In the aftermath of devastating storms, thousands of friends and neighbors joined forces to provide refuge and strength.

by Jessie Jones and Haley Herfurth
(Photos by Jamie Cicatiello)
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.

On Wednesday, April 27, 2011, more than two dozen confirmed tornadoes ripped through Alabama, killing nearly 200 people and injuring thousands more. Thirty-nine of the state’s 67 counties were affected. The storms included a monster EF-4 that barreled through Tuscaloosa, missing the University of Alabama campus, but ravaging neighborhoods and businesses. The world watched the replay on Weather Channel videos and viewed the aftermath in social media photos.

“This is a generational event; most will not see one like this in their lifetime,” said James Spann, ABC 33/40 chief meteorologist. “The whole day was surreal. We caught the first tornado live on our SKYCAM in downtown Cullman, and from that moment on, it was non-stop, with multiple violent tornadoes on the ground. The hardest part was trying to figure out which one to focus on.” The national outbreak of severe weather included a total of 178 tornadoes in 14 states, and was ranked the largest in U.S. history by the National Weather Service.

Despite the damage done that day, Spann said that knowing the conditions were right for such severe weather and providing early warnings to cities in the path of the storms saved countless lives. “The average lead time on all tornado 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 tornadoes 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 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 Compass 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 U.A. 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 dropped from 20 to only seven, when those who had lost homes had to leave for the summer. “We’ve been really trying to utilize the students that are here, 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 that’s been difficult.”

For Huddleston, a 2005 graduate with degrees in telecommunication and film and Spanish, covering the aftermath of the storm has been the biggest project of her career. “This story hits much closer to home,” she said. “Our chief meteorologist lost his home. So many people I know lost homes. It just hits closer to home because so many people I know were impacted personally.”

Huddleston has had the chance to talk to storm victims, and she said they 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 got in on the action, making a one-day visit and reporting on the volunteer efforts in Tuscaloosa.
“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 10,000 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 help families sift through what was left of their homes or carrying items needed, he said, whether it was helping families sift through what was left of their homes or carrying items for people who were unable to do it themselves.

“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 case of prepackaged chips, he loaded up his car and drove from his home in Birmingham, Ala., arriving at 8 a.m. the day after the storms. He spent that entire day in the Alberta City section, one of the hardest hit, doing whatever was needed, he said, whether it was helping families sift through what was left of their homes or carrying items for people who were unable to do it themselves.

“It didn’t even look like Tuscaloosa,” Williams said. “I lived close to Alberta City community.”

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
“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. “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 and other volunteers, they are providing food, water, clothes and other supplies to storm-ravaged neighborhoods.

Christina Tatum, one of the Toomer’s for Tuscaloosa organizers and a dedicated Auburn fan, said she and the other two program leaders, Holly Hatt, a student at AU, and Warren Tidwell, another devoted fans, had no idea the organization would grow into what it did, with more than 100 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 to help.

“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 them?’” Tatum said. “We can mess with each other, beat each other up and call each other names, but nothing else can mess with us together.”

For Rusty Smith, it is hard to reconcile the damage he saw in the days following the tornadoes with the Tuscaloosa he knows and loves. “The landscape has changed a lot since I went to school here,” he said just days after the storms. “To remember it then, how it was last week, and to see it now—it’s never going to be the same. It will be years before we are able to recover.” But in the midst of it all, he said the efforts of thousands of volunteers who are committed to helping leave him confident in that future. “We will rebuild and it will be better than ever,” he said. “People are thinking, ‘This could have been me.’ And from the United Way perspective, that’s what we’re all about—helping friends, neighbors and family. That’s never been more evident than right now.”

For information on how to help with recovery efforts, visit www.ua.edu/tornadorelief.

Relief workers. many of them UA students, gathered and sorted donations.