**Andrea: A burst pipe and the power of community**

**Jule:** Hi, I'm Jule, and this is *Hard Times and Hope,* a place for real conversations with regular people about a real hard time. We talk about what it was, how they got through it and something good that came from it.

Today's guest is Andrea. Andrea and I met at work where our desks were opposite each other. I noticed right away how upbeat Andrea was. It didn't matter what was happening around us, Andrea was consistently positive. I wanted to talk with Andrea because we're friends. And because I wondered what does a positive person like Andrea have to say about hard times—does she have them? Let's find out.

**Jule:** Andrea, thank you so much for being here today.

**Andrea:** Thanks Jule.

**Jule:** We haven't really… well, actually, that's not true. We have talked to each other recently, but we've never done anything like this before.

**Andrea:** No, it's a whole new level.

**Jule:** It is. So what hard time are you going to be discussing today?

**Andrea:** I was going to talk about a time that really deeply impacted my whole life and throw it upside down. And that was the winter, Christmas season of 201,7 when a pipe burst in our attic, while we were on vacation, visiting my in-laws in Minnesota and the ensuing 18 months of topsy-turvyness that I did not anticipate my life would be thrown into.

**Jule:** What a bummer. And that it's 18 months. Okay. So let's, let's set the stage. You go to Minnesota to visit your in-laws…

**Andrea:** When we go to Minnesota to visit the in-laws and I have two small kids, they're two and four and with my husband, and it was actually the day we were planning to leave. So, one of the themes in this story is how many coincidences worked in my favor that you just have to believe that there was some kind of higher power looking out for you. Right?

 We were at breakfast actually, and I got a call from a number that I hadn't recognized and I put it to voicemail or whatever. And eventually I checked it when we got back and we're starting to get ready to pack. So it was the alarm company notifying us that there was an issue with our house.

They were going to send the police over because they hadn't been able to get ahold of me to find out if we had tripped the alarm. And clearly, we hadn't tripped the alarm. So thinking that it was potentially a burglary or something like that, I let them go and investigate. And they said, well, the police didn't see anything.

So at that point it's still in the back of my mind that something's obviously going on and I was very lucky to be sharing a nanny with my next door neighbor. And I knew the nanny was next door watching the neighbor’s the day after Christmas. And she had a key to our house. So I said, “Hey, do you mind going over and checking out what's going on?”

She goes over and she opens the door. She has me on the phone as she's opening the door. And she says, “Oh, my gosh. I'm so sorry. It's raining in your house.” And I'm eight hours away, right? So, you know, it becomes that like *Home Alone* moment where they're late for the airport and everyone's just rushing to pack up.

And so we pack up and hightail out of Minnesota and my in-laws are wringing their hands and such at that point, we had no idea. What had happened? I've never lived in an old house. It had never even occurred to me.

So my nanny and my neighbor actually both jumped right in, came in. The very, very first important lesson here I learned was obviously that power of community and connection. And thank goodness that I was friends with my neighbors and I had these wonderful people who were willing to come in my house, pop in, with all this water that was falling from the attic down to… it was pouring in the basement.

I mean, there was really no words to see everything just soaking. And, then also, meanwhile, I'm trying to keep my kids off that stuff and they wanted to play with their Christmas stuff, which was, you know, all wet. Oh, It was definitely just a night of…Surreal, I guess is all I can say, surreal.

This is the place that you've selected as your home. I'd always lived in apartments in Chicago. This was like my first, the first house that we bought. It was just, yeah. I don't want to say devastating, but also, we were thankful because it wasn't a fire. Our stuff was still there a little.

**Jule:** When you were talking about coincidences and the power of community, so your nanny comes over, could you hear it? In your nanny's voice when she said—

**Andrea:** Absolutely. You could hear just how, I mean, she had spent so many hours in the house like that. She was just broken up to see it in that state.

**Jule:** You had your nanny, your neighbor, your neighbor's dad.

**Andrea:** Yes, exactly. All jumping in, dropping, whatever was going on in their day and thinking it was not a big deal. That it’s just what you do for someone. And I just thought that was so caring. And that was, I think what I needed at that moment to be able to move into whatever the next steps were going to need to be, to get through this.

So what is interesting, too? That I hadn't thought of actually, until I started thinking about, reflecting back on the experiences. You call in these companies, it's a restoration company and I didn't really have any experience with that either, but they had this enormous trailer the next day they're coming into the house.

They are completely emotionally detached to your home, it's freezing. They're tramping through with their boots, it just makes you feel like, Oh, please treat my home with respect.

**Jule:** Yeah. It's just a job to them.

**Andrea:** Right. Definitely, they were on a mission to save my house.

**Jule:** When you talk about the restoration people coming in, I can relate because I also had a water pipe burst. There are people trapsing through and ripping off baseboards and they don't care. They're just like, boom, boom, boom, boom.

**Andrea:** Absolutely. And again, our house is old, it has this beautiful molding, and they don't care.

They're just ripping it off and I'm like, “Can any of this be saved?” And they throw it in a pile, right? I think yours happened in the winter, too. This was the dead of winter and it was so cold. They had so many heaters, so many fans that they had to bypass our electrical, whatever panel in the basement and put something in so they wouldn't blow a fuse with all these things.

They were connecting and it brought back something for me of when my dad actually was in the hospital, in the ICU for a couple of months, it was similar to when the doctors come in and they put the patient on life support and they hook them up to all these things, to do all the functions that are needed with all these wires.

That’s what I felt like with my home, just helpless and, and hooked up to things. And then it was waiting, like, “Oh, how are the floors going to turn out? How's the wall?” You know, it's just this sense of waiting and, and no one that I knew of had been through this to guide me through. Well, then you call the insurance and this is going to take approximately this many months.

That's really just what I wanted to know is, “How long is this going to last?” Because I was going day by day and, well, “How many clothes do I need to pack? What hotel am I staying at?” Because we didn't even have heat.

**Jule:** Oh, I didn't even think about that. Where did you go?

**Andrea:** We went to the holiday Inn Express and for the next couple of weeks.

So, it was like being a vagabond. It was kind of me in charge of the kids, trying to figure out where we were going to stay for a week or two at a time. We would end up in Wisconsin with my mom, just because she had space. There was support, a washing machine that I could use, et cetera.

We couldn't use anything within the house really. And at that point we kind of had a sense of, okay, well now it's time to get some people in to see how long this is going to take to repair. I can't tell you how many times I asked for help from this neighbor. She's amazing. This next person who she referred was the contractor who had come in, actually he gave us an estimate for our basement the summer before. So he had seen our house, how it was, and I said, “Hey, can you just come over? Like, I know I trust your judgment, right? Like you're in the business. Any kind of estimate in terms of timing or how much this is going to cost would be helpful.”

And I remember the call I got from him at night at one of the hotels and he said, “I have concerns.” And he said, “Have you heard about the way you're supposed to deal with lead paint in reconstruction with old houses?” And I was like, “No.” And he said, “Well, I have some serious concerns about the way they're restoring your house, and how all the paint that's being disturbed as they're just ripping things off without any barrier.”

**Jule:** Wow

**Andrea:**  I thought that was really brave of him to call when no one else mentioned that to me. And once I did dig a little deeper, I found that this was in fact a serious issue.

So I have two little kids. They're the ones who are really, the concerns about lead poisoning are for smaller kids, six and under is what I found.

So that just threw a whole, another monkey wrench into the whole thing.

**Jule:** What did you do?

**Andrea:** I drew on someone else in my network. I have this amazing web and I'm so grateful. I work for a commercial real estate company and the head of risk management there could not have been a nicer man, so approachable, so amazing.

I called him like, New Year’s Day or something. It's like, “Hey—"

**Jule:** “Let's talk lead.”

**Andrea:** He immediately gave me his personal contact. He said, you need an environmental engineer, you need an assessment, and then you need mitigation, obviously. So what I didn't realize in all that was two things was that those processes take a really long time.

**Jule:** Yeah. When you said this took 18 months, I was thinking, how can, how can it possibly take 18 months?

**Andrea:** Exactly. So, I did call the environmental engineer. They eventually came out and did the lead wipes and assessments and discovered lead everywhere—

**Jule:** Oh, wow.

**Andrea:** Yeah. Which also meant we couldn't, we weren't technically allowed to come in and out of the house then at that point. They put on one of those stickers on, like environmental hazard.

**Jule:** On your front door?

**Andrea:** Oh, yes. We also ended up having to move into temporary housing. So that was fun. That was another hard time, going to Target to furnish the temporary house in the middle of winter. And that first night at that place was so cold. We had an air mattress. Now I don't know if you've ever slept on one.

**Jule:** Oh yes.

**Andrea:** It's very cold. It's not a comfortable situation.

**Jule:** Yes I have, because it sucks all the heat out of your body. You have to put blankets under the sheet between you and the air mattress.

**Andrea:** We learned this, meanwhile, the same with my kids, too. And I will tell you kids who don't sleep through the night, it's not a very happy family situation. So there's definitely some rough times there. And as people gave me more information again about the insurance claims, I got more in their face and started advocating, like “This is not okay. My children are not sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags or whatever. It's going to take however many months to get their rooms clean. So you're ordering a new crib, sorry.” And I'm not an assertive person.

So to do that, I think that's a lot of emotional… just energy out of me to keep fighting that fight all the time with that. So it was a very happy day once the people cleaned the lead, but that didn't happen until May.

**Jule:** Wow. And it happened Christmas time. Did you go through any kind of mourning period or you were straight onto ‘gotta fix this’?

**Andrea:** The mourning happened, the grief, along the way, as there were little incidents that would happen or things I would see that would trip me up and ugly crying that happened.

**Jule:** What's one thing that prompted an ugly cry?

**Andrea:** Definitely the kids sleeping on the floor prompted an ugly cry. Oh my gosh. Because we weren't allowed in because of the led and all their toys were here. So we had to move out with nothing to occupy them. And I had a friend in Mississippi who sent us a kit with some Play-Doh and some like, you know, the little things that you play with it, like a roller and some scissors and whatever.

And they were so happy and they were so busy and I was just so touched. I was like, it was that moment of loss and it's stuff. So it's hard. You, you don't wanna, you know, there's that sense of like shame too, like I'm okay. I'm still alive. Like we're, we're not on the streets, but yeah.

**Jule:** A loss is a loss and especially when it's your kids. So you see your kids having a hard time. What helped you get through that?

**Andrea:** What helped me get through that was I think staying busy, there was always something to do in regards to it. I was very, very thankful that I was working part-time because it's was that like little distraction of I have something else to focus on, iinstead of just this domestic mess.

**Jule:** Yeah. So the part-time benefited you before, because it gave you time to work on the house reconstruction stuff, but there was also a benefit of part-time that it took you away from house reconstruction.

**Andrea:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Jule:** If you were going to give yourself advice to that woman who was driving back in the car, who hadn't gotten there yet, what advice would you give her?

**Andrea:** The advice I would give would be to be patient. It would also be to think about the impact in the long term.

**Jule:** and thinking long-term, which is kind of hard then, because your main focus is getting back in your house, right? So getting out of the temporary housing, getting back in your house.

**Andrea:** Exactly. And you don't realize to what extent the location that you've chosen for your home has such a big impact on the rest of your routine.

**Jule:** What do you mean?

**Andrea:** Just in terms of how long it takes you to drop people off or how close you are at a walk to the local coffee shop or things that you would take for granted that are now more difficult.

**Jule:** So the temporary housing, wasn't just the housing. It was the location and what it took you away from.

**Andrea:** Yeah, exactly.

**Jule:** You live in a great neighborhood. You can walk to one of my favorite Italian restaurants in the world.

**Andrea:** We love it. And it was hard to be away. And the other thing I would say that I learned too, was in hindsight, we were very, Oh, let's say dazzled impacted by the visual show that the contractor we chose had on their website in terms of the results and the positive customer reviews, and ended up choosing someone that wasn't the brave contractor who called me and said, “Hey, you have issues with your house” who clearly knew his stuff and had come referred.

And in hindsight, I would've gone with that person. And in hindsight, what we needed was someone we could trust, first of all. And second of all, someone that we knew was going to do quality work and would, again, that theme of treating our home with respect. In the end, I came to realize, Hey, you know what? The design is certainly not as important as the actual work, the care of the labor.

**Jule:** Yeah. The confidence, the trust you have in the contractor to do good work and to just be straight up with you.

**Andrea:** Exactly. So it all had a happy ending. We got to move back in the summer 2019 finally.

**Jule:** And then you had your house done for 2020, which was a good thing.

**Andrea:** I know. Absolutely. I can't imagine having to go through that during a pandemic.

**Jule:** That would definitely be awful. What's something good that came out of that time, that wouldn't have happened if that whole burst pipe hadn't happened?

**Andrea:** What's so funny and so good about it is I talk about my neighborhood and the temporary housing that we moved into ended up…It was a duplex. So we were able to make friends with the neighbor there. She was the mother-in-law of the owner. So she was older. And to this day we still go by and wave to her. And, you know, we've definitely, there were neighbors there also that had kids. And so it's like expanded our group of neighbors, which is awesome.

**Jule:** That's nice. So you made new friends, new neighbors.

**Andrea:** Yeah.

**Jule:** Great. Is there anything else you'd like to say about that time or hard times, hope, anything?

**Andrea:** Hmm… I think the only thing I would like to say is just the importance of small talk, the importance that you are making the effort to have the connections with people in your life and your community and your job.

And I mean, we all know how, what a small world it is, but that it just, it doesn't take it even something like that to remind you, you're always running into that person who knows this person, who's that next to that person.

**Jule:** So the importance of small talk and the connections that are made from that small talk. Cool. What's one of life's simple pleasures that you really appreciate?

**Andrea:** The one thing I really appreciate it is, I really like to just sit in the sun, especially in the spring and fall. I don't like that summer sun, but as the seasons change and the sun isn't as intense, I just, I feel like a cat or something. I just don't get up and they rejuvenate me.

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**Jule:** At the beginning of our conversation, Andrea asked if she could give a shout out to someone. Here's Andrea, shout out:

**Andrea:** I wanted to give my shout out to Harut Hagopian, one of my mentors who had given me the best advice that I pass along to anyone whose position is eliminated and that if you can financially afford it, not to take the six weeks or two months that your company gives you.

If you can do it, take a year off and let yourself reset, reevaluate and, and just figure out what's important to you and what the next step is going to look like that's going to work with how you want to live your life.

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**Jule:** Thank you for listening. That was Andrea. I'm Jule Kucera host of Hard Times & Hope. My website is Jule Kucera.com. That's J U L E K U C E R A.com. If you think this episode will be helpful to someone, please feel free to share it.

Take care, take heart. See you next time.

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