

VIEWPOINT 2/26/2012
CF-C04

Joplin had a tornado

Ray Downen

LUCILLE VEST (a former student at Ozark Christian College) REPORTS: My husband Vernon and I have lived at 721 Kentucky Avenue in Joplin for many years. Vernon is now retired. I operate a day-care center in our home. May 22, 2011 was a beautiful, sunny day. It was my 67th birthday. Morning church services were held at Green Briar Nursing Home that day. I played the piano to accompany singing of hymns. It had been such a blessing to play the piano and Vernon lead singing at the nursing home.

We had been going there each week for almost a year to help our friend, **Gerard Mondestin** who was preaching for the residents. Some of the residents enjoyed singing hymns they knew. My husband Vernon and I went on to West Side Christian Church building for morning services there where Vernon is one of the elders.

At 4:41 p.m. we experienced an EF-5 tornado, 3/4-mile wide, six miles on the ground in Joplin city limits with damage continuing east for several more miles. Joplin lost 800 businesses (not all in separate buildings, some in adjacent units of destroyed buildings). 8,000 houses demolished along with their lawns and trees.

A third of Joplin was wiped out, with debris everywhere. One hundred and sixty-two lost their lives in or as a result of the tornado. The tornado traveled six miles in six minutes. It was surprising that so few were killed in such terrific tragedy to so many. The tornado which swept

2 through Joplin that afternoon flattened the nursing home. 13 residents were killed. We knew several of the residents. I had not realized that residents would have no place to go for refuge in an event such as the tornado. The front door faced the hall where the residents were taken. They were pulled out of the building by the wind.

Joplin had always been a place where the sirens go off but nothing ever comes after the warning. May 22nd seemed no different. In our home, we headed for the basement. The sirens shut off. So we went on about our business, not even turning on the radio or TV. Vernon and Tresor (a student from the Congo who is staying with us) went out on the porch and could hear the tornado. We went back to the basement. There were strong winds and heavy rain. After awhile we came up, looked around, and decided "Well, it wasn't as bad as they said it was going to be."

A huge cottonwood tree next door to our house had been uprooted and fell across our power and telephone lines. The roots were 20 feet in the air. My play equipment for the day-care children was blown against the fence and a big limb broke across them. Nothing was ruined, however. It could be moved back to where it belonged. We were without electricity for 10 days. On the third day after the tornado, a friend brought us a generator to use for our freezer and refrigerator. We got telephone calls but weren't able to answer them.

With St. John's Hospital being destroyed, the only people the hospitals were accepting were the injured. It was a horrible night. Busses, pickups and cars were full of injured people. Traffic never stopped all night. Sirens, helicopters, ambulances, police cars continually. Memorial Hall was opened for doctors. Tents were set up there also to care for the ones most in need of medical help.

Chase, our grandson, called from Texas and let us know that his mother Rosetta and his sister Sasha now had no home. Rosetta had just enough time to get into a closet. She grabbed up 4-month-old Elijah, but their dog didn't follow them to safety. No more did she get the door of the closet shut than she heard glass breaking. The wind was so strong she could feel the baby being pulled out of her arms. So she put him under her legs. That way she was able to hold on to the door to keep it shut. She said she could feel them being moved. The door was bouncing up and down on her feet. She was wondering if she would have any feet left. The debris was horrible being blown into the house.

When the tornado had passed, Rosetta had no shoes and she felt that Elijah was dead since he was so covered with the debris and was so quiet. As far as she knew, he never cried at all during the tornado. They were left with no doors at all and only two side walls of the closet still standing. The dog, unharmed, was under Elijah's broken bed. The house had been moved off its foundation and was 20 feet from the front steps. One wall of the house was left, leaning against debris from the neighboring house.

Sasha was at work at Logan's Steak House on Rangeline Road, not within the tornado touch-down area. Rosetta was able to call Sasha and say it doesn't look good here. That was all she was able to say before they were cut off. Sasha left immediately and was able to drive to near the house. It was quite an obstacle course with wires down, trees uprooted, limbs and debris everywhere. Another friend was ahead of Sasha and was able to get to the baby and Rosetta. Both were soaked and dirty.

Rosetta walked through all that debris barefoot, but with all they went through they were both fine. Elijah had splinters all over his scalp but otherwise was unharmed. They were brought to our home. Elijah, after getting here,

4 couldn't settle down. He cried for a long time. I was afraid he had gotten some of that debris in his lungs. It was several days before Sasha could get him in to see the doctor to get him checked out. Since we didn't have electricity, Rosetta and Sasha decided they should go to Mason's, who lives in Webb City and was not in the tornado area. I'm not sure they could have endured all the noise which continued through the night. The morning after the tornado, Mason was ready to go see what could be salvaged at Rosetta's house. She didn't want to go. She felt nothing could be salvaged. She finally did relent and go.

Oddly, a lot of picture frames were there, but no pictures left in the frames. Elijah's first pictures were never found, but I have some at the house so the ones lost can be replaced. A team from I.D.E.S. came and helped search for things which could be of use. Most of the clothes they found were not theirs or were not usable. They were filled with insulation which wouldn't come out even when the clothes were more than once washed and dried. Rosetta couldn't find a place to rent. She found a run-down house she could buy for much less than any rental could be found. The house is in Webb City, on Hall Street, right on the corner by the park.

International Disaster Emergency Services

(I.D.E.S.) has moved a Joplin Relief group into West Side's building and is using some of our space nearby to store materials they are using in rebuilding houses damaged by the tornado. We have quite a lot of land with our building, 18 city lots in all. Just outside the side door of our building, I.D.E.S. has erected sheds to help the groups who come from other communities to provide donated labor in the rebuilding. Two of the 12x16' sheds are equipped as shower houses where workers can clean up after their work. One is for women. The other for men.

One shed is for storing tools and supplies of all kinds. Another is a laundry room where workers' clothes can be washed and dried. Another is "home" for the local director, Rick Chesnut. Another, more recently built, houses two assistants to Rick. And the one being completed on 2/24/12 will house Joe Luttrell and his wife, with Joe now sharing director duties with Rick. Two large semi-trailers are also parked at the church building and also hold tools and supplies needed for the work.

Different teams come in each week from near and far to help clean up, build or whatever needs to be done to help Joplin-area people in recovering from the tornado. They are certainly God-sent, and it's good to be able for us to visit with them. Teams have already signed up to help through March of next year. Vernon has spent a lot of time with these groups, and has proved to be a great help to them in the work they've chosen to give for God.

I.D.E.S. groups came to Rosetta's home and converted a garage into a very nice bedroom and bath and also a fine laundry room. The house had two bedrooms, one just big enough for a full-size bed and the other for a twin-size. So neither was very big. The I.D.E.S. teams went through the house fixing things. A new kitchen floor, new tile flooring on the old bathroom. They didn't like the back porch, so they tore it off and rebuilt it. Some of the siding was replaced. They stabilized the kitchen floor.

Rick went through the house and around finding things that needed to be repaired. He set an estimate of how much it would cost. We were hoping new windows could be put in but that didn't work out. They got a lot done at no cost to us. Both the material and the labor were donated by ones who love Jesus. **We have been so blessed by the people of I.D.E.S.** Many of the ones who donate their labor are profes-

6 sionals so the jobs at Rosetta's were done right. Their place really looks nice now. I'm so happy for them.

The tornado in Joplin has been quite an experience. We weren't in the devastated area, just on the edge. But have we felt the aftershock! People came by with things to contribute, asking if we needed them, then giving them to us for Rosetta. Our house became a storage place. The upstairs sun room was full of things except for a path. At the bottom of the steps to upstairs we had things piled up. In the living room where the children's table was, things were stacked. Since Rosetta didn't at that time have a place to store or use things, the things were left here.

I'm so glad we could make storage room. It was things they needed when they got their place. Cases of water were stacked in corners. For several days our water had to be boiled for cooking and drinking. Gas was shut off in some parts of town for several weeks. People drove around in the worst-hit areas handing out sack lunches to workers and those clearing away debris at their homes. Quite a few churches were making hot lunches and serving them to whoever came to eat. We were told to take advantage of these things since later we would need our resources for other things. We did, some. I felt bad when others didn't have anything. The day-care kids were good about not bothering things stored in their usual play areas. It got to be quite a joke.

There must have been quite an abundance of tooth brushes and tooth paste. Rosetta would get a phone call saying they had things for her to pick up. Every time, as she walked out the door, it was "Here, you can probably use these," and she was handed toothbrushes and tooth paste. And she is saying, "Guess what you're going to get for Christmas? A tooth brush, tooth paste, and a candy cane!"

It was three days before I went into the devastated areas to see what I could see. Unless you saw it, it is hard

to imagine. Tree stubs minus their branches were stripped of bark and leaves. Utility poles were lying on the ground with wires tangled or missing. Cars were smashed and full of debris. It's something you might see in a movie. Tresor said that growing up in the Congo he had been through three wars, and this damage was worse than anything he had ever seen. **7**

My brother Lynn was able to take off work in Texas and come up to help us. He works for the government in a grain elevator. They just wanted a report and pictures when he came back. After we had been at the place where Rosetta now lived, Lynn asked if I had seen any of the devastation. I hadn't. So we went driving around. Words can't explain what there was to be seen. It was overwhelming. I had no idea where I was since there were no landmarks and no street signs standing. I was supposed to be taking pictures for Lynn but I couldn't do it.

As bad as it has been, it has been comforting to know we are in the prayers of God's people, and they were there when we needed them. It has been such a blessing to be around such caring people. A lot we didn't even know. Only by the grace of God, Rosetta and Elijah are with us. God surely has something special for them.

FEMA has a little village at this area, even down to their own police office. We had several places they called "Tent City." I'm so glad Rosetta and Sasha didn't have to move into a trailer. They both looked horrified when that was mentioned as an option for them. They both said, **"You couldn't pay me to stay in a trailer after going through a storm like we did."**

RAY ADDS: Joplin residents had never before suffered a storm such as the tornado last year. I drove into the tor-

8 nado, just the edge, so that my car was damaged but not I. The house I was renting suffered wind damage but the windows did not break, so all my belongings were unhurt. Since the inside walls needed later to be redone, I had to move out. My belongings are in storage at this time, pending my locating a place I can afford to rent. I'm a guest in the home of Vernon and Lucille Vest for now, and unemployed.

I'm 82 years of age until June 16th. I've recently signed up for food stamps and Medicaid. I solicit your help in continuing the publication and e-mail ministry which occupies my time. My expenses are greater than my income.

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I host also an e-mail list to which I'm the only one who can send notes even if they are written for all the list to read. I set it up that way to limit the number of notes sent to the list since I had belonged to lists where dozens of notes were received daily. That was too many.

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