

# Home again

## Woman gets a helping hand after Sandy

By HARVY LIPMAN  
STAFF WRITER

LITTLE FERRY – Filippa Balistrieri couldn't have been happier to return home Sunday.

"Ooh, it's beautiful," she said, beaming, as her son Angelo steered her wheelchair into the bedroom of the basement apartment she shares with her husband, Emanuele.

With all new kitchen appliances, a new motorized hospital bed and even a new wheelchair ramp leading from the outside door, her home looks considerably different from the last time she saw it. That was four months ago, after superstorm Sandy filled the basement with 4 feet of water.

"Thank you. You did a nice job," she said to Tom Toronto, president of Bergen County's United Way. The United Way paid the bulk of the more than \$38,000 it took to repair the apartment, with the rest of the funds coming from Heightened Independence and Progress – a Hackensack non-profit that provides programs for the disabled.

Balistrieri, 62, has multiple sclerosis and has relied on a wheelchair for more than 20 years. As water began seeping into the basement unit the night of Oct. 29, Balistrieri's son decided she needed to be moved upstairs to the house's main level, where he lives with his wife.

"We lost power and I knew the sump pump wasn't going to work," Angelo Balistrieri recalled. "I said, 'Let's go upstairs.' But she was fighting me."

"I didn't want to go," Filippa Balistrieri said. But her son convinced her, fortunately. Within a half-hour the basement was filled with water. It receded the next day, but the apartment was devastated.

"The refrigerator was on its side, the washer and dryer were moved across the floor, even

See HOME Page L-6

the wheelchair ramp was detached off the wall," Angelo explained. "The hot-water heater and the boiler were damaged; so was the hospital bed. It wouldn't go up and down."

Over the next few days, the family tried to care for her on the upper floors, but her son soon

recognized that would be impossible.

"Our bedroom and bathroom are on the second floor and getting her up and down stairs was just too much," he said. His 71-year-old father – who was diagnosed with lung cancer last year – simply wasn't strong enough to help.

Angelo called his sister, who contacted the day program their mother attends. Within a couple of days they had been referred to the Bergen County Health Care Center, a county-run nursing home in Rockleigh. That's where Filippa moved in November, and had been living ever since.

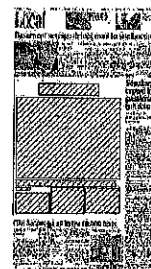
"The people were fine there, very nice people," she said. "But the food I didn't like."

And it wasn't home. It also didn't sit well with Emanuele, who badly missed the woman he'd shared his life with for the past 37 years. But coming up with the money to repair the home was a major problem.

"My dad's retired 10 years," Angelo said. "And with my mom's disability, they did not have a lot of money. My dad wanted to just hose it down, clean everything up with bleach. But with the damage and the likelihood of mold, I knew that was impossible."

"It was no good," Emanuele said in a thick Italian accent, shaking his head. "My mind was racing all the time. I didn't know what to do."

Then one day when he was driving home from work, Angelo got a phone call from Toronto. The United Way was going to pick up the tab.



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"We'd been raising money for Sandy relief, but we weren't getting connected with people," the United Way president said. "The problem was, people weren't coming forward for help. And when we'd find somebody, they'd say to us, 'There's somebody else who needs help more than I do. You should talk to my neighbor.'"

That changed gradually over a period of months, and when the United Way, along with other volunteer agencies, held sessions for storm victims at the Little Ferry and Moonachie senior centers, more than 200 showed up.

At this point, Toronto said, the United Way has spent nearly all of the \$300,000 it has raised for Sandy aid on rehabilitating houses in the two towns. The organization has over 100 more names on its list of people who still need assistance.

"We're down to our last \$20,000. We're going to hit the zero point in our funds around the midpoint of next week," Toronto said. "I'm getting ready to go before our board and ask them to dip into our reserves so we can keep going."

The United Way has long put an emphasis on building and rehabilitating housing for the disabled, going back years before Sandy struck. So when Toronto received a call last fall about the Balistrieris from Heightened Independence and Progress president Eileen Goff, he offered to put the United Way's resources behind the repairs.

"When Tom first called me, my reaction was -- I was kind of in shock, so I didn't react the way I should have to someone offering that kind of help, because I sort of didn't believe it," Angelo said. "I think I just said OK, because I didn't think it was real."

By the time he watched his mother react to returning home, however, the reality had long since sunk in.

"I can't thank Tom and the United Way, or Eileen and the

people at HIP enough," he said. "We're very thankful for everybody who's helped us along the way. Without the United Way and HIP, I don't know what we would have done."

He stopped and smiled.

"We're just happy to have Mom back home."

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AMY NEWMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Filippa Ballstrieri, in wheelchair, with her husband, Emanuele, left, and son and daughter-in-law, Angelo and Josephine Ballstrieri. Filippa moved to a nursing home after superstorm Sandy destroyed her apartment. Then two non-profits paid for home repairs.