

# UNCOMPROMISING DEDICATION *in the* FACE of DISASTER

By Alexandra Anastasio

October 29, 2012 is a day many in Staten Island, New York and New Jersey will never forget. Superstorm Sandy was the deadliest hurricane to hit the northeastern U.S. in 40 years and the second costliest in the nation's history. With damage in the states amounting to \$65 billion, the storm will always be remembered for its devastating effects. There are innumerable stories and pictures of the devastation, but there are countless stories we haven't heard, like that of Staten Island University Hospital (SIUH).

SIUH went to great efforts to ensure that network operations ran efficiently before and after the storm. With locations on both the north and south shores of Staten Island and the main data center located at 1 Edgewater Plaza, there was a critical need to make certain nothing was lost. Working with a team of people, Matthew Earley, a network architect and engineer and an invaluable member of the hospital's information services team, worked tirelessly not only the day of the storm but continuously afterward in maintaining the hospital's data center. In addition, Earley was instrumental in the relocation of major hospital departments that were destroyed.

Earley, who's been working for the past two years in a senior management capacity in IT with SIUH, proved his loyalty and commitment along with his sense of partnership with the North Shore-LIJ Health Systems, explains Kathy Kania, chief information officer (CIO) for SIUH. For such work ethic and expertise, Earley was nominated and chosen as the 2014 National Staffing Employee of the Year by the American Staffing Association (ASA) and was honored at a ceremony this past October in Orlando, Florida.

"Matthew is an invaluable member of the team," says Kania. "He is an expert in his field and is extraordinary in his ability to plan and think outside the box while being able to address issues under tremendously stressful circumstances. He's wonderful to work with, to know and to have as part of our organization."



Above: Matthew Earley, SIUH network architect and engineer. Insets: The IT department employees present the night of Sandy; The view outside of 1 Edgewater Plaza as Sandy hit.

Earley, a married father of two young boys, and a contractor employed with LloydIT (the technology division of Lloyd, a staffing firm that has been working together with NS-LIJ Health System since the early 1990's), sat down with BELLA for an exclusive conversation about that night and what went into ensuring the hospital's systems were never lost.

**The day of Hurricane Sandy, what was going on at the data center?** That day, a team of people and I were working at Edgewater Plaza, which is right on the water. While it wasn't mandatory for us to stay, I knew I had two critical roles to play, so with the support of my wife I was confident I was making the right decision. As the day went on, the severity of the storm was unknown but with so much debris surrounding the building, we began to anticipate that there may be structural damage.

**Who made the decision to shut down the data center, essentially the "main hub" of the hospital? What was the process like?** The decision was an administrative one. Once decided, I and a dozen or so IT people from SIUH immediately got to work. At this point the waves were coming up alongside the building and the tanker ship had broken its moorings. The building had lost power and the gas was turned off so the decision to take it down was the best one.

There's an order of operations that has to be followed; since the network is the backbone of the operation, it was the last thing to be shut down. All of the power for the equipment runs through the basement and if there had been another six inches of water, everything would have been lost. If that happened it would have been impossible to bring the system back up without major reconstruction.

**What exactly is stored in the data center? As patients, we never really stop to think about where all of our information is housed.** Both locations rely on the data center

for their clinical, administrative and patient records, as well as a significant number of practices and remote sites that connect to the center. The hospital has an extremely difficult time operating during a data center outage; that's why it was imperative to make sure it was functioning.

**What was the day after the storm like? It's been said it was like a "miracle" to be up and running that next day. How did you accomplish that?** Before I even left home, there were conflicting reports as to whether the building was destroyed, but I knew I had to get back and see for myself. I also knew our job was far from over. We had tremendous help from the police and National Grid in getting back inside the building, and with a call from a state senator to National Grid, the power was turned back on. There are a lot of components that go into bringing things back up and they must be followed in a specific order; no one piece of the puzzle works alone.

Each step was followed to make certain things were running properly, and once we were confident, we moved on to the next step. It took us almost an entire day to get the system back up and running, but we were able to do so without any problems. It's imperative that there is communication between the data center and the hospitals and while that could have been damaged or destroyed, it wasn't. Thankfully, everything worked flawlessly.

**Once the data center was back up and running, was your job finished?** Not at all ... there were many residual issues and a lot of people were depending on the network team to help them get back to being fully operational. Administration and physicians' practices were knocked out as well, and it took anywhere from weeks to months to get them back online.

**While you were working, where was your family through all of this?** I live in Franklin Lakes, NJ, and while I was at the data center, my wife and two boys were at home, but not for very long. My wife, Daphne, didn't want to be alone; if I was going to stay in Staten Island then she wanted to be where I was. In the early afternoon I went home and brought them back to the Holiday Inn. The original plan was to spend the night but when I finally got back to the hotel and saw the water level in the parking lot, I inquired how long their generators would be able to run. Assessing the situation my family would be in once there was no power, I decided to get them back home. Another concern was whether or not I would be able to make it back to Staten Island the next morning. It was a risk I took but thankfully with the assistance of the police and escorts - and my hospital ID, which was a big help - I was able to make it through.

**Was there ever a point in time throughout all of this that you asked yourself if you made the right decision by staying in Staten Island?** Absolutely! Despite the fact I knew I had a job to do, there was a point when the dock pulled apart and the water was hitting the building when I asked myself, *Why am I here?* But I knew my family was safe and all the decisions I'd made were solid and well-calculated so I felt at peace. I would do it the same way all over again, if necessary.

**How did you feel upon learning you'd been chosen to receive this award?** When I found out, I felt a great sense of humble recognition. It's nice to look back on that time and realize I did the right thing but not to rest on those laurels. During that time of crisis, everyone pulled together and worked seamlessly to guarantee success. With all the pieces in place my two roles in the process were possible and successful.