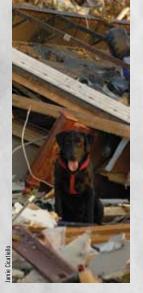


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FEATURE



If you close your eyes, you can probably still see it. How could anyone forget the sight of a massive tornado dwarfing Bryant-Denny Stadium on a spring afternoon? The images were burned into our memories.

> more than two dozen confirmed torna- live on our SKYCAM in downtown does ripped through Alabama, killing Cullman, and from that moment on, nearly 200 people and injuring thou- it was non-stop, with multiple violent sands more. Thirty-nine of the state's tornadoes on the ground. The hardest 67 counties were affected. The storms part was trying to figure out which one included a monster EF-4 that barreled to focus on." The national outbreak through Tuscaloosa, missing the Uni- of severe weather included a total of versity of Alabama campus, but ravag- 178 tornadoes in 14 states, and was ing neighborhoods and businesses. The ranked the largest in U.S. history by the world watched the replay on Weather National Weather Service. Channel videos and viewed the aftermath in social media photos.

> will not see one like this in their life- providing early warnings to cities in the time," said James Spann, ABC 33/40 chief meteorologist. "The whole day "The average lead time on all tornado

On Wednesday, April 27, 2011, was surreal. We caught the first tornado

Despite the damage done that day, Spann said that knowing the conditions "This is a generational event; most were right for such severe weather and path of the storms saved countless lives. warnings that day was a little over 20 minutes," he said.

Spann said he has seen a few EF-4 or EF-5 tornadoes in his career, but it never gets easier. "I might even suggest it is harder as I get older," he said. In the days after, he visited some of the areas affected to assess the damage and speak with residents. "I was able to spend Sunday afternoon following the tornados in rural Walker County and helping some families, which is always good therapy," he shared.

While the devastation was shocking, the aftermath demonstrated to the world the strength and love of the tightly knit community of Tuscaloosa, where 41 people lost their lives, including six UA students. In the following

ABC 33/40 chief meteorologist James Spann visited children in Walker County after destructive storms there.

"This is a generational event; most will not see one like this in their lifetime. The whole day was surreal."

> -James Spann. ABC 33/40 chief meteorologist

week, more than 5,500 volunteers registered their areas of interest and willingness to serve through the Tuscaloosa County Spontaneous Volunteer Center for tornado relief and rebuilding. "Volunteers are matched with current needs as best as possible," said Nancy Green, mobilization chairman of Compassion Coalition of Tuscaloosa County. "The level of enthusiasm shown is amazing."

UA alumna Clare Stewart Huddleston said the support seen around Tuscaloosa and surrounding communities in the days following the storm was overwhelming. Huddleston is a news anchor and producer for WVUA, a commercial television station operated by UA's College of Communication and Information Sciences, which was put in the unique situation of covering their own devastated city. "WVUA has a lot of student reporters, and a lot of them were impacted," Huddleston said. The station's summer intern number project of her career. "This story hits dropped from 20 to only seven, when much closer to home," she said. "Our those who had lost homes had to leave chief meteorologist lost his home. So for the summer. "We've been really try- many people I know lost homes. It just ing to utilize the students that are here, hits closer to home because so many to give them off days. They've worked around the clock," Huddleston said. "We are so fortunate. All of our interns are safe. They just lost property, but talk to storm victims, and she said they that's been difficult."

"It's been really encouraging to see so many people donating their time and their resources for the relief effort."

-Clare Stewart Huddleston. WVUA anchor and producer



For Huddleston, a 2005 graduate with degrees in telecommunication and film and Spanish, covering the aftermath of the storm has been the biggest people I know were impacted personally.

Huddleston has had the chance to are uniform in appreciating the help provided. "It's been uplifting and it's been really encouraging to see so many people donating their time and their resources for the relief effort," she said.

That support has come to the region from near and far. President Barack Obama visited Tuscaloosa two days after the storm to view the damage, express his concern and pledge federal resources. Even actor Charlie Sheen University students during a visit to got in on the action, making a one-day





Clare Stewart Huddleston took a break from reporting to volunteer.

Donning a UA ball cap, actor Charlie Sheen, on right, surveyed the damage with Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox.



President Barack Obama greeted Tuscaloosa.



visit soon after. "I'm glad both of them United Way volunteers tend to a voung came to the area," Huddleston said. "I've been afraid Alabama will lose its national spotlight." She said that during Obama's press conference, it seemed like he pledged as much support for the area and state as he possibly could. Even Sheen's concern appeared genuine. "He was really down to earth, and seemed really passionate about this," Huddleston relayed. "It didn't seem like a publicity stunt."



child whose family lost everything.

the help has come from right at home. Rusty Smith, a 1995 UA graduate and vice president and director of resource development and public relations for the United Way of West Alabama, said the response he has seen has been overwhelming. "There has been an unbelievable outpouring of support from the community," he said. The United Without a doubt, though, much of Way and its partner agencies, including Temporary Emergency Services and the American Red Cross, were among the first organizations to respond to Tuscaloosa residents. Two United Way partner agencies had received damage themselves: the Salvation Army's office was destroyed and Tuscaloosa's One Place, a family resource center, was severely damaged.

More than 1,000 volunteers showed up at St. Matthias Episcopal Church on 15th Street the day after the tornadoes to pitch in with relief efforts. "They expected half that number the second day, because usually numbers drop," Smith said. "There were more than

Rusty Smith, vice president of the United Way of West Alabama, coordinated an overwhelming flow of donations and volunteers.

"There has been an unbelievable outpouring of support from the community."

-Rusty Smith. United Way of West Alabama

1,000 volunteers that second day, too."

While much of Smith's time has been spent coordinating and in the office responding to calls and requests, that Thursday morning he met a CBS 42 crew across from the site of a destroyed Krispy Kreme doughnut shop for an interview. "To see the destruction firsthand was unbelievable," he said. "Pictures on TV, pictures in the paper don't really do it justice. It's devastating enough to see it in the papers, but when you see it firsthand, it's burned into your mind. It really does look like a war zone. It looks like someone dropped a bomb at 15th Street and McFarland."

Help from the University community arrived in swift and powerful ways, beginning within hours. Fraternities and sororities across the campus banded together to form UA Greek Relief, an effort that supplied more than 30,000 hot meals to displaced families, first responders and volunteers within the first week following the storms. The Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity asked fellow Greek houses on campus to clean out their freezers and bring in food to be cooked and distributed to those in need. Food was prepared at the Delta Kappa Epsilon, Beta Theta Pi, Sigma Nu and Phi Gamma Delta houses and distributed across the affected areas in Tuscaloosa.

Students were not the only ones who leapt into action. Dr. Patrick LeClair, associate professor of physics, together with his wife, Christine, represent hundreds of faculty and staff who helped out. The couple coordinated both supplies and volunteers at Temporary Emergency Services on 15th Street, making sure the incoming and outgoing items were as organized as possible, as well as directing other volunteers as to what most urgently needed to be done.

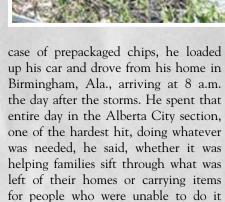
"Almost no one there knew I was a professor, and no one asked—it didn't make a difference at all."

—Patrick LeClair. associate professor of physics

In addition, Christine spent most of Saturday, April 30, carrying supplies in the family truck to various locations. Patrick said that while volunteering, he ran into people from all over the country who were helping as well. "It didn't much matter who you were or where you came from; the largest need was just strong backs to keep the flow of supplies moving, and a few people to keep it organized," he said. "Almost no one there knew I was a professor, and no one asked-it didn't make a difference at all.'

Members of the alumni community, like David Williams, '01, were quick to head for their college town when they heard the news. Williams learned of the destruction in Tuscaloosa and said he knew he couldn't sit by and do nothing. After buying two cases of water and a

Former UA football player Roy Upchurch lent a hand in the Alberta City community.



themselves.

"It didn't even look like Tuscaloosa," Williams said. "I lived close to Alberta





Residents in the hard-hit Rosedale Court neighborhood joined hands in prayer.

City, and we'd go there to eat and stuff. I couldn't remember what I was looking at; all I saw was nothing. It was something I've never seen in my life." Williams, who was a Capstone Man while at the University and whose earliest childhood memories include UA football games, said that he was stunned by what he witnessed. "It's hard for me to even talk about it," he said, choking up. "It was home for four years, and I have a vested interest in what goes on there. It was like watching part of your life get destroyed. Even though I'm not there anymore, it's still a part of my life. I didn't want to feel helpless anymore."

For Meredith Cummings, a journalism instructor at UA, the April 27th storms brought about the destruction of her home. A two-time graduate of the University (once in 1994 with a bachelor's in English and again in 1996 with a master's in journalism), Meredith and her 8-year-old daughter, Isabel, were huddled in a bedroom closet while the EF-4 tornado rushed over them. "My first thought was trying to make sure I didn't let go of Isabel," Cummings said. "She's so tiny; I was terrified she would be taken from me. I was holding on for



Meredith Cummings, far left, with students who helped pick up the pieces of her home

dear life." The next day, they were faced with the overwhelming task of picking up the pieces of their home and their lives. But then, an unlikely pair showed up to pledge their assistance.

former Crimson White co-worker of Cummings, immediately headed for Tuscaloosa as soon as he heard that she was in need. He said that when he initially heard about the tornado there, he did not realize the extent of the damage. After numerous attempts at contacting Cummings, he received word that both she and Isabel were safe, but that their home had been damaged and her car totaled. "Without giving it much thought, I cleared my calendar at work and left for Tuscaloosa," Long said. "I didn't know what I could do, but I knew that I needed to do something."

On the way from his home in Atlanta, he picked up Jonathan Killian, another friend and former CW coworker, and they bought food, cleaning supplies and "pretty much anything we thought might be useful the morning after a tornado." He said both he and Killian were happy to see Cummings' reaction as they arrived on the scene. "I know she was under a lot of stress and was unsure how she would put her

life back together," Long said. "I was so happy to be able to provide just that smile for her, if nothing else."

Cummings said she was both excited and surprised to see Long and Killian. "It took my brain a minute to process who was on my lawn," she recalled. "It was both wonderful and startling, because you don't want someone vou Bryan Long, a longtime friend and haven't seen in years to see you looking like I looked that day."

Cummings said she also received much support from her students, her co-workers and her sorority. Gamma Phi Beta. She had numerous students

A Toomer's for Tuscaloosa volunteer packed baby supplies for distribution.



"We never thought it would get this big. We believe that this has not only brought our state together, but it has brought our nation back together."

-Christina Tatum. Toomer's for Tuscaloosa

show up to help in the days following the storms, and said the encouragement from the journalism department has been "wonderfully overwhelming."

Even alumni from other areas were getting creative about finding ways to help. Russ Gambrell, a 2002 UA graduate who was born and raised in Tuscaloosa, said his hometown holds a special place in his heart. While he wasn't able to be there in the immediate aftermath, he sent donations, and took two weeks off work in May to assist with cleanup. "I was in shock," Gambrell said of hearing the news. "And honestly, I began to feel guilty for not being there. One rides down 15th or McFarland so many times throughout your life, and now it will be completely different. But my reaction has turned to feeling so proud of being from Tuscaloosa and having gone to Alabama."

And crimson wasn't the only color worn by the crews helping around town. Immediately upon hearing what had happened to the home of their sports rival, the students, fans and alumni of Auburn University joined forces to pull together one of the largest contingents of relief workers to come to the rescue. Toomer's for Tuscaloosa began as a Facebook page that garnered 50,000 members in its first 24 hours (more than 85,000 at press time), and grew into a massive volunteer effort. Beginning their work out of Five Points Baptist Church in Northport, Ala., and moving within the first days after the storms to the old Food Max warehouse on McFarland Boulevard in Northport, they came by the hundreds, and they stayed. Combining their efforts with Auburn fans from the Tuscaloosa area



Christina Tatum (right) and another volunteer boxed items to be delivered to those in need. Right, students removed fallen trees from houses and yards.

to storm-ravaged neighborhoods.

er's for Tuscaloosa organizers and a dedicated Auburn fan, said she and the other two program leaders, Holly Hart, a student at AU, and Warren never going to be the same. It will be www.ua.edu/tornadorelief. Tidwell, another devoted fan, had no idea the organization would grow into what it did, with more than 300 daily volunteers within the first week, and donations coming in from all 50 states, including Hawaii. She has even received calls from people out of the country wondering what they can do

"We thought we would just be feeding 50 or 60 volunteers," Tatum said. "We never thought it would get this big. We believe that this has not only brought our state together, but it has brought our nation back together." Tatum said Toomer's for Tuscaloosa was somewhat inspired by the Tide for Toomer's program, through which UA raised more than \$50,000 for Auburn's Toomer's Corner oaks after they were poisoned by a disturbed football fan. "We thought, 'they helped us with the trees, so what are we going to do to help

to help.

them?"" Tatum said. "We can mess with each other, beat each other up and call each other names, but nothing else can and it will be better than ever," he mess with us together."

Christina Tatum, one of the Toom- scape has changed a lot since I went to than right now." school here," he said just days after the storms. "To remember it then, how it For information on how to help was last week, and to see it now-it's with recovery efforts, visit years before we are able to recover." But in the midst of it all, he said the efforts Relief workers, many of them UA stuof thousands of volunteers who are dents, gathered and sorted donations.





committed to helping leave him confident in that future. "We will rebuild said. "People are thinking, 'This could For Rusty Smith, it is hard to rec- have been me.' And from the United and other volunteers, they are providing oncile the damage he saw in the days Way perspective, that's what we're all food, water, clothes and other supplies following the tornadoes with the Tus- about-helping friends, neighbors and caloosa he knows and loves. "The land- family. That's never been more evident