

Education | updated: 9/21/2017 4:33 PM

Huntley grad recounts her work as reporter in Hurricane Harvey



Huntley High School graduate Meagan Flynn has been covering the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey for a Houston weekly.

Courtesy of Meagan Flynn

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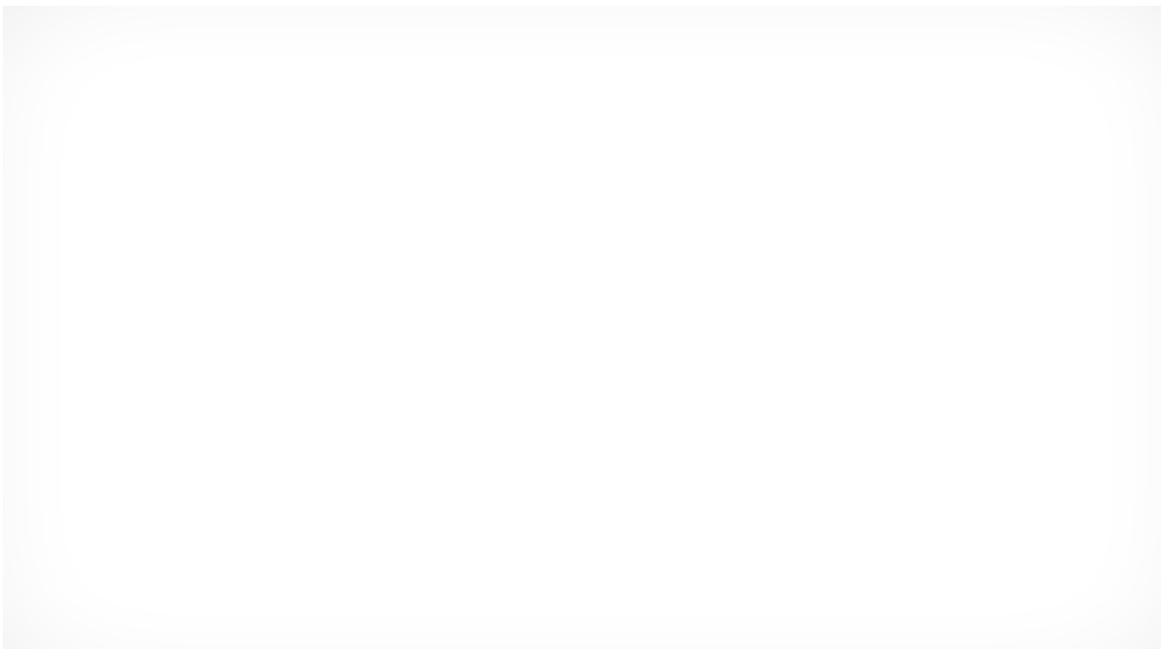


Madhu Krishnamurthy

Being in the right place at the right time to break the next big story is every journalist's dream.

The biggest story of Meagan Flynn's journalistic career soon turned into a nightmare for thousands of her fellow Houstonians forced out of their homes by catastrophic flooding.

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Hurricane Harvey made landfall Aug. 25, pounding the Texas coast with winds of 130 mph and torrential rains deluging highways and streets overnight, according to the National Hurricane Center.

"Nobody will ever forget this one," said Flynn, 24, a 2011 graduate of Huntley High School and staff writer for the Houston Press, a weekly newspaper where she has worked two years covering criminal justice and political squabbles in Harris County. "We've never seen anything this big. You have this intense sense of urgency to really get the news out there as soon as possible. People were constantly needing to know what was safe what wasn't safe."

Flynn ventured on foot to document the flooding and talk to residents taking refuge in a nearby shelter. She lives near one of Houston's many bayous -- a slow-moving stream, either a little river or a big creek -- that "were really rivers overflowing the streets," she said.

Her Aug. 30 (<http://www.houstonpress.com/news/tropical-storm-harvey-brings-historic-floods-to-houston-9746647>) and Sept. 1 (<http://www.houstonpress.com/news/how-will-houston-and-harris-countys-housing-market-handle-thousands-seeking-new-homes-9754627>) stories capture the plight of inundated Houstonians -- supplanting an earlier planned cover story about Texas' medical marijuana laws.

Flynn was a writer and features editor for Huntley High's The Voice. She earned a bachelor's degree in magazine journalism and writing from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa.

Huntley journalism teacher Dennis Brown called Flynn an "amazing reporter and really a stylist with her words."

Flynn has spent the past four weeks writing about the aftermath of Harvey's devastation and recovery efforts and filed about 30 storm-related stories. (<http://www.houstonpress.com/authors/meagan-flynn-7623209>)

The last two times the entire city was crippled by severe flooding were during Tropical Storm Allison in 2001 and Hurricane Ike in 2008.

"We exceeded the rainfall of Tropical Storm Allison in just half the time, which is pretty crazy," Flynn said.

Allison dumped up to 38 inches of rain over five days across Southeast and East Texas causing widespread flooding and

22 deaths, while Harvey dropped up to 52 inches of rain in eight days, according to the National Weather Service.

Flooding last year, though bad, affected only certain areas of town. "You didn't see the entire city evacuating from rooftops," she said.

Some people waited 24 hours atop dining room tables in their flooded homes for someone to rescue them.

"I met a guy who spent more than 12 hours in a canoe rescuing people," Flynn said. "His own house had flooded and he just tried to get out there to help other people who were stranded in their houses."

Harvey's overall death toll has risen to roughly 82 -- 35 drowning deaths in Harris County alone.

Flynn hasn't had to wade through floodwaters or take undue risks personally or for her reporting, but working consecutive 14-hour days documenting the devastation took its toll. One of the most difficult stories was writing about those who drowned, she said.

"I looked at every single person and tried to have a brief paragraph of who that person was, how they died, what they were doing (when they drowned)," she said. "That was hard ... just the sheer life after life that was swept away in these floodwaters. Entire families were found at one time in a van. It was just really tragic stuff. Some of the people who did volunteer and went out in boats, they were just swept away."

Flynn's reporting now is focused on telling the struggles of thousands of displaced Houstonians and the recovery ahead.

Frustration levels are high with some homeowners having faced severe flooding for the second or third time, Flynn said.

"I've seen really disgusting, moldy apartments, and that's an experience that thousands of people are going through right now," Flynn said. "Some landlords are still asking for rent while others are giving a grace period (to renters). People are having to live in these apartments that are unlivable. There is nowhere really where they can go. Some landlords are not giving back their security deposits, and just finding a vacancy now is really difficult. We still have more than 3,000 people who are still in shelters who are waiting on housing assistance."

For Flynn, the most remarkable story of all has been how the disaster has united people.

"It's been truly incredible -- I am speaking as a person, not just a journalist -- to see how everybody is there for each other," Flynn said. "Houston often prides itself on its diversity. You could see out there so many different cultures, races, ethnicities, backgrounds just helping one another. People were risking their lives to save strangers."

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