

Sponge City
By Mindy Thomas

The Pop Ups. Stay seated. Three, two, one, ignition. Get ready for an adventure of magnificent proportion.

The Pop Ups. (Singing.) I don't know what you've been told, but we're in a golden age - so many discoveries that are jumping off the page. Wow in the world. Wow in the world. Wow in the world. Wow in the world. Wow in the world. Wow in the world. Wow in the world. Wow in the world.

The Pop Ups. With Guy and Mindy. We're on our way, Houston.

(SOUNDBITE OF THUNDERSTORM)

Guy Raz. Wow...it is really coming down out there!

Mindy. Yeah, that's a whole lotta of cloud juice!

Guy Raz. It's been raining for seven straight days! The whole city is going to flood if this doesn't stop soon!

Mindy. I wonder how many clouds you'd have to squeeze to flood the whole city?

Guy Raz. Let me turn on the TV news and find out if there's any end in sight!

(SOUNDBITE OF TV NEWS PROGRAM)

Gail Richard Simmons. Good afternoon, and thanks for joining us for W.O.W. News. I'm Gail Richard Simmons.

Bob Ralph Machio. ...And I'm late for dinner!

Gail Richard Simmons. Bob...

Bob Ralph Machio. What?!

Mindy. Haha! That joke never gets old.

Bob Ralph Machio. Ok, fine. I'm Bob Ralph Machio

Gail Richard Simmons. And tonight's top story– wow in the water!

Bob Ralph Machio. It's a real gully washer out there, folks!

Gail Richard Simmons. That's right bob, for a seventh straight day in a row...the rain is coming down, and there is no end in sight.

Guy Raz. No end in sight?! There's no place for the water to run off to!

Mindy. Well sure there is! It can just run off into the storm drains and the pipes under the city!

Guy Raz. Well, normally that would be the case, but not with this much rain!

Bob Ralph Machio. That's right, it's a record-breaking cloudburst! Just buckets and buckets of rain out there!

Mindy. Not just water! It's raining cats and dogs out there!

Guy Raz. Well, that's a great expression. But in an actual fact–

(SOUNDBITE OF DOOR OPEN)

(SOUNDBITE OF CATS MEOWING AND DOGS BARKING)

Guy Raz. Uh!

Mindy. *Gasps* Oooh!

Guy Raz. What in the...?

Mindy. Hahahaha!

(SOUNDBITE OF DOOR CLOSE)

Guy Raz. What is going on? This is just too much rain for our city's drains and pipes to handle!

Gail Richard Simmons. Let's go live to our storm team reporter, Penny Presley standing out in the rain without an umbrella.

(SOUNDBITE OF WHOOSH)

Penny Presley. Thanks Gail! As you can see, I am being absolutely drenched in a substance some would call, water!

Guy Raz. Uhh...

Mindy. What would others call it?

Penny Presley. And now everyone's wondering, where did this so-called "water" come from?

Guy Raz. What?

Mindy. Uhh...

Penny Presley. Experts say, it came from clouds in the sky!

Guy Raz. Well, uh, we know that water comes from clouds... how is this even news?!

Penny Presley. Regardless of where the rain came from, the water has flooded the city, turning it into a water park of epic proportions. Also my shirt's all wet!

Mindy. You'd think she'd at least wear a raincoat or something...

Penny Presley. However, one brave citizen decided to come out today, despite these torrential downpours and the warnings to stay indoors.

Mindy. Oh no...

Guy Raz. I don't understand...who would ever want to go out in this weather?!

Penny Presley. Her name is Gertle Greenpeace and she's here—

Gramma G-Force. The name is G-Force!

Penny Presley. What?

Gramma G-Force. I said G-Force!

Penny Presley. That's your name?

Gramma G-Force. That's your question?

Mindy. That's Gramma G-Force?!

Gramma G-Force. Hi Mindy!

Guy Raz. On the news?!

Gramma G-Force. I'm on the news!

Mindy. Hah! Guy Raz, she's famous!

Guy Raz. Ugh.

Penny Presley. Gramma G-Force, what brought you out into this devastating storm today?

Gramma G-Force. My legs.

Penny Presley. Uh...yes, yes... But why did your legs bring you out here? We've been cautioning people to stay indoors at all costs.

Gramma G-Force. Yeah, I never not gonna listen to that.

Penny Presley. I see... Well, it looks as though you came prepared. As we can all see, you are wearing your swimsuit...

Gramma G-Force. What!

Guy Raz. Oh boy...

Gramma G-Force. This ain't no swimsuit!

Mindy. Here we go...

Gramma G-Force. This is a hot pepper wrestling uni-tard!

(SOUNDBITE OF ELASTIC SNAP)

Penny Presley. Alright then.

Gramma G-Force. I was just on my way to Lil' Buff Bunny's Big Gym over there. Trying to get my workout on so I could wrestle some hot peppers.

Penny Presley. Ah yes, Lil' Buff Bunny's Big Gym! The gym so big that five acres of natural forest were taken down and paved over to make room.

Gramma G-Force. You talkin' ta me?

Penny Presley. No, I was talking to the viewers.

Gramma G-Force. Where?

Penny Presley. The viewers at home, watching us on TV.

Gramma G-Force. What TV? I can't see it?

Penny Presley. Through the camera there...

Mindy. Wow... developers had to cut down over five acres of trees just to build Lil' Buff Bunny's Big Gym? That's like four football fields' worth of forest!

Guy Raz. Yeah! And in front of that, they tore down another four acres to build the parking lot, and next to the parking lot, the city built the world's largest parking lot, the size of five hundred football fields!

Mindy. Ugh! And let's not forget all the forests that had to be cut down in order to build the Spin Zone last year...and the river that had to be paved over to build the parking lot for the spin zone!

Guy Raz. So many trees plowed and paved over to create parking lots...and the parking lots for the parking lots!

Mindy. Flooded parking lots now!

Guy Raz. Yeah, the city's been so paved over by concrete, there's nowhere left for all of this rain to run off to!

Penny Presley. ...on everyone's mind is, where did the pennies come from?

Gramma G-Force. So I dive into the fountain at the mall... and then I take all the pennies, and I shove em' in my unitard like so...

(SOUNDBITE OF COINS)

Penny Presley. Oh my!

Gramma G-Force. And that's how I get my lumps.

Penny Presley. Huh. Lumpy handfuls of pennies in your bathing suit.

Gramma G-Force. It's a unitard!

Gail Richard Simmons. Uh, Penny Presely, can we get back to focusing on the rain and flooding for this news report, please?

Bob Ralph Machio. Hahaha! I agree. I do not want to hear any more about lumpy bathing suits!

Gramma G-Force. Hmph!

Mindy. Hah! Nothing like live local news!

Guy Raz. This is a disaster!

Mindy. I'll say...Gramma G-Force should never have agreed to speak on camera.

Guy Raz. No, I mean the incessant rain! The flooding! It's a disaster, Mindy!

Mindy. Oh right, the flooding. So why is it happening, Guy Raz? I mean, does all this flooding have anything to do with the fact that all of the forests and rivers in this city have been bulldozed and replaced by concrete and asphalt?

(SOUNDBITE OF TWINKLING, ENTERING STORY TIME)

Guy Raz. Well, that's a great question Mindy. See, in highly developed cities like ours...

Mindy. Cities with lots of big buildings and even bigger parking lots?

Guy Raz. Exactly, yes! In order to build these parking lots and buildings, space has to be made for them. And that space can only be created by removing nature, and essentially, paving over it.

(SOUNDBITE OF BULLDOZER)

Mindy. Ah, so kinda like how the space where Lil' Buff Bunny's Big Gym used to be a lush forest...

(SOUNDBITE OF BIRDS)

Guy Raz. Right! A lush, water absorbing forest!

Mindy. Or how the world's largest parking lot used to be a river bank...

Guy Raz. Right! A riverbank for rain water to run off to...

Mindy. Paving over a riverbank to build a parking lot...

Guy Raz. And when this happens over and over again, all over a city, suddenly, we're left with two potentially big problems.

Mindy. And plenty of parking!

Guy Raz. Eh! The first problem is that all of that concrete and asphalt actually makes a city hotter.

Mindy. Ah, by absorbing and trapping heat from the sun... which causes temperatures to rise.

Guy Raz. And when this happens, cities essentially turn into urban heat islands!

Mindy. But then it rains, and everything cools off again!

(SOUNDBITE OF RAIN)

Guy Raz. Well, it might...but all that cool refreshing rain has to go somewhere once it hits the ground.

Mindy. And that's why we have storm drains and pipes to carry water out to nearby rivers, lakes, or the ocean!

Guy Raz. Right, but when there's too much rain for the drains to handle, or when the nearby rivers and lakes have been paved over and turned into parking lots...

Mindy. Ahhh, there's nowhere left for the rain water to go!

(SOUNDBITE OF TWINKLING, LEAVING STORY TIME)

Guy Raz. And that's when we get the flooding that we're experiencing right now!

Penny Presley. As you can see here folks, the flooding is now up to my waist.

Thomas Fingerling. G-force!

Gramma G-Force. Www, hushpuppies!

Mindy and Guy Raz. Thomas Fingerling?!

Thomas Fingerling. G-Force! What are you doing out here?! Can't you see it's flooding?!

Gramma G-Force. Can't you see that I'm on TV, Fingerling?!

Thomas Fingerling. Ooh, live TV eh?

Penny Presley. Joining us now, a gentleman in a very strange boat.

Thomas Fingerling. Well, technically it's a bathtub, but I'm usin' it as a boat to come and rescue G-Force over here. G-Force, get in the tub!

Gramma G-Force. No!

Thomas Fingerling. Well then I'll put you in the tub! C'mere!

(SOUNDBITE OF COINS JINGLING)

Gramma G-Force. Hey! Ow! I told you no, Fingerling! Yer spillin' all my pennies!

Thomas Fingerling. And I told you to stay outta that mall fountain! Those pennies are for the wishes!

Gramma G-Force. And I'm wishin' for money!

Thomas Fingerling. That ain't your money, honey!

Guy Raz. This is a disaster!

Gramma G-Force. Don't you call me honey, bunny!

Mindy. The flooding rain? Or Gramma G-Force and Thomas Fingerling fighting on live TV?

Guy Raz. Both!

Thomas Fingerling. Now get in here!

Gramma G-Force. Don't tell me what to do!

Guy Raz. Ugh!

Mindy. Ok. Well, let's solve one problem at a time. And the easiest problem here to solve here is reversing the effects of paving over all the trees and wetlands in our city.

Guy Raz. Okay, well, let's get to work! Give me your best idea!

Mindy. Okay, let's say we take everything off the ground– including the ground– and we elevate it...you know...put it on stilts or something? The buildings, the houses, the parking lots...all of it. We raise it all up to a level where the flooding can't reach it.

Guy Raz. Okay, terrible idea! Costly, and impossible to implement on a large scale! What else have you got?

Mindy. Okay, umm, let's see here... Uh... Oh, ok! We embrace the flooding, and turn the whole city into a giant water park! The roads become water coasters, and the parking lots become boat docks!

Guy Raz. Completely infeasible! Never gonna work. Next!

Mindy. Ugh. Alright, alright, I got this... uh... What if we give every citizen really big straws? And then, on the count of three, we get everyone in the city to come outside and suck the water away!

Guy Raz. Great idea for poisoning everyone!

Mindy. Ugh!

Guy Raz. Awful idea for rain water mitigation! Mindy, can't you think of any good ideas?!

Mindy. Uh... nope!

Guy Raz. Ugh.

Bob Ralph Machio. Citizens are concerned! What can be done to save our city from flooding?

Penny Presley. That's right, Bob. What or who will save us from these flooding waters, now and in the future?

Dennis. Dun duh dunnnnn! Dun duh dunnnnn! Dun dun dun dun dun duuuunnn!

Mindy and Guy Raz. Dennis?

Dennis. Never fear! I'll save you citizens!

Bob Ralph Machio. Oh, lookit that!

Penny Presley. This just in, our local super-villain, Static Man appears to have arrived on the scene.

Dennis. No! I'm not Static Man! I'm... Super Sponge Man!

Guy Raz. Super.. Sponge Man?! Did any of our friends heed the warning to stay inside and avoid the floods today?

Penny Presley. And as Super Sponge Man, you will...

Dennis. I will save the city! Floods and rain don't stand a chance against Sponge Man!

Penny Presley. Fascinating! How exactly do you plan to rescue the city?

Dennis. What do you mean? Isn't it obvious!?

Mindy and Guy Raz and Penny Presley. No!

Dennis. Well, I'll suck up the water with my super sponge powers. See? I got sponges all over my cape, and a little sponge strapped to my forehead, here... and another sponge glued to my butt... and sponge gloves on all of my hands...

Guy Raz. Super Sponge Man... this is ridiculous!

Mindy. ... This is genius!

Mindy and Guy Raz. Wait... what?

Mindy. Ok. You go first.

Guy Raz. No no, you go first...

Mindy. Okay, what if sponges were the answer to all of the problems we've created for ourselves?

Guy Raz. Go on...

Mindy. Well, see, we humans created this mess by paving over nature to build parking lots and buildings, right?

Guy Raz. Yes, because with nothing but asphalt and concrete as far as the eye can see, there's nothing left to absorb the water!

Mindy. Unless... we add sponges!

Guy Raz. Mindy, are you suggesting we...

Mindy. Guy Raz... I am suggesting that we turn our city into Sponge City!

Guy Raz. Sponge City? Mindy, we're never going to be able to find enough sponges to soak up all of the excess rain water!

Mindy. Yeah, but—

Guy Raz. And besides, we'd have to cut down even more forests just to be able to build factories to manufacture that many sponges!

Mindy. No no no, you don't understand!

Guy Raz. And on top of that, sponges, especially synthetic ones, can be bad for the environment because they're not biodegradable and can contribute to plastic pollution when we throw them away... And on top of that...

Mindy. Guy Raz! I'm not talking about sponges made in factories, I'm talking about nature's natural sponges!

Guy Raz. I'm sorry, I haven't heard of that brand.

Mindy. it's not a brand, Guy Raz! It's nature!

Guy Raz. I'm not sure I understand...

Mindy. Well, you said it yourself! Before dense cities were paved over, replacing trees and wetlands with concrete buildings, rain water was able to run back into the Earth!

Guy Raz. Okay...

Mindy. So imagine our city like a giant sponge. And just like a sponge soaks up water when you spill it, our sponge city will soak up rain water when it rains! And that would prevent flooding!

Guy Raz. But what will we use for the sponges?

Mindy. Well, in Sponge City, we'll place natural sponge-like materials, like on roofs, the outer walls of buildings, and other places where we can add big areas of plants with soil layers underneath...

Guy Raz. So essentially adding large areas of natural plants and absorbent soil to places where we wouldn't normally do that?

Mindy. Exactly! I'm talking green roofs, green facades, and other garden areas that can act like shallow drains to capture rain and stormwater runoff!

Guy Raz. Ah! And these natural sponge-like areas could collect water, before it moves to the streets where it could become polluted!

Mindy. Yes! And doing this would keep it from reaching our drinking water sources and other bodies of water like rivers, streams, and lakes!

Guy Raz. Sponge City...I like the sound of that! Wow! Dennis...I mean, Super Sponge Man, could really be onto something here!

Dennis. ...And as Mayor of Sponge City, I vow to use my super snooping...I mean...super spongeing powers to make this city softer! More absorbent! And more... uhhh, I need a third thing.

Penny Presley. Spongier.

Dennis. Yeah! Spongier!

Penny Presley. And there you have it folks! Could the future of flood mitigation be found...in sponges? Back to you Bob and Gail!

Gail Richard Simmons. Sponge City... you know Bob, while I'd like to give Super Sponge Man all the credit for coming up with the concept of sponge city, it was actually an idea first introduced in China some twenty years ago by a landscape architect named Yu Kongjian.

Bob Ralph Machio. That's right, Gail. And since then, he has led the movement in implementing areas of spongy vegetation in the dense concrete jungles of major cities all over China.

Gail Richard Simmons. And soon...the world. For W.O.W. News, I'm Gail Richard Simmons.

Bob Ralph Machio. And I'm not!

Gail Richard Simmons. Bob.

Bob Ralph Machio. What, Gail! It's a little joke!

Gail Richard Simmons. Well it's not a joke if it's not funny, Bob.

Bob Ralph Machio. Hahahah! That's it for the weather report! Stay tuned for our next story, how a raccoon became best friends with a squirrel.

(SOUNDBITE OF TURNING OFF TV)

Guy Raz. Wow Mindy! In the age of technology that we're living in, it's wild to think that something as simple as adding natural soils and plants and other absorbent spongy materials to our cities, could be the answer to our flooding problems!

Mindy. Now if only we could get the rest of our city.. No- the rest of the world on board!

(SOUNDBITE OF DOOR CRASHING OPENING)

Dennis. Mindy! Guy!

Mindy. Dennis!

Dennis. Mindy! Did you see me?! I mean– did you see that ponge wielding superhero on TV!?

Gramma G-Force. That superhero would be me.

Dennis. What?! No, Granny G!

Thomas Fingerling. Woo boy! All that rain is makin' me have to go potty! Mind if I use your lavatory, Mandy?

Mindy. Uh yeah... sure Thomas Fingerling.... It's right over there.

Thomas Fingerling. Thank you!

Guy Raz. So what do you say we all be Sponge City superheroes, and make plans to help our city to be the spongiest it can be?

Dennis. Sorry Guy, there can only be one Super Sponge Man! And it's not you.

Guy Raz. And it's obviously not you either, Dennis!

Dennis. Ugh! Guy! I beg your pardon!

Mindy. I love this idea! Turning ourselves into a pack of flood-fighting superheroes! I'll go get my sponge cake! I mean...sponge cape...and a sponge cake, in case I get hungry saving the city from floods.

Guy Raz. Great! And I'll start researching some local tree planting and gardening programs to increase green spaces that can absorb water!

Thomas Fingerling. And I'll start collecting rain water in barrels, and reusing that water in your garden, Guy Razy!

Guy Raz. Oh...

Mindy. Great idea, Thomas Fingerling! If everyone did that, we could reduce the load on our stormwater drains and pipes!

Dennis. And I'll see if I can arrange a meet and greet with the mayor of this Sponge City... Super Sponge Man himself!

Guy Raz. We don't even need Super Sponge Man, Dennis!

Dennis. What?! What are you even talking about!?!

Mindy. Yeah! We got this, Dennis!

Gramma G-Force. No! I don't got this. I'll just sit here count the coins I sponged off of the mall fountain.

Thomas Fingerling. G-Force!

Guy Raz. Gramma G-Force!

Gramma G-Force. Okay, fine I'll help.

Mindy and Guy Raz. Yay!

Mindy. Sponge City, here we come!