by Jordi Williams as told to Paul Voll

Jordi was twenty-five years old and running a warehouse in Langley when his cousin told him to pursue his passion for fishing. “He said, ‘Listen, you don’t like your job, you’re not happy. Come up here and go guiding.’ So, one season of that turned into three, four seasons and then I started guiding down in [Argentina] in the offseason.”

Jordi went on to be a professional fishing guide locally and internationally for twenty-five years. His interest in fishing came from growing up in Surrey in the 1980’s, before it became the province’s second largest community. That’s where he would roam around its acreages and watershed, developing a love of the outdoors.

This love eventually led to another one. At the age of twenty-eight, while working as a fishing guide in the popular freshwater fishing community of Harrison Bay, Jordi met his future wife, Krisztina, a server at the Sandpiper Golf Course at the time.

“I just kept asking her out and asking her out. She kept saying no, and then I finally gave up and a couple of weeks later, she called me, and I guess the rest is history,” said Jordi. One year after meeting, the couple had their daughter Cassie and moved to the City of Chilliwack.

Today, Jordi guides part-time, while looking after the architectural salvage company he now owns and operates. But when the heavy rains poured down on the Fraser Valley in November of 2021, Jordi realised his small fishing boat with its jet motor could serve a bigger purpose.

The first afternoon the wife and I walked around the Vedder Canal. The rains came so fast, the Canal was piled with logs at the bridge. Tons of debris from upriver, like no one's ever seen. Just a small area that the water was getting through. There was a real danger of that bridge actually going out.

Day two, houses were flooded. It was all over social media. I was in a lot of pain, and I still am from this knee injury, but I said, "I can't sit around here and just watch this happen. I need to go and figure out how I can help."

I had a big diesel truck at that time. Hooked up my boat, drove to the first roadblock and tried to get through. Abbotsford police said, "Nobody's allowed to go down there." I said, "Well, people need help down there."

I understand where they are coming from; they don't want somebody running around playing hero. But I've been a river guide twenty-five years. I have all the accredited first aid courses. If you want somebody down there, you want guys like us that have experience and can help.

I came home, started making calls and I got a farmer's name and number. Once I had a purpose, that gave me access to the Sumas Prairie. I just kept going back every day.

The first mission I went on we were supposed to go down and rescue some heifers that were at a barn. Apparently, cows can't stand in water. They get infected easy, and just die. A couple old farmers in my boat could get every one but one out. But I had pumps and another farmer in my boat. He said, "Oh, let's just go take the pumps to this place."

So, I drove down Dixon Road all the way. And I kept asking this old Dutch farmer I've never met before, "Where are we going? Where are we going?" He was like, "This way, this way." We just kept going and going and going.

Picture driving your boat on the road with five feet of water on it. The wind's blowing about forty and it's raining like you've never seen it. You got farmland and houses on the left-hand side of the road. You've got these big marshmallows coming unwound. There's a cabbage field that has completely let go across the entire road. There are pigs floating by and cabbage getting stuck in my engine, so I have to rip it up and turn it off. There's water splashing in the boat. At this point, I'm getting nervous.

We finally got down there. I threw the pumps out. Search and rescue comes flying down the road and took him to wherever. Now I had to get back and it was starting to get nasty. The rain was still pounding down, the water was coming up. I've been in a lot of boats. I've had some sketchy things happen. That trip was the most scared I've ever been in a boat in my entire life.

In the days following, the main thing was looking for pets. I got a call that there was a kitten that had been at this house for a week. These people just thought the water's going to draw up and we'll be able to get back. Then all of a sudden, they go, "Oh, shit, this water is not going anywhere for weeks."

So, I went in and here's this little kitten bouncing around. Gave him some water. Gave him some food — he just attacks it. Then got him into the cat carrier and took him back. To return a pet to somebody who's pretty much lost everything will give them some reprieve. You've got this fuzzy little animal and it's happy to see you.

We rescued a couple more here and there. There was two dogs and a cat in this RV. The guy tried to get back, driving through two or three feet of water. He went to go over a bridge, and the bridge was gone. His Dodge Durango endo'd right at the bridge. It just started floating. It took on water and it sat like that.

We got to the RV, open the door, and this dog was on the couch. It was flooded. This dog was kind of pacing back and forth. There was another older dog in the back and also a cat. We rescued these animals. The next day, the guy called me. He's a very colourful character. He's like, "Hey, man, you guys got my pets. Awesome. How's my alligator doing?"

I'm like, "You're kidding me."



There's a trailer behind this RV. There was a caiman in this trailer. It had its own trailer, a five by ten. So we open the back and there's this goddamn alligator sitting in this enclosure. I was with Darren and the RCMP guy. The RCMP said, "I don't know man, I'm not going in there." Darren's like "Well I'll go in there." It was dead by then because the power was off and it was too cold. But we almost rescued a crocodile.

After about four or five days, the dike blew in two different spots. There are lawsuits against the City of Abbotsford because they were way behind on their engineering on the dikes. They knew that they were insufficient. They weren't high enough; they weren't strong enough.

When that let go it was like a raging river. Like a class ten rapid, just the whole Sumas. We were doing our rescues that day. It was coming up so fast that they said we had to get off the water. We got the hell out of there, because every five minutes it was coming up two inches.

So, we had one day off and then we were back out there. There was a couple of big tanks that let go in the flooding. A lot of farm gas. A lot of diesel and dead animals. Garbage floating everywhere, totes floating everywhere, just an insane amount of debris in the water. We probably wouldn't want to be eating too many crops from those fields. After about two and a half weeks we started to get the idea that the E coli would get really bad. I said, "Now it's not worth it for us."

I was happy with the decision I made to go out there and put myself on the line. A lot of people came together, dropping everything, and worked together for a common goal. It wasn't for weeks until the government showed up. But it was too late. You had to have boots on the ground right away. The damage had been done. They have fairly good protocols when there's forest fires. Why can't you do that for flooding?

It was a real wake up call. As the climate continues to evolve and change, this sort of thing is going to keep happening. It could be worse next time. It could be a complete loss. It's not the same as when we were growing up when you had those four seasons, and you didn't have these freak weather patterns that come out of nowhere.

I was out on the Fraser River this morning and it is so low. In one year, it went from the highest it's ever been on record to this year, where it's the lowest it's ever been in 111 years. This is the world we live in now — the fluctuations. I think our hope for the future is that infrastructure gets put in place and just have a better disaster response plan. We don't want to see this happen again.



Photographer: Phil McLachlan

# ALISON ARENDS

ALISON ARENDS

Sumas Prairie, Canada | Southern British Columbia Floods, 2021

"It was the most important thing I've ever done in my lifetime."

by Alison Arends as told to Aldyn Chwelos

*Alison spent much of her life on a busy dairy farm in the Sumas Prairie, an agricultural community that blankets the basin of a former lake. "It's a tranquil place to be," says Alison, "Even with the smell of manure all around." She moved to the farm when she married her dairy farmer husband, John, and quit her various jobs as nanny, cleaner, and vacuum salesperson to do all the running around required by a cattle operation.*

*Now the family operation includes the next generation: her two sons help their father manage the dairy farm, while her daughter manages the hay farm.*

*Alison's life had grown much quieter since she moved to a property a block away from their dairy farm. She filled her days looking after her grandchildren while they'd ride their bikes or fake crashes so their play tow truck could come to the rescue. "Thank goodness for grandkids," says Alison. "I was bored."*

*But all that changed when the rains came. It was November and a patchwork of cover crops blanketed the fields. "It was beautiful. It was long, it was green. It was lush," says Alison. "And then, it was gone." Soon, she was pouring her time and energy into running a community hub for flood survivors.*

The amount of rain was something I've never seen before. I was outside and heard the sirens going from Sumas, Washington. My husband went out with his truck and trailer, as did my boys. They were rescuing animals from barns. My brother-in-law's farm flooded. So they spent the day bringing his cows to our place. The south side of the dike was flooding. You could see rats swimming in the water, everybody's property items floating around. It got to the point that the trailer full of animals was starting to float. A lot were brought to our place. Our farm was dry.

My in-laws are on the other side of the dike. He was with a walker. She is in a power wheelchair. We can't get her in a helicopter. We can't get her to go in a boat. We rescued them from their house on a great big loader tractor. The guys had to maneuver the loader into the garage to get her up. Coming down the road, they had to go around a car that was fully emerged in the water. You could just see the roof floating. We brought them to my house. We felt safe on this side of the dike.

The next day, the Cole Road dike burst which is only one block from me. There's no sirens. I got no knock on the door. I got no text message, no email, nothing. I wasn't looking at social media. I was making dinner. My daughter-in-law phoned in tears and said, "It's catastrophic. You have to get out."

All the water poured into our field. It's around my house and going over the road. That's how fast it came. Everything had to be dropped. All of our belongings thrown into a bin. My mother-in-law and the wheelchair needed to be put in a truck.

There was times we had to stop because there was wood pallets floating across the road. We had to keep an eye on the power poles to know where middle of the road is. It's pitch-dark. You could see nothing. It was surreal. Like you were in another world.

I stay with the in-laws. She needed home care. My husband, hired hands and one daughter-in-law, went back to the farm. It was no easy task to get back. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be there helping.

I got home after five days. It didn't even look like our Sumas Prairie anymore. Whether you were flooded or not, you were affected. Your eyes could see the devastation. Roads were broken, washed out. People's memories on the front yards. Everything's wet. Everything got that greasy stuff on it. Sludge water was sticky and gooey. The smells were horrible. My crawlspace was flooded but nothing compared to so many.

After we got back, we were making breakfast for the hired hands. They were going around the clock milking. Now we were milking about nine hundred cows. The farmers need to water to their animals. Big water tankers were brought to our place.

All of a sudden, the trucks were coming. We don't know who started it. We don't know how they found out that we were serving. The semi-truck is coming in full of stuff. Our pump room was full of donations. I took over a part of the shop. I was hanging really ugly tarps and blankets around to hide the machinery and the workspace. We had to keep bringing more tables because that's all I had to put stuff on. I phoned Gateway CRC, the church we attend in Abbotsford. They started bringing hot meals for lunch. Our farmyard just turned into the hub.

These people came in fully devastated. They looked like deer in the headlights. You sit them down. You give them hugs. COVID was out the window. These people needed a hug. They needed to cry. They needed to talk. They needed someone to listen to them. And that's why we were there. They could come, grab the things they needed. And you just make sure they take it.

We had diapers, we had canned food. Things for cleaning. Sprayers, mold, and mildew cleaners, bleach, anything to get going. They needed boots. They needed hip waders. It's November. It's getting cold. They needed warm hats, warm coats, warm gloves.

I said, "This stuff is for you." "Yeah, but other people had it worse off." "I don't care. Here's a box, we're going to fill it up." I started filling it up for them so they felt comfortable enough to fill a box. I said, "Now, that one's full, let's fill up another."

We needed hot food every day for one hundred people. I had food from so many different restaurants and so many different churches. We put in a freezer outside where people could grab ready-made meals. Take it home. Feed your kids. Feed the families you're staying with.

The volunteers were everywhere: people we deal with on the farm, total strangers. I got donations sent to me from a lady in Fort McMurray who says, "I give it to the little people that are helping on the ground right now because that's what I needed when I was in the fire. Those are the people that help me."

I know where help comes from and I know where help doesn't come from. Your immediate help is the people in your neighbourhood. Everything else is a lot of red tape. Bring on the people in your community that are there to help and help them help others. Because they do. Give to the smaller agencies that are on the ground helping now immediately. When something happens, they are there.



It's been a year and Cole Road, where the dike broke, still closed. There's people re-flooding on the north side where the big break was. There's no words. There's no words. PTSD is very much setting in right now.

When it rained at the beginning of this year, little kids are like, "Do we have to leave? Do we have to leave? Are we going to flood, are we going to flood?" These poor kids aren't even in their own homes yet.

We now have picnics and, as it got colder, dessert and coffee nights for the community at a restaurant close by. That's their counselling. That's how we help each other. We plan events every month for the community.

If there's a silver lining to this flood, it is community. I'm very prone to anxiety, depression. Through the six months of running a hub, I had none of that. It was a complete blessing for me. Is it a God thing? Yes, it is for me. It was the most important thing I've ever done in my life. The people we met, the connections I got.

If this ever happens again, I know what I have to do. There'd be a lot more people helping out. If anyone is capable of running something like this, you will never regret it. Never.



Photographer: Phil McLachlan

# BRIAN MIREA

BRIAN MIREA

Abbotsford, Canada | Southern British Columbia Floods, 2021

"It was just water everywhere for miles and miles."

by Brian Mirea as told to Aldyn Chwelos and Sean Holman

*Brian studies business at Simon Fraser University. But, most days, he'd rather be on the water with a fishing rod in hand. "My dad got me into it when I was younger," says Brian, who has 12-foot aluminum boat with an eight horsepower motor.*

*"I love the early mornings. I love watching the sun come up. I love the feeling when you hook a fish. I love being outside and taking that time to de-stress from everything throughout the week,"*

*In a roundabout way, fishing led him to Simon Fraser University's Beedie School of Business. "I like making money so I can spend more time doing the things that I love such as fishing," says Brian. "I thought business school would've been the ideal way to do that and just make as much passive income as possible."*

*But that passion for fishing also meant he had the skills and equipment necessary to help when atmospheric rivers plunged the Sumas Prairie beneath several feet of water.*

I became aware of the floods on social media. There was one guy talking about being on the roof with his dog, not knowing if he was going to get help. I knew that I had a boat and I had friends who had boats as well. I was like, "Why don't we do a big rescue effort?"

I put something on my Instagram and Facebook seeing if anybody needs help. All of a sudden, because I have a lot of friends in the fishing community, people started messaging, "Hey, can I join you? I have a boat. Hey, my buddy has a boat. He wants to join." We ended up having a big group effort that happened within the span of twelve hours.

We were driving around trying to look for a place to launch. It was just water everywhere for miles and miles. After we got the boats launched, we were off to the races. We made a bit of a map and said, "Okay. This is the area. You take that part of Abbotsford. You take that part. You take that part. I'll take that part."

It was a slow roll for the most part. You knew how deep the water was in most places. But, depending on the incline, there would only be a couple feet. You'd have to watch out because there's fences. We hit the prop so many times on fences. We hit the prop on so many different things that day. The water was so dirty you couldn't avoid it.

At certain points, you'd be watching out for vehicles. There's lots of flooded cars. Some were barely under the water, some were half out of the water, some were just fully submerged.

We had a list of people who asked for help on Facebook. We were going towards one of the houses and I see this island. Probably only ten feet by ten feet, just the pinnacle of this hill. I see something on it and go, "Oh my goodness. That's a dog."

We got really close and we're like, "Oh, oh. That's not a dog." This coyote had managed to swim to this island that was the only piece of land for a mile.

My personal story was that this family had a cat that was left in the house. Coming up to the house, we dinged the boat motor prop on something. We looked down and had dinged it on top of a tractor. We arrived and tied the boat off to a pillar in the front of the house.

As we're walking towards the house, it was waist deep in most spots. My buddy gets something on his leg. He kicks it and a dead rabbit floated up. We couldn't get into the house originally because everything was locked. We asked permission to break into the house. We broke a window, got in, and looked all over.

Going inside the house was a shock. The downstairs level is just chaos. There's three feet of water inside. Things are floating. Everything's soaked. The walls are just tarnished. Then you walk up to the second floor and everything's in order. You had schoolwork on the desk. Everything is normal.

We looked on every level. We looked everywhere and we couldn't find this cat. As we're about to head out, one of my buddies, he's like, "I just heard a meow." We turn around and heard another. We look into this closet. We find the cat underneath the clothes, looking terrified. We got the pet crate they left out, ushered it in, and put a blanket on it so it wouldn't get so cold. We saved it.

Prior to the flood, I would say I was a selfish person. I'd always been like, "Oh, not my problem." Seeing that death and destruction hit so close to home shifted my mindset to: "These people need help. I would hope that if this ever happened to me, they would come back and help me."

The flood made me feel like climate change disasters could hit close to home. Prior to this, climate change affected the things I love to do. It's decimated fish stocks around here. But I'm really worried about it having even more of an impact through these disasters.

I think there needs to be more work to prevent these events in the future. We will get big rainstorms like that again. Politically, I'm very right wing. But this is definitely a very liberal opinion I have. Climate change is a big issue. We need to stop politicizing it. We need to start working towards trying to slow it down or stop it completely.

When something like this hits so close to home, you look at it and go, "Wow, it can be you tomorrow."



Photographer: Phil McLachlan

# CORRY SPITTERS

CORRY SPITTERS

Sumas Prairie, Canada | Southern British Columbia Floods, 2021

“It's like a slow moving freight train that you can't stop.”

by Corry Spitters as told to Christina Gervais and Aldyn Chwelos

Corry is Western Canada's primary supplier of organic chicken to Costco. He grew up surrounded by the industry he would become part of, being raised in the small agricultural community of Nicomen Island next to a slough of the Fraser River.

His father bought their first farm in 1964, after labouring six and half days a week to save money for that purchase. It was a “small, broken, rundown dairy farm milking sixteen cows,” but over the next thirty years it grew into eighty cow operation.

Corry inherited his father's work ethic. Every night in grade 10, he'd ride his bike two miles to a local farm where he milked 250 cows. He completed a diploma in agricultural business management from the British Columbia Institute of Technology and managed a poultry equipment dealership.

In 1988, Corry married his first wife and the following years were a mix of joy and loss. The couple welcomed two baby boys and Corry bought his first farm. It was a twenty thousand bird per cycle poultry farm located in Aldergrove. A couple years later, his wife was diagnosed with cancer and she passed when the boys were still very young.

Corry expanded his farm while spending as much free time as he could with his sons. In 2013, he acquired a larger organic farm in the Sumas Prairie, a flatland created by artificially draining the Sumas Lake. With the help of his sons and brother, they grew the farm four-fold to become Canada's largest organic poultry farm.

At the time the atmospheric river hit the frequently flooded Sumas Prairie in November 2021, the 66-year old farmer was living with his wife on the original Aldergrove farm while operating the larger Sumas Prairie farm with the help of his brother, one of his sons and a fourteen person farm staff.



Where my farm is, it's the beach. Before they built the dikes, it's the place where people would go swimming in Sumas Lake. It takes about three days to fill. It's like a slow moving freight train you can't stop. You know what to expect. You just don't know how bad it will be. But chickens don't swim.

It was November, right at that turning point where we hadn't quite gone to winter. It was raining exceptionally, beyond anything normal. We were operating as best we could. We had to drive through a lot of water. But at least we could get to the farm. We had electricity. We have our own wells and water. So we were pretty much self-sufficient.

But once the dike broke, the RCMP said "You have to evacuate immediately." We were told we've got an hour to get out. My workers dropped everything and left. We had to leave the farm for almost forty-eight hours. But we had two days before the water even reached our property line. That's how big the lake is.

We would have had days to move all our equipment to high ground. We could have lifted all the feed lines. We could have removed all the motors on the bottom floors in all our fans. We probably would have saved almost ninety percent of our equipment.

We were told we couldn't go back. Well, farmers just went in and did. They drove past the roadblocks. They went cross country. My son, one of my business partners, and two of my workers flew in with a helicopter when we were told we couldn't get there.

When they first flew in, the barns had still not gotten underwater. I was on the phone with them. Within an hour of being on the farm, they said we can't save them. There are seven rows of barns. Within four hours, the first had already gone underwater.

Once a bird gets wet, it lays down and suffocates. Birds were already starting to suffocate. We couldn't move that many birds. There was too many. There's nowhere to go with them. All our downstairs floors were annihilated. We had twenty-one floors. They're three hundred by forty-two. We had 196,000 birds on the bottom floors. They're all dead.

It was a mess to clean up. All the garbage from the lake tended to move into our property. We had fuel tanks. We had kids toys. We had plastic wheeled bicycles. We had thousands upon thousands of zucchinis.

The dead chickens hadn't really started to ripen or deteriorate too much. The water was cold. But it smelled. It's a smell I've never smelled before. It was not pleasant. The water was very sick. If someone told you had to go walk in that without protection, you wouldn't do it. The first thing we did was get our employees proper gear. I went to Cabela's. I bought fifteen sets of hip waders for all my workers. And rain gear because it didn't stop raining for days.

First we have to take the dead birds out. Because we have our own equipment, we're able to skeleton rake. Without that you're literally picking this stuff up by hand. Pick up all that mortality. Load it into bins. Take it away to composters. Then the manure. Lagoons of manure. It was somewhat contained in the barns. The minute we opened up the doors, this soup wanted to run out. We scooped it as best we could, and loaded it into watertight bins. That was hauled away.

It was traumatic. Some employees took it better than others. Some were overwhelmed. They needed really specific instructions. They could do the work, but they couldn't process what was in front of them. It's upsetting. I was there. My son was directing traffic. I didn't direct because I knew what it would do to me. There are certain things that you just say, "Well, I got people for that." I did walk into the barns. I saw it. I'll never forget it. I know when there's a crash, everybody wants to look. Sometimes it's better to read about it in the news.

Maybe that's my safety valve. I don't know. I'm dealing with a business challenge right now that I didn't see coming. I have to break it down to the parts I can. I can't dwell on the negative effect of it. When my wife passed away, there was nothing I could do after she was gone. Every day that she lived, I was there beside her. But the minute she passed, I went into my barns. I went back to work.

For flood mitigation, the government knew what to do. And they've known what to do for the last twenty years, ever since the flood in '90. The dikes were not maintained properly. The government didn't listen to the experts and the farmers. They took it upon themselves that they were the authority. Rather than work together, they became the obstacle. The community was functioning quite well without them. The problems were solved by the people that were there. They took charge of moving the livestock, they took charge of a moving feed around. Because that's what they do. They have the equipment, they have the resources to do it. The problem was that we were stopped by the provincial and municipal people to not get access, to not move freely.

It's one of those once in a lifetime events that nobody wants to experience. We haven't got a final number, but we're gonna be upwards of four million dollars with losses. It's the first time that I can remember that I actually posted a significant loss. We work on a very thin margin. It could take us seven years to actually pay for it.

We only get seventy percent recovery from government assistance. To this day, we've received less than twenty percent. To this day, we're still fixing. It weighs heavy. Is it insurmountable? No. When you get into the size and scope of what we're doing, you got to look past that. You can't stop. You can't stop because of a setback like that.



Submitted by Corry Spitters

# CYNDIE ANDERSON

CYNDIE ANDERSON

Mission, Canada | Southern British Columbia Floods, 2021

“It’s like cutting off a lifeline.”

by Cyndie Anderson as told to Gage Smith and Aldyn Chwelos

Cyndie lives with her husband and elderly mother in Lac La Hache, a small Central Interior community stretched along the aspen-lined lakeside and the Cariboo Highway. Before moving to the Cariboo, Cyndie was raised as a country kid in the Lower Mainland where she rode horses and swam in her family’s pool. Her belief that “everyone should know the stories about where you live” led her to study history and anthropology at the University of the Fraser Valley.

She and her husband raised their children in a home on a hill in the rainy valley city of Mission. “My husband and I joked that if there was ever any major disaster, at least we’re on the top of the hill,” says Cyndie. “Which probably isn’t funny now.” There she worked as a teacher for students with disabilities, a school administrator, and served as president for the Mission Association for Community Living board of directors.

In 2018, Cyndie’s dad passed away, leaving her mom on her own. “It’s not easy to be alone in the Cariboo.” In January 2021, Cyndie and her husband moved to the lakefront house in the Interior to live with her mother. They kept their family home in Mission, renting out the upper portion and keeping the basement suite for themselves to make visiting their adult children easier.

“We moved knowing we could go back and forth,” says Cyndie. “Five-hour drive, not a big deal, right?” Every summer of her childhood, and even some winters, she’d travelled the Canyon Highway. “My dad would quiz us on the names of the tunnels and Cariboo Gold rush history,” says Cyndie. Between visiting her granddad in Horse Lake and pulling a trailer full of horses to a Little Britches Rodeo, Cyndie was “no stranger to the Fraser Canyon.”

At the time the atmospheric rivers hit British Columbia, Cyndie, and her husband were in Mission. When the rain started falling hard, the couple decided to cut their trip short and head back to the Cariboo the next morning.

My husband always gets up before anybody. He said, "There's been a major disaster. Flooding on the canyon. The roads are blocked." He's looking to see what our options are. We couldn't get over to Abbotsford because Highway 11 had swelled up. Highway 1 was flooded. Sumas Prairie was filled back up to be a lake. East of Mission was a landslide. Coquihalla was closed. Then I heard that people were stranded all night out on Highway 7 because there was a landslide. Living in Mission, there are how many ways to get out? And none of them were open. It's as if we were on this little island.

We were immediately calling our children. "Are you guys okay? Are you home? Where are you at?" Our daughter was the first to contact us. She and her partner were ok. I recommended that she get the necessities and fill up their gas tank.

Our son, wife and their newborn were also okay. All were home safe but there was flooding all around them. I knew they would be okay but as a parent you still worry, even if they are adults.

The worry and the stress about my mom was big. She was seventy-eight. She's by herself up in Lac la Hache. It was winter. We heat the place with a wood stove. Her bringing wood in from the shed. She's capable. It's just the worry that she's doing it by herself. Is she okay going to town? Because of COVID, I was doing the shopping. I didn't want her to be around people. The responsibilities that were left on her. To look after five cats and two dogs. The 'what ifs' get in your brain.

We went to Superstore to grab some groceries because I didn't know how long we were going to be there. It was really busy. People were rushing and racing to get stuff. The toilet paper panic happened again. People were very close to each other. I found they forgot COVID ever existed. It's the next tragedy on top of the one that we were having.

I thought we'd be there for a week. I thought things would open up. Peter kept checking different routes. Maybe we'll go Highway 3. Maybe we can get out through 99. Then the slide happened. A couple of people were killed. So we're waiting. I needed to get home to work. We were there for two weeks. It was a significant loss of income for my husband and I to lose weeks of work.



Roads eventually opened up. We drove through Whistler. It was a 10-hour drive that would normally take us five. There was snow in the mountains. The rivers were rushing. You're on this two-lane highway weaving through. When we went through the more worrisome areas, we had quiet. Turned the music off. I was looking at the mountains and worrying they were going to fall on us.

It was such a sense of relief once we ended up on Highway 97. There you're above it all. Away from any of the danger areas. I cried a bit at that point because I knew we were able to get home.

We got home around ten o'clock at night. My mother gave us a hug. Had food for us. I had to get to bed because I was getting up to go to work the next day. The students were really happy to see me. I got a big cheer when I came in.

Some kids didn't really understand what was going on. Two days before we were home, I got a report that one of the kids' was upset. Pulled off papers I had on the board behind my desk and had erased my schedule.

I asked the student when I got back to school about it and was told, "Well, I thought you weren't coming back." And I said "Why did you think that?" "Well, I watched the news and I saw a house floating down the river," the student said. "I thought you were going to be floating down the river."

With the whole class, we talked about the highway and the destruction and natural disasters as part of our curriculum: all these different things and how it affected them. They're worried about food. The shelves were empty because the highways were closed. They didn't quite understand why things couldn't get here.

I went into more about it. We asked: "What did the Fraser Canyon look like before there were roads?" and, "What was it like living around these places at the time?" It changed my focus for social studies to talk more about cultures, communities, and families and how people support each other in times of natural disaster.

We were stuck up here. It was worse than we thought. There was no way to get to the Lower Mainland through the Coquihalla or the Canyon Highway. It's like cutting off a lifeline. We didn't want to risk driving through Whistler because that's a pretty dangerous route. When we moved up, we promised our children, "We've got our house here, we're going to be back often." You worry about snow and road conditions but not complete wipeouts.

To be stranded here was emotionally difficult for everyone. We were hoping and praying we would be able to get there for my granddaughter's first Christmas. The highway wasn't opened until late January.

Covid was already disruptive, now it had been two years that we haven't been with the kids for Christmas dinner. So what happens with the third one? I think family traditions get altered and changed and affected by this. By distance and not being able to be together.

My life's changed now because of everything. We sold our house in Mission. We weren't going down as often as the roads were still being fixed and I worried about travelling. I'm glad I live where I live. You double check and think, "Am I good where I am?" Is there something above us on the mountain that could take us out? We're still feeling the effects of it. I think we're gonna still feel some in a while. We don't know what they are yet.

When we eventually drove to the Lower Mainland we saw the damage. you see the power of the river. You see half a mountainside has gone. You see part of a bridge or a road that's damaged, and know so many people's lives were destroyed. You don't know how something could be so powerful until you see the devastation of it all.

It's caused me to think about relationships and not waiting. The confidence you have of "Oh, it'll be there" is different. You don't wait to do the thing. You don't worry about other things when that stuff happens. You go, "Why am I so uptight about this when in one night, things can change?"



Submitted by Cyndie Anderson

# WANDA TURNER

WANDA TURNER

Canada | Southern British Columbia Floods, 2021

*"My first words after 'Lord save us' was 'Put down your windows, we're going to have to swim!'"*

Wanda Turner as told to Samantha Holomay and Aldyn Chwelos

*Raised near the confluence of the Thompson rivers in the Central British Columbia city of Kamloops, Wanda grew up outdoors: hiking, biking and skiing. Her own sizable nuclear family — she's the eldest of four children — melded with a huge extended family that kept her youth filled with love and security. "They may have lived out of town but boy, there was always somebody visiting," says Wanda. "I look back and I think I had the best childhood in the universe."*

*For twenty-five years, she worked as a registered nurse in cities across British Columbia and Alberta. Wanda then spent another fifteen years as a homemaker, raising her two sons and taking them on road trips through the Rockies. She is a woman of faith, "a wonderfully and fearfully made creation of God," and attends church regularly. She now lives in a senior-oriented condo in Chilliwack and acts as the strata's president. At the time the atmospheric rivers hit southern British Columbia, Wanda was returning home with a neighbour from a long-weekend trip to Kelowna.*

*It rained in Kelowna all night on Saturday. It was ridiculous. It was over the top. On Sunday morning, I check the Coquihalla webcams. There was no snow. I was like "Wow, it's still warm," instead of thinking, "That is so wrong. That does not make any sense at all, in November, to have rain that heavy." If I had seen five hundred centimetres of rain, I might not have gone.*

*I knew the roads: just go to Aspen Grove, then down to Princeton, Manning Park, then Hope, home. We started kind of late, one in the afternoon, so it was getting dark when we were at Princeton. Everybody and their dog was going back to Vancouver. So we went on this very crowded road all the way through Manning Park with these waterfalls coming down. I was thinking, "When is this road going to wash out?"*

Our usual three hour trip already turned into six hours long. When we drove through Hope at 6:00 p.m., the power was out. I just thought, "We got two more big bridges" over the mighty Fraser, which is going to be fully loaded with water. I don't like going over bridges during flood time.

We were driving in the dark, west on Highway Seven. We were almost home. One more bridge to go, thirty minutes from Chilliwack. Excess water released a portion of a mountain. A huge scar of rock and trees and water fell down from above.

I saw an angry tidal wave coming toward the car's passenger side. Then the impact, throwing the vehicle across the centerline. Right off the highway into the great unknown. There were a lot of very loud bangs. Felt like throwing the car from side to side, as if in a cement tunnel. On one side: bang! We're hitting trees. Bang!

Thirty seconds of this violence. Rushing water through a stand of cottonwoods, followed by a logjam. We came to a stop. Dirty water dripping off my companion and myself. It was pitch black. I had no idea what we had just been riding. I had no idea where the Fraser River was, except we're probably close to it. The thought that we were being swept into it overcame me. I thought we should immediately prepare to get out of the car and be engulfed by the current. My first words after "Lord save us," was, "Put down your windows, were going to have to swim!"

It took an hour of shock and trembling to finally move out of my car seat. The water was slowly filling up the car. We went to sit on top. We could hear others occasionally calling for help.

I found my phone. It was wet, but with all these great covers, everything worked. I called 911. Then called family and friends. Just a quick call. I phoned my sons. One phoned me back and said he was going to call me every half hour once he figured out what was happening up in Kelowna. I said "You can't phone me every half an hour. I have no more battery power."

My companion with me had a phone that worked for a long time. The kids in the cars not far from us had their phones. They all called back 9-11 and spoke for a long time with them. "When are you coming? When are you going to be here?" "Two to three hours," they said, "We've sent somebody out." They were coordinating with the locals that could still get there because so many roads were not working.

Suddenly I saw a big light and thought it was something set up for checking the train tracks. Then I saw little flashlights going up and down and coming closer. I realized people going up and down the landslide debris between us and the road. The landslide washed me off the road approximately 300-metres into a drainage pond.

We were rescued at one o'clock in the morning. The first responders were young men from the Agassiz volunteer fire department. We balanced over giant logs, huge rocks and mud debris. I was elated, supercharged with adrenaline that helped me navigate a "Tough Mudder." I've seen Tough Mudders. I wasn't actually in one before until then.

Five of us were taken in a minivan to Chilliwack hospital. It just happened to be quiet in the ER. We had great care. I had no injuries except for a sore arm and lots of bruises. I went home to sleep for twelve hours.

I woke up and had to deal immediately with a building disaster. The same disastrous rainfall flooded the elevator pit in my condo. I was working my unpaid job as property manager. Chilliwack became an island. There was nowhere to go. If you'd go down the road, there'd be a barrier because it's flooded. I had to problem-solve about what to do because we couldn't use the elevator. The local elevator serviceman, fire protection companies, hydro-vac service, and plumbers had to be called by me to remedy the situation.

We became friendly as we worked together. We had nicknames for each other. I was called, "Washed Out Wanda." The elevator guy was called, "Pit-Stop Pete." What we were living through was being processed by us all and we were in shock. We were giddy, even jovial. It seemed surreal, knowing that we were landlocked, and the major highway was underwater, crippling the whole province.

People do bond in a crisis. I came to a deeper friendship with the neighbour that I went through the landslide with: she and I get together more often to talk about what happened. We share pictures and videos to process the event. We were needing a post traumatic stress debriefing. I made myself go through that. I thought, "Okay, I'm gonna need counselling for this."



I wanted to positively process the traumatic memory of the events. I learned about who was responsible for the emergency rescue service. I especially want to thank the Agassiz volunteer firemen and make a donation to their emergency program. I wrote thank you letters to the BC premier, who I wasn't particularly fond of. But when you're sitting there after having that near death experience, I was grateful for the fast rescue. The BC rescue emergency service was fantastic. They just had that two days of hell and they found us in six hours. It seems so quick now.

I went to church more regularly. I joined a small group for sharing and had regular prayer time. My relationship with my family deepened. With almost dying, we all appreciate each other so much more.



Submitted by Wanda Turner

# SHOSHAUNA ROUTLEY

SHOSHAUNA ROUTLEY

Abbotsford, Canada | Southern British Columbia Floods, 2021

“Where is the water coming from?”

by Shoshauna Routley as told to Sandy Ibrahim

*Shoshauna is an athlete, farmer and co-owner at The Functional Beverage Group Inc., where she and her partner manufacture Healthy Hooch Kombucha & Thrive Remedies. They live and work on a ten-acre farm in Abbotsford, British Columbia. She grew up in Texas and immigrated to Canada with her mother and step-father when she was eight.*

*A self-proclaimed shy kid with not much confidence, Shoshauna had a natural athleticism and disciplined personality that led to a ten-year stint as a professional cyclist, a career she shared with husband Will, whom she'd met right after high school. When she retired from cycling five years ago, Shoshauna and Will bought a two-acre farm and embarked on a dream of growing their own food. Shortly thereafter they expanded their vision and started a small-batch kombucha company.*

*In November 2020 they took a risk and bought a ten-acre farm to scale up their business. They spent nearly a year upgrading their new facility to meet the stringent food-safe requirements of GFSI (Global Food Safety Initiative) so they could sell their products to the US and big box stores like Costco.*

*In early November of 2021, they passed their food safe audit with flying colours. They were about to celebrate when two weeks later, a series of atmospheric rivers caused unprecedented flooding in Abbotsford and surrounding areas.*

*It was a really big challenge for us to even get this place. We sacrificed so much. It's quite the feat to build a manufacturing facility. Normally, that's a business that's passed down from generation to generation. It's not something that you just start, you know, just a young couple that's like, “I want to get into manufacturing.” You just don't get into a business like that. The last five years have been really, really trying. We would have been celebrating our eight-year anniversary and seventeen years together that weekend. We were in celebratory mode because we just got this big certification. And then it flooded.*

Monday morning, we woke up and it was raining a lot. That's normal in this area. We're like, "How high is that water going to come?" I wasn't thinking anything unusual, other than, "Wow, it's flooding a lot. I hope the rain stops. I don't want it to come up one inch or two inches into the facility." You're not thinking six feet. We didn't know it was going to be catastrophic.

We were trying to use pumps to pump the water out, but the water was rising way too fast. We basically worked until the water got too high inside the facility. As soon as I saw that the electrical hub was compromised, that's when I was like, "We need to make the call. I don't want my partner getting electrocuted." We just had to say, "We have to shut the power off and wait till morning."

So, we're exhausted from the day, just in shock. All the roads are flooded around us, so our house and our yard was like this little island. Before we went to bed that night, it wasn't in the yard yet. We'd seen, at like 8:00 pm, they had issued an evacuation notice and at that point, there was no way we could drive out.

We thought this was all from [rain] water and the water appeared to be going down. My partner put a ruler in the ground so that he could watch the water levels. So, you're just like, "Well, hopefully we wake up in the morning, and it starts to drain."

I woke up at 3:00 [am] to the sound of a waterfall gushing in the crawlspace. I woke up in a panic. You just jolt out of bed. I could see water pouring in over the concrete, like a waterfall. We planted this cherry orchard this past year and I can see it from our bedroom window. It was pitch black, but I could see that the entire cherry orchard was fully submerged. It was like you were looking out at a lake. Everything was a lake. Everything was flooded.

My dog wouldn't go pee in the front yard because there was mice and rabbits and tons of wildlife on our little patch of grass at the front of our house. She's in a frenzy. She's like, "Well, there's animals everywhere." She didn't want to go pee. We're just like, "Holy, this is insane." You just see all these little rodents and rabbits, because they're all trying to survive.

We didn't understand it. You know, it wasn't raining. I think it was a freaking beautiful day. I kept going over the same question in my head, like, "Where did this water come from? Where did the water come from?" You know, I just couldn't understand it. We knew it wasn't coming from the Fraser. So like, "Where is the water coming from?"

Eventually we did find out the Nooksack River in the United States breached by like three feet. We didn't know that information. I'd called search and rescue and they said they were triaging. But there was no timeline. Are we going to be those people who have to climb onto the roof with their cats and dog and wait on the roof for a helicopter ride? Because at that point, we're like, "Well, if it's this high, why not twenty feet?" You just have no comprehension. And our neighbors were saying, "Okay, we think we're going to have a canoe." So, they picked us up in their canoe. At this point, I went to the worst place: "We're done. Like, our business is done."

So we went and stayed with Will's parents, came back and the water had recessed. We assessed the damage, and it was horrific. We had to speak with insurers, and that's a hell unto itself, to be honest. There's so much cleanup to do. All our records that we've made are gone. You're reordering inventory. Like there's just so much to do. And insurance was basically a part time job for my partner. It was insane. Just inventory alone was like a couple hundred thousand dollars. All told, probably close to half a million dollars.

I think we're all afraid that it will happen again. And in my mind, it will happen again. It's just, will we still be here? And can we escape another catastrophic flood over the next couple of years? How long will it take for it to happen again? It's constantly weighing on my mind. We need rating systems on these storms, especially as they get worse and worse, so that we can prepare.

If we didn't have the business here, I probably would move. I don't know where. I don't know where you're safe. I personally don't think there's anywhere safe. It's just where has damage not affected an area? You know, because forest fires are everywhere. So you're never safe. I thought we were lucky in BC for the most part. You know, that's just how I thought, "Oh, we're very lucky to be here. Not a lot happens." I don't know why we think that way.



Submitted by Will Routley



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