

Floods are not a good thing

Written by Michael McGurk

Most of my favorite memories of growing up have to do with the Cedar River. It carries none of the cachet of the Mighty Mississippi, sometimes the water was so low you really couldn't boat that far, it was pretty dirty, but I remember summer after summer of swimming and skiing and getting wonderfully sunburned. While it was happening, we never really thought about how lucky we were. They were the summers of song. We lived up by Jefferson while I was in school and, though we had a place in the harbor, we always dreamed of living right on the river. Sure enough, as soon as I left home the folks found a place on Ellis Boulevard at Penn Avenue. The house was OK and there was a big back yard. But the best part was that back yard led right to a dock on the river. Hardly a show place, but to us it was Xanadu. For the next thirty years or so that dock launched countless boat rides, saw a couple of generations learn to ski, landed an ocean-load of carp, channel cat and bass, witnessed one wedding, a 25th Anniversary, and more than our fair share of pig-roasts.

May 2008 was kind of a wet one. Not just for Cedar Rapids, but, more importantly as it turned out, for all of northeast Iowa. It rained...a lot. Then, while we were preparing for my mom's 80th, the river began to rise. No one was too worried at the time, because this was nothing new. The Cedar floods every now and then. And the worst flood crested a little over 19 feet. Looked like this one might get there too. No problem, the city was ready for 19 feet. It kept raining. There would be some damage, but nothing we couldn't deal with. It rained even more. Then they started talking about 20 feet. This is new territory. People poured in from all over the area to help throw up sand bags. They started at the dike a Penn Avenue (pretty much in our back yard) and headed north toward where the old Kappa Ann used to be. 20 feet? No problem. There might be some basement flooding, probably not much more. But the rain wouldn't quit. And neither would the river. Police and National Guard ordered people off the sand bag lines late the night of June 11. Kids as young as 10, seniors as old as 79. Some weren't even from Cedar Rapids. They were just there to help. There was no time to grab things from the house. Get to your cars and leave the area. The sand bags didn't help. The river continued to rise. 22...24...28...32 feet!!! Water raced through downtown, where so many years ago on the day after Thanksgiving kids raced from the Iowa theater to the Paramount to the World to watch free cartoons while parents shopped at Killians, Armstrongs, Penneys, Woolworths, Kresges. Through neighborhoods...through dreams.

We know too well the devastation from Czech Village to St Pats to City Hall to Mercy Hospital. 32 feet! Not in anyone's wildest imagination.

When I arrived in Cedar Rapids to help as the waters receded, I couldn't believe what I saw. I've included some pictures that tell the story better than I ever could. I believe you can find them in the photo gallery. I'll check with John and Jim to make sure.

Mom was safe, but lost just about everything. She is living far from the river now in a great little house off Stoney Point Road. The home on Ellis was a complete loss. The dock is still functional. There are still good times to be had there, though they will be bitter sweet. Sometime in the next few years the city will be taking our land and our neighbor's land, throwing up an huge earthen dike and turning peoples hopes and dreams into so-called "green space". Cutting off the river from people who so much want to live there.

But it was great while it lasted.