

RECOVERY *and* RESILIENCE

In the five years since the April 27, 2011, tornado, UA has been vital to the city's rebuilding efforts. *by Meredith Cummings*

In those immediate hours of shock, Mayor Walter Maddox remembers one of the first phone calls he received after an EF-4 tornado destroyed more than 12 percent of Tuscaloosa. It was from then-University of Alabama President Dr. Robert E. Witt. "This phone call, in particular, was important because the University was pledging its resources, its logistical support and its planning to assist us in the hours and days following April 27," Maddox said.

That phone call set the tone for the city's path to recovery. Maddox, a Tuscaloosa native, said the partnership between The University of Alabama and the city of Tuscaloosa has been key in the progress the city has made in five years. "The help the University provided was invaluable, and the city knows no greater partner than [it]," Maddox said. "It was good to have the University in our corner."

Three UA presidents later, that unwavering commitment has led Tuscaloosa down a path to recovery and resilience. The Acts of Kindness Fund at UA has given more than \$1.8 million alone, yet UA has not only offered monetary help. Almost every college on campus has contributed to recovery efforts over the years.

In those early days following the tornado, UA provided everything from traffic control—which allowed Tuscaloosa Police Department officers to conduct search and rescue—to heavy equipment, deployed to assist in debris removal so ambulances could get to those who were injured. UA also ended the semester





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early that year, cancelled final exams and moved graduation to the following August, allowing the city to focus on the humanitarian needs of the community.

Though a lot has changed in five years, the University's commitment to recovery has not. "The thing that has really captured my imagination is that events like this really define you in one or two ways," Maddox said. "It either defines you negatively, or defines you positively. I believe the final result for Tuscaloosa as a community is that it has defined us in a way that demonstrates that we are a shining city on the hill. It would have been easy with us losing so many assets and experiencing so much heartbreak for us to become a community in decline, but we just refused to accept that narrative, and five years later we're an example shown to communities across the nation: This is how you respond."



FIVE YEARS FORWARD

Today, when Tuscaloosa residents involved with rebuilding and recovery talk about the tornado, they get a faraway tone in their voice, as if they struggle to reach back into the closets of their minds and pull out memories. That's because Tuscaloosa is not the city it was five years ago. It has pushed forward slowly and methodically.

Deidre Stalnaker, public relations coordinator for the city of Tuscaloosa, said the focus has changed over the

last half-decade. "Recovery has changed to resilience," she said, as reflected by the city of Tuscaloosa's website and now-named Office of Resilience and Innovation. "Our goal is to build back better, but now we've got [to] almost refocus. We're going to build back better and be a more resilient city in total, not just in the recovery zone. We're building back with the thought that any day now another EF-4 tornado is going to ravage the city."

That is not a doomsday prediction; it's the new way of thinking in a city that has stared down a worst-case

The tornado left a line of destruction across Tuscaloosa County, including on McFarland Boulevard, top right, and in Holt, top left. UA students volunteered to help the city recover.

scenario and come out better on the other side thanks, in part, to UA.

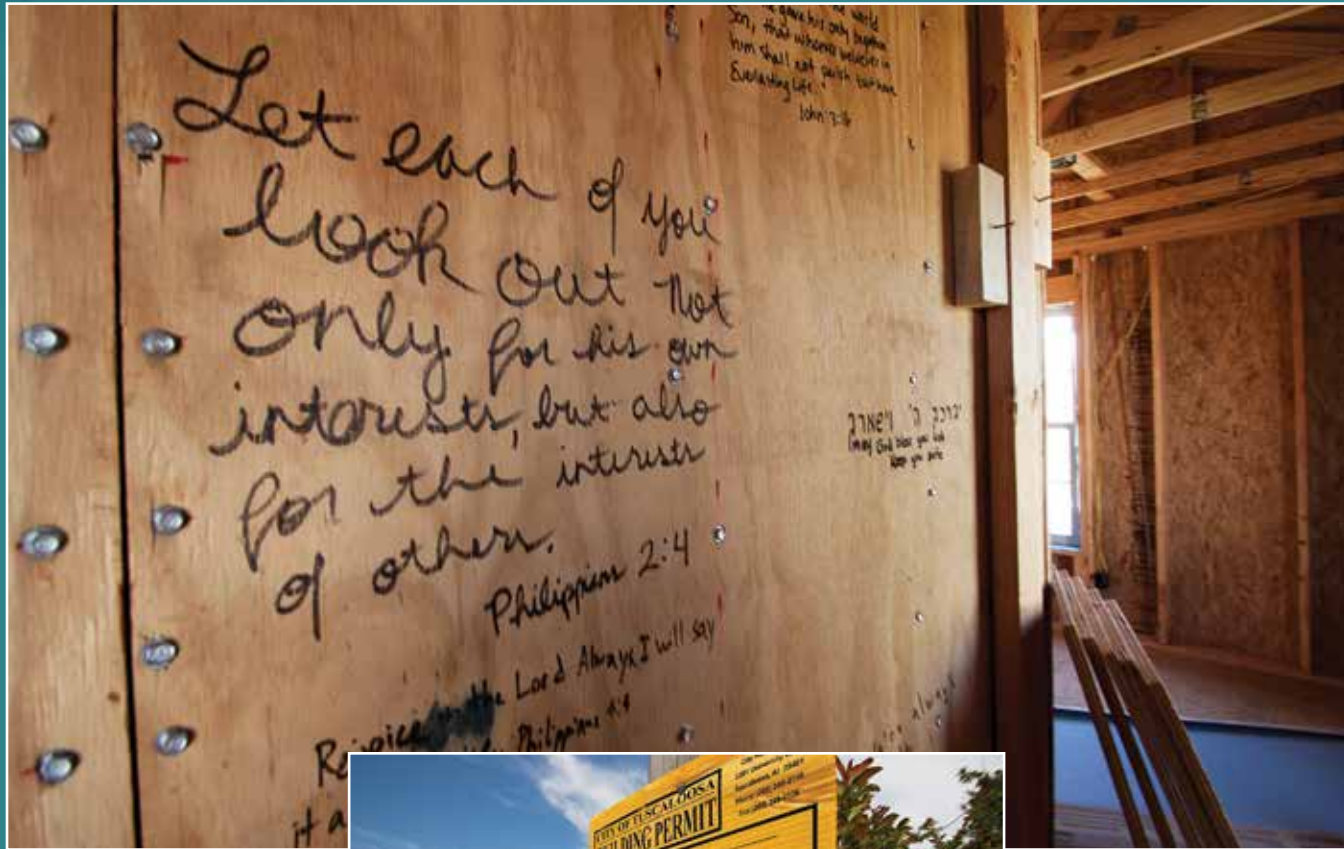
Ellen Potts, executive director of Habitat for Humanity Tuscaloosa, said University groups who have helped her organization over the last five years have run the gamut from campus ministry groups to athletes, faculty, Greek organizations and the Community Service Cen-

ter. Perhaps the most famous of volunteers is Alabama football coach Nick Saban who, along with his wife, Terry, has built 15 houses, each representing a national championship, with one to come commemorating the 16th. Habitat also has a "very active" student chapter on campus. Since the tornado, Habitat has welcomed nearly 18,000 volunteers and has built 55 houses, almost all of them in the tornado impact zone.

Volunteers from all 50 states and six continents have flooded into Tuscaloosa to help over the years, many of them with ties to UA. "A lot of those folks have been connected in some way with The University of Alabama, whether they are students, faculty, staff or fans," Potts said. "You name it, and we have had such support from The University of Alabama," Potts said. "We are so grateful for that partnership. We could not have accomplished what we have without the University."

Maddox recalls students helping in and around Tuscaloosa. "University students certainly were images of God throughout our community," he said. "I really think that was important. I think it was very important to see how the students truly call Tuscaloosa their home. I was touched so many times by the way they gave of themselves. They were extraordinary, and they certainly were a difference maker for us."

In the weeks following the tornado, the mayor visited six or seven volunteer sites a day. Even a year later,



a visit to students working “was the closest I had been brought to tears in some time,” Maddox said.

“There wasn’t one volunteer site that I didn’t see students actively engaged and involved in. It made you proud,” he added. “I think we have seen that the vast majority of students are here to do something with their lives, and they understand the value of giving back and it showed.”

RECOVERY 2.0

Students who attended the Capstone when the tornado hit Tuscaloosa are mostly gone now. Tornado talk now consists of recovery in phases: the initial survival mode phase, and the second wave, which continues.

James Fowler ended his term as Student Government Association president just weeks before the tornado hit and now lives in New Orleans. But Tuscaloosa’s recovery and rebirth remain close to his heart. He visits Tuscaloosa frequently to check on the progress the city has made with help from students. “I can’t think of, in my personal experience, a time when I have been able to understand what community really is more so than in the aftermath of the storm,” he said. “When I look

They stuck around, and they worked countless hours and very long days to support their community. It was a special thing to see.”

Fowler was involved in Greek Relief, a recovery effort that not only prepared more than 52,000 hot meals in the aftermath of the storm, but also raised more than \$220,000. In 2014, Greek Relief was rolled into the Office of Greek Affairs on campus, yet another step in recovery. After the first phase of Greek Relief was complete, the second phase included student officers helping to coordinate philanthropic activities on campus and building Habitat houses.

Taylor Crosby, a 2014 graduate, worked with Tuscaloosa City Councilman Kip Tyner—who represents Alberta—to help the community understand rebuilding efforts there. Students produced a website and videos based on community conversations held by city officials. Crosby was participating in an internship when the

Habitat for Humanity has built 55 homes in Tuscaloosa since the tornado. Many of them are located in areas hit by the tornado, including Alberta. (Photos courtesy of the Crimson White)

at the response of the students when the University told students to leave and go home, they didn’t leave.



Nine people died when the tornado hit Rosedale Courts, a public housing development on 10th Avenue, top. The development has since been rebuilt, right.

tornado hit and heard about it secondhand, yet this project brought the stories to life. “This project made it more than a story to me, and more than I was just reading online, when I could see and hear what actually happened,” he said.

As part of the project, students had community members write their thoughts on pieces of Plexiglas with brightly colored markers. “We really wanted to accomplish community outreach to show the progress Alberta was making after the tornado,” Crosby said. “Everyone started coming and writing and saying how great it was. You saw so many different aspects of the community and how it was affected by the tornado. Sometimes [community members] asked if we could write it down for them because they couldn’t read or write. It was amazing how I didn’t know anything about this community that is just right across the road.”

Crosby and Fowler both admitted that after seeing such a close community, it was hard to leave UA, but agreed that Tuscaloosa’s progress makes them proud.

“After going through such an experience like that ... losing those who were lost who were our brothers and sisters at the University ... it was a very emotional time but also a time we could all come together as a UA family,” Fowler said. Leaving after

that was a very emotional time. For me, that’s really what the University of Alabama community is about and it’s really special to see.”

Graduate student Casey Voyles served as editor of *91 Minutes in April*, a website produced by Dr. Scott Parrott’s journalism class, Digital Community News. After touring the destruction, the class wanted to find a way to help people move forward. Not only did the class ask themselves, “How do we tell this in a different way?” Voyles said, but they realized that 2014 “was the year that the last students that were here for the tornado would be graduating.” Voyles was one of the students who came to UA after the tornado, but keeps the story moving forward. “We let people tell their own stories and all of the feedback was positive. People were ready to tell their stories,” she said. “I think part of sharing is healing. Being able to talk about it in a reflective way and to show that they have moved on and to be proud



of where they've gone and moved through it and grown from it. They have shown how it changed and affected them and how they will treat life experiences for the rest of their lives."

TUSCALOOSA FORWARD

Even though the city lost 85 percent of its heavy equipment, 17 percent of police assets, a fire station and four other city facilities, it continued to provide services to almost 90 percent of the city following the tornado, and never borrowed money or raised taxes. "Some people don't understand how hard it was, and that it is still a shadow today that we deal with," Maddox said. "In many ways we are victims of our own success in managing the tornado effectively."

When ticking off ways the city has rebounded, Maddox points to The Edge Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, as one example of a partnership. The Edge is an effort among UA, the Culverhouse College of Commerce, the city of Tuscaloosa and the West Alabama Chamber of Commerce to provide space, resources and consulting for students and community members seeking to start their own businesses. Mayor Walter Maddox, Chamber President Jim Page and Chamber Chief Operating Officer Donny Jones are among the leaders instrumental in working with UA and Culverhouse to create The Edge. It is located in downtown Tuscaloosa with future plans to build a new center.



A new retail development called The Shoppes at Legacy Park opened in 2015 where homes once stood in the tornado-hit Cedar Crest neighborhood.

"That speaks a lot about the University," Maddox said. "To put a state-of-the-art innovation center outside the walls of the campus demonstrates the University's commitment to this city and our recovery in one of the worst natural disasters in American history. I am very proud that the University made this bold step."

After any disaster, lessons are learned, and challenges and triumphs, as well as regrets, can be counted. Tuscaloosa is no exception, yet the spirit of cooperation is a theme that runs throughout the city.

"Out of the tornado came a spirit of cooperation," said Potts of Habitat. "We are now working across party lines



Alberta Baptist Church, above, and the surrounding area were heavily damaged by the storm. The church has since rebuilt, and construction continues in the region.

and racial lines and denominational lines and really saying, "Where can we find common ground and work together to really significantly improve the lives of low-income people in our community," Potts said.

Maddox agreed.

"We are always walking that fine line between never wanting to forget, and absolutely wanting to forget," Maddox said. "Trying to find that balance is difficult. If, in some way, we recover on a pathway to excellence, then the scars should eventually be gone. But in many ways, it's important we never forget just who we are and what we became in the hours and days and weeks



following April 27. That's unity of spirit. That's unity of purpose. That understanding that we are all in this together was as genuine and as authentic as I've ever seen during my time in public service. That is a feeling that I hope I never forget." 🍌

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