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# In the Eye of the Storm

Lamorinda volunteers experience the destructive force of a tornado

By Bobbie Dodson



A toilet seemingly hangs from the ceiling in this trailer that was completely picked up by powerful winds, flipped upside down and smashed into another trailer nearby.  
 Photo Tom Welte

The mission team from Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church (LOPC), myself included, never imagined we would experience tornadoes when we planned a trip to Moore, Okla., for the week of May 3. Our group of 34 volunteers, ranging in age from 28 to 89, was going to help in the rebuilding of the town. In 2013, a tornado hit Moore with deadly force, claiming 24 lives, nine of them children, and destroying 1,150 homes. The estimated \$2 billion of damage is in a zone stretching more than 17 miles long and 1.3 miles wide, so there is still much to be done.

The work scheduled by non-profit Serve Moore, which helps those in need, had us repairing damage from a smaller tornado that happened in March of this year. The first three days were spent fixing fences and roofs. One of the tornado victims, Connie, told the group it was a dream come true to have a fenced-in yard again. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart," she said.

But work was cut short Wednesday afternoon, May 6, because of an impending storm. Our team assembled in the lobby of the Days Inn Motel ready to move into the central pantry room if necessary. For us Californians, the eerie wailing of sirens off and on for the next six hours was unnerving as our eyes were glued to the TV screen. Images showed street-by-street progress of the storm, the damage being caused, and major flooding, with water up to the door handles of cars.

Moore received seven inches of rain and also golf ball-size hail. It appears there was only one death: a woman drowned in her cellar storm shelter. Fifteen mobile homes were destroyed, and 10 more were deemed uninhabitable by the tornado that passed over our motel and touched down at the Forest Park Estates Mobile Home Park a couple of miles away.

We also learned how capricious tornadoes can be, as they touch down and perhaps destroy homes on one side of the street and not the other. Ours was a three-story motel, and we experienced the eye of the tornado going over us, but not touching ground. Two miles away a motel building just like ours had the roof and part of the third story blown off, all the windows smashed, and extensive damage.

The next day, hoping we could help those who experienced damage, we learned that Serve Moore couldn't send volunteers until a request was made. So some labored at a home where

many repairs were needed, and others stocked shelves and helped clients in a food pantry the food bank operated.

The request finally came, so we spent all day Friday at the mobile home park (or manufactured home park, as they call them). Seeing some of the homes turned on their sides or upside down revealed the strength of the wind. Huge trees had been uprooted, damaging homes, cars and trucks. It was a heartbreaking scene. But the gratitude of the residents was heartwarming: "Thank you, thank you." "God bless you." "We so appreciate your coming."

All this rang in our ears as we hauled tree limbs, siding, water-soaked insulation, as well as metal and wooden framework to the curbs where we deposited it, and homeowners in pickup trucks hauled the debris away. Dorinda, head of their security team, had tears in her eyes as she hugged each one of us upon our arrival. She expressed her appreciation for all we accomplished in a note sent to our construction leader, Rich Lewis of Orinda. We were impressed by the way the people of the park were out helping one another.

LOPC team members, Mary and Tom Welte, also Orindans, were surprised to see Bill and Kelly, owners of the home where their team had worked on the roof. It turned out Bill's parents lived in one of the completely destroyed homes, and they were there to help out. The Welte's learned that the parents had a storm shelter, but a car had been deposited on the entrance so they could not get out. With the help of friends, the car was shoved off, and Bill's parents were rescued.

Rev. Lauren Gully, staff leader for our mission team, said of the trip, "It is always incredible to speak to people who have lived through a natural disaster. Their stories of what the storm was like, how they felt, and the obstacles they face in the wake of the storm speaks to our humanity and our need for one another. I have been changed by having these conversations, not only in Moore, but on other mission trips as well. These sorts of interactions are honest and authentic. They remind me of how we need to care for one another when things are tough, and how inspiring it can be to see strangers helping one another."

Much, much more was left to be done in Moore but the LOPC team was glad to accomplish what we did and that we showed the residents others cared about them and their plight.

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