

THE GREATEST CHALLENGE

December 11, 2021

By City of Bowling Green Public Information Office



Dedicated to the memory of:

Alisa Besic, 26

Alma Besic, 11 months, 7 days

Elma Besic, 5

Samantha Besic, 5 months, 10 days

Selmir Besic, 6

Nariah Cayshelle Brown, 16

Nolynn Brown, 8

Nyles Brown, 4

Nyssa Brown, 13

Rachel Brown, 36

Steven Brown, 35

Terry Martin Jayne, 67

Say Meh, 42

Cory Scott, 27

Victoria Smith, 64

Mae F. White, 77

Robert Williams, Jr., 65

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The Greatest Challenge

At a time when the town is usually asleep, three tornadoes ripped through Bowling Green and Warren County, in the early morning hours of December 11, 2021. The storms were the worst the city of 72,200 people have seen in terms of lives lost, injuries, and property damage.

Bowling Green’s two hospitals treated 84 people that day for a variety of injuries. Some people were taken to area trauma centers for a higher level of treatment. The storms claimed 16 lives in Bowling Green and one in Rockfield.

Some 474 calls for help initially flooded Bowling Green Police Department Dispatch in the first hour of the disaster. Fiber optic lines were cut, electricity was out throughout the area, and streets were covered in debris making many of them impassable. On top of these already difficult circumstances, heavy rains fell immediately after the tornado passed, and the rain kept coming.

Residents began seeking shelter at fire stations while at the same time, fire fighters were being called to structural collapses.

The first call for the Fire Department came in around 1:20 a.m. when a fire was reported at the GM Corvette plant. As the crews rolled out of Station 5 on Porter Pike, additional calls were coming in for structural collapses in the Creekwood neighborhood.

“I have no hesitation in saying that the early morning hours of Saturday December 11, 2021 were the greatest challenge the Bowling Green Fire Department has ever faced,” Bowling Green Fire Department Deputy Chief Bret Smith said.



The fire at the Corvette plant was on the roof and it was visible from the fire station over a mile away as that crew rolled out the door. On the scene, Engine 5 discovered that it was fed by a large gas line. Once they shut down that gas line the fire was quickly extinguished by the firefighters on two trucks.

All other units responded to the Creekwood neighborhood.



The Fire Department issued an all-call for the first time, meaning every single firefighter who was able was called in to work immediately.

“Initially speaking, there were tremendous challenges,” Smith said. “The weather was a challenge. Even though the tornado had passed at that point in time, power was out to the area. There was no light. Rain was coming down heavy.

“Everything was difficult.

“Everything was a challenge.

“The first units into the area at Jennings Creek had no landmarks to go by, no street signs and very poor visibility. Our crews and our units that responded first

in were dealing with something that they had never seen before. This situation isn’t in the promotional manuals. It’s outside of anything that we have experienced before here in the City of Bowling Green.

“In the memory of anyone who’s worked at the Bowling Green Fire Department, we’ve never issued an all call for every available body to come in and respond. We had 33 people on duty that night. We had another 65 respond to assist with the search and rescue efforts.

“There were 15 fatalities that evening within that one neighborhood. Of 17 total deaths within Warren County from the tornado, 15 were in that neighborhood that evening.”

Into the Unknown

“Our firefighters walked into the unknown, carrying hand lights, medical bags, a few hand tools,” Smith said. Unlike most emergencies where three or four firefighters can render aid to one seriously injured person, the unprecedented challenges of December 11 created an unimaginable scene. The combination of weather, no light, scores of patients with severe injuries, impassable roads, and communication issues created a scene never before encountered here.

“We couldn’t get our trucks, our engines, our apparatus, we couldn’t get them any closer so our fire fighters had to walk a quarter of a mile in, searching as they went, encountering injured victims, trying to provide what care they could. Communication was difficult. Every aspect of it was difficult,” Smith said.

“Many times our people just walked into the unknown and started giving aid in every way that they could. The injuries that they encountered were horrific – patients with multiple compound fractures and other injuries I won’t describe.



“Generally speaking, you encounter a patient like that and that’s your only job, and you have a crew of three or four people to aid one victim with serious injuries. In this situation, we encountered one victim, one patient with those kinds of injuries and there were 10 more behind them that needed the same care, serious traumatic injuries, one after another, after another.



“It was difficult to get those patients out of the destroyed area. Everyone had to be carried out by hand until you could get to a street that was open that you could bring in an ambulance and load that patient for transport,” he said. Personnel resources were used up very quickly.

“Everyone who responded that evening worked until the morning light, and then at that point we had to start rotating some crews and begin to give our firefighters some rest and rehab,” Smith said.

Everyone working, all hands, stayed on until the structures and debris field where the tornado touched down were cleared.

Damage Assessment

In total, three tornadoes touched down that morning within Warren County – two EF-3 category tornadoes and one EF-2. The first EF-3 tornado crossed into Warren County at the Logan County line, the second roared through the Russellville Road area causing the damage to the Creekwood neighborhood and proceeded south of Western Kentucky University’s campus, parallel to Interstate 65. The third started near the Bowling Green Warren County Airport, crossed Interstate 65 and caused damage to the NCM Motorsports Track and some neighboring structures.

In Bowling Green, more than 20,000 people were completely in the dark and cold after winds took out electrical infrastructure including more than 250 power line poles. Winds ripped apart 437 homes with some having minor damage and others completely destroyed. The business community wasn’t spared – 74 businesses sustained damage ranging from minimal to a total loss. The estimated monetary damage from the storms is in excess of \$101 million.

Local utility companies worked as quickly as they could to get electricity back up but for some people that took days. Multiple agencies sent crews from a variety of utility providers from other parts of Kentucky and in neighboring states to assist with the work.

Former Public Works Director Greg

Meredith was overseeing a department of 62 employees on December 11. His initial reaction was disbelief at the tragic loss of life and the scope of the destruction.



“So the first thing was, of course to open roads and to clear roads to get first responders in,” Meredith said. “That occurred right after the storm.

“Not only did they open up roadways that were closed due to trees and debris but they also had to start erecting important signs, stop signs for example, putting temporary stop signs up, making sure that people who needed to get into the sites in the locations that suffered the worst damage were able to. So that was our first initial push, if you will.

“Roads weren’t all opened, at least to the public, for a week and half maybe after the storm. They were open enough to get first responders in but not for people to get to their homes necessarily and to be able to have full access,” Meredith said.

The fleet division quickly became busy patching or replacing tires on police, fire and public works vehicles. The city went through many tires that were flattened mostly by nails from roofing materials blown into the roadways during the storms.

“We temporarily plugged those tires, the ones we could and then we made rather extensive orders for new tires because police cruisers can’t operate long term on plugged tires,” he said. “They have to have new tires. Our fleet division was active in getting that done.

“All of our guys responded and stepped up amazingly well. This is their community. They wanted to help their people and so that showed in the response and how well they did,” Meredith said.

Planning and design employees in Meredith’s department helped with traffic control during the day in the hardest hit areas so that police could focus with fire on search and rescue.

At night, police worked to secure storm-damaged areas to prevent trespassing, theft, and keep people away from unsafe structures.



“There were issues after the tornado with looting, and I know the police were actively working to try to control who got into neighborhoods after dark. So our guys did that mostly in the daylight. “They worked weekends, nights, long shifts, 20-hour days, that sort of thing,” Meredith said of the City’s public works staff.

At the peak there were 100 people working actively at removing debris which lasted 57 days including three winter weather days during which time it wasn’t safe for debris haulers to work.

City Environmental Manager Matt Powell managed the contracts.

“Matt did a great job,” Meredith said.

“We worked through that pretty quickly and we had help after a week. We had the debris removal contractor in and active and going. I think that was on the 18th after the 11th so it was exactly a week later. That was the initial push and that was how long it took,” he said.

Debris

Powell began the process of finding experienced FEMA contractors on December 12. A 16-year veteran of the City’s Public Works Department, he had never seen such a wide scope of destruction before in Bowling Green.

“It was so severe that you just really never felt like you got to the end of it,” Powell said of the tornado damage.



Powell and Meredith got together with county employees, none of whom had run a large-scale debris removal operation before, and they began calling a variety of contacts.

“I was really surprised by how many call backs we got on a Sunday,” Powell said. “We learned pretty quickly how the process needs to work.”

The City needed competent and experienced contractors who could work efficiently.

In addition to removal contractors, Powell had to secure debris processing sites, a debris monitoring firm, and make sure the paperwork with both the City and Warren County governments was quickly processed.

Within days, the city hired CrowderGulf as the debris hauler and Tetra Tech monitoring firm to provide third-party quality control, a requirement that had to

be met to get FEMA reimbursement for storm cleanup.

The contractors began work December 18.

“There were standards about how it had to be processed,” Powell said. “Demolition debris and vegetation debris had to be separated. We paid the contractors based on the volume of material they picked up and the distance they moved it.”

From Warren County, debris haulers picked up 50,000 cubic yards of vegetation and demolition debris. Within the city limits of Bowling Green, haulers collected 175,000 cubic yards of debris between December 18 and February 16.



We're Not Alone

Six days after the tornadoes, more than 40 local, state, and federal leaders convened at the City's Neighborhood and Community Services Department for a post-incident transition from Emergency Operations Center response to disaster response and recovery.

More than 6,000 volunteers locally and from elsewhere all over the country showed up to help the community. They completed 26,371 service hours from December 11, 2021 through March 16, 2022.

Bowling Green Mayor Todd Alcott said he will never forget the outpouring of support Bowling Green received and the way in which neighbors helped neighbors.



"What was so special, I think that none of us will ever forget as long as I live is that it was a community response," Alcott said. "Our churches, our community went out to help out their neighbors."

"They were out and about. They were basically going through the rubble, going through the debris, finding out what people needed getting to their homes, getting to people to give them first response. It was a difficult, challenging time. We called on a lot of special services that came from all over the nation to help us out for search and recovery as far as our Red Cross, as far

as our private orgs that were helping out in that emergency response, our schools.



"We saw the best of our community and the best of our people and the best of Bowling Green in those days, and we continue to see that in many ways. A lot's happened. A lot has transpired and we're still working through this but we came together, and that's what I remember the most," he said.

"The biggest lesson for me was that we're not alone," Alcott said.



Bowling Green Police Department Public Information Officer Ronnie Ward encountered that lesson almost immediately after leaving his home in Smiths Grove to head to police headquarters downtown.

Ward was home with his wife when the tornadoes rolled through. They had stayed up late that night because of the weather forecast. He later learned that one of the tornadoes he heard roaring near his home moved through about five to six miles from his house.

He turned on his police radio, looked at his wife, and told her he needed to go to police headquarters.



"You could not see to drive because the rain was coming so hard and there were no lights anywhere," Ward said. "All of the lights on the interstate exit ramps were out. All

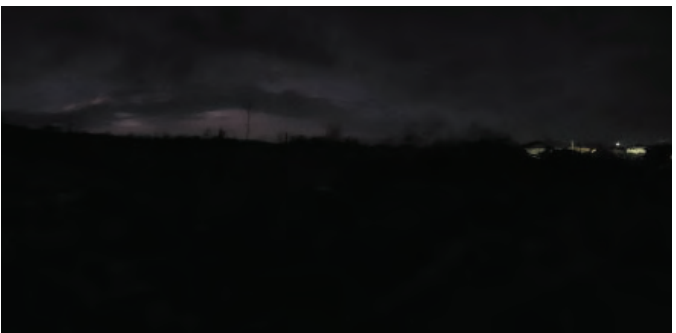
of the lights were out in Smiths Grove. There really was nothing giving you any reference point as to where anything was. I was driving very slowly because the rain was coming so hard. At one point, I realized I was driving on the wrong side of the road."

He was on Glasgow Road at the time headed towards town. He slowed down, stopped under a bridge and evaluated the driving conditions before moving. He got out to the interstate and met up with another city officer who was taking his wife to work. The other officer had

stopped for an overturned tractor trailer truck. Ward said he would stay with the truck so the other officer could get his wife to work at police dispatch. Ward stopped to check on the truck driver who was out of his truck and not injured and then began once again making his way to the police station.

"I had no idea the devastation," Ward said.

As Ward approached downtown, an officer called and said they needed help in the Transpark. He turned around and drove towards Glasgow Road. As he approached the Transpark, he began to see debris in the road and stopped to talk to an Atmos representative who handed Ward his card and told him to call if he needed help getting gas cut off anywhere. Ward noticed one building in the Transpark was completely leveled.



"It was flat. There was nothing standing at all," Ward said.

It wasn't occupied at the time. Ward ventured back to the Crown factory where all of the utility poles toppled over leaving electric lines and poles completely blocking the parking lot and the street, preventing employees from being able to leave. Ward asked if anyone was injured or unaccounted for and upon learning that everyone was OK, he got back on the road to head into town.

As soon as he left there, he remembered hearing a call on the radio for the coroner's office and without yet knowing the extent of destruction in town, he thought how terrible it would be for the coroner's office to have to go out on a night like that.

Before he could get to the office, reporters were calling him to ask for the number of dead and injured. He didn't yet have that answer and wouldn't for several hours.

After his arrival at the office, he was met by Police Chief Mike Delaney who was already at headquarters with others who had also come into the office. That's when Ward heard the number of calls and saw the addresses where the coroner's office would be needed.

Ward distinctly remembers the prescient warning of another officer telling him by daybreak the complete picture would come into focus and would be worse than initially feared.

In the first several hours, the police department set up the Emergency Operations Center in the police

department community room so first responders and utility workers could assess needs, figure out where to use what resources and come up with response plans.



At first light, Delaney left police headquarters to assess storm-damaged areas.

Police and dispatchers started working in 12-hour shifts. Officers paired up with firefighters walking door to door to rescue people and also check homes for anyone who may have been trapped.



Meanwhile, Ward worked around the clock at the Emergency Operations Center to obtain correct information from first responders in the field and then he relayed that information to city officials, press, and the public.

"We became our own news just because we were getting minute-by-minute information on lots of the neighborhoods," Ward said. "Then on Saturday, a major networking line broke

on Russellville Road and knocked out our internet. Not only do we need to communicate issues to our citizens, we don't have a way of doing it because we don't have internet.

"It was challenging, very challenging. Once the internet came back online, it was a huge help."

In addition to regular press calls, Ward was receiving calls from people who wanted to make donations. The call center stayed busy providing information to citizens about where they could get food, water and shelter.



By Wednesday, the City's Information Technology team sent out several chargers to Moss Middle School so that people who lived in the hard-hit Creekwood neighborhood had a place to go to charge their cell phones.

"Our focus was to continue to communicate with our community and people outside of our community," Ward said. "We had people from all over the nation calling wanting to help, asking how they can help, both in physically coming here to do a task or sending items here for relief. We had contact information, of where to send people, items, and what to do with money.

"I think it was very beneficial to our task. We were trying to get them the help they needed as fast as we possibly could make it happen. It was not perfect. We stubbed our toes along the way on some things."



The trauma was gut wrenching, even for people who were strangers to Bowling Green. One specific memory stands out from the Moss Creek Avenue damage where several people died.

It was about 4 a.m. one morning and Ward was providing information to a Nashville, Tennessee reporter.

"I'm telling the story, which again to me is the same story over and over. While I'm telling the story to the reporter she is literally bawling. She was not on the camera. I'm on the camera looking at her, and I thought 'this lady, this reporter does not live in the community but she is struck by what has happened here.' It was moving to me to see she was not looking at this as an assignment.

"She will take this with her for a long time. There were local reporters I put in touch with grief counselors in our building. I called their direct supervisors and said, 'you need to make time for this person to talk to a grief counselor,'" Ward said.

While the losses seemed unimaginable to Ward, like Alcott, the standout lesson is a story of solidarity among locals and people from all over the country who committed to helping.

“This community became one large extended family,” Ward said. “There was a lady here who lived in California and took her vacation to come here and volunteer. That wasn’t the only story. I know that there were other people. People came from other states to give their time. They had been through something equally as devastating. They knew how much our community needed. That stood out to me.

“In the police world we seem to only deal with really, really bad things. We know those good things happen every day but we don’t get to see them,” he said.

As word of the destruction got out to the state and nation, donations started to flood the community. People from all over the country stepped up and began sending food, clothing, household items, bottled water, and other necessities to Bowling Green. The donations came in by the truck loads. A Buddhist group from Chicago came into the community and handed out Visa gift cards to families in need.

Local churches and nonprofits offered help with the organization and distribution of donated goods until a centralized distribution site could be set up.

Within days, the city took possession of leased space inside of Greenwood Mall at the former Sears store.



Under the direction of the City’s Community Engagement Coordinator Emily Angel, this became the BG Strong Disaster Recovery Center, a one-stop shop for people to come and pick up any donated items they needed, talk to FEMA representatives, the Small Business Administration, or meet with mental health professionals. Residents who represented 1,293 households sought help at the center, many of those residents made repeat visits.

No one was turned away, and everything was free of charge.

Angel instinctively knew that survivors were traumatized, and their needs must be met without any further trauma. She gained experience in college conducting mission work following Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana.



Angel immediately began working with groups of volunteers here who worked together to set up donated items like they would be arranged in a department store.

The BG Strong Center had to be a “shop with dignity” experience, Angel said. As an example, she said if someone lost everything and walked to an aisle filled with new toothbrushes, survivors weren’t told to take a particular toothbrush. It was important to give people choices.

“They’ve been through enough,” she said. “Let’s not re-traumatize them. They were given options.

“Just because you’ve lost everything doesn’t mean you have to lose all of your choices. Where there was an opportunity to give them an option, we needed to allow it and encourage it,” Angel said.

Angel became the disaster center coordinator from mid-December through March 11, 2022.

While always operating with a “shop with dignity” mindset and continuously training new volunteers to adopt that same approach to service, Angel’s two top priorities were number one, taking care of people in need and number two, being a good steward of the donations.



While serving others, Angel experienced a range of emotions. She was grateful for the people who volunteered their time and others who donated items to be given to people in need. And, at the

same time, she experienced survivor's guilt. Her home was unscathed and no one in her family was injured.

"You feel very fortunate, and then you feel guilty," she said.

But the outpouring of support from all over the country was "awe inspiring," she said.

Angel frequently worked long hours from December 11, 2021 through March, 2022 to make sure that everyone seeking help got what they needed.



At the BG Strong Center everyone asking for help met with an intake person to have a conversation about their current living situation and needs, and each head of household was assigned a personal shopper who asked questions in an attempt to make sure that their needs were being met.

"We had a process. They would come and sit down with our intake, and they would have a conversation and a big piece of that was 'what is your current living situation.' Everybody had the same conversation. No one was turned away.

"We would ask every time 'what are your

immediate needs right now.' Everybody had a personal shopper with them. They would talk to their shopper, and we would learn they needed things and the shopper would suggest other things," Angel said.

Some people were afraid to take donations from other people who might need it more than they did.

Angel would tell shoppers that the donations were intended to be given to them.

"We were having people take what they need for the week and come back and get some more," she said. She didn't want anyone in a temporary housing situation, like a hotel, to suddenly become overwhelmed with too much stuff and no place to store it.

"As we were having these conversations you could tell there was a trauma. We weren't just giving out donations. We were taking inventory of everyone's mind, body, and spirit. If you don't treat all of those together, then you're putting on Band-Aids. They had been through a lot and they deserved to heal," she said.



Clearing the Path

In the immediate moments after the tornadoes passed, firefighters forged paths to get to injured storm victims but no one knew until daybreak the enormous tasks that lie ahead for city crews to start assessing property and clearing roads to move people toward recovery.

"There wasn't a lot of awareness or communication of what was really going on," Code Compliance and Animal Protection Division Manager Brad Schargorodski said of the early morning hours of Dec. 11. "So we didn't know how bad things were just at that point. But we knew we were facing a serious situation."



As police officers and firefighters walked from one address to the next to assess people's well being, code officials with help from other city and county employees began to assess structures.



"Those teams drove to thousands of properties within days of the storm, and covered hundreds of road miles,"

Schargorodski said. "They finished up Thursday of that week."



The teams determined location of the destruction and placed green, yellow, and red placards on buildings to help people know what appeared to be the structural damage level based on an exterior inspection of the structures. All damage surveys were logged on paper, and input into a database by a team of other city staff back at the Neighborhood and Community Services EOC, which helped GIS staff to map the exact damage path and determine estimated property value loss in a matter of days.

The initial assessments were not an official determination if a building was safe to inhabit but rather letting people know the level of structural damage from an exterior inspection.

“One gentleman was sitting on his couch without a roof, just the sky above,” Schargorodski said. “We said ‘sir, you need to leave,’ and he was just so in shock he didn’t know what to do.”

About a month later, code officials conducted a second, more detailed set of assessments. Some yellow placards changed to red, meaning the structures were unsafe, and others changed to green upon a second assessment. All inspection data, including photographs of every damaged structure, were uploaded to the publically-available GIS map. During the second set of assessments, staff and volunteers also made direct contact with every single affected property owner and tenant, providing them with a packet of

information in multiple languages on how to register with FEMA, obtain disaster services, and even on preparing for future disasters.

“From a code compliance standpoint it allowed us to know where we needed to focus to help people,” Schargorodski said.

All of the boots on the ground also helped the city make assessments that were later used by FEMA to determine needs here.

“I think that in the face of adversity of what we were dealing with, which was unparalleled in our community, the city on the whole did an amazing job.”



Historic Response

City employees immediately realized the storm response required all hands on deck to meet the needs of the city’s residents and businesses, City Manager Jeff Meisel said.



“This was a historic event for our community which led to a historic response by our community,” Meisel said. “We wouldn’t be where we’re at right now without the selfless collaborative efforts by everyone involved in our comeback.”

“There were departments like IT and Human Resources that you wouldn’t think would be involved in a disaster like this; however, IT had to work around the clock the first couple of days to stabilize the city’s network and communications system while the HR department stepped in and brought in counselors and peer support groups to support our police officers and firefighters who had experienced the trauma of the immediate aftermath following the storms and seeing and experiencing the injured and the deceased,” Meisel said.

“The storms caused an unprecedented loss of life and property in Bowling Green,” he said.



Meisel received damage updates in the early morning hours of December 11, and came in for work that morning at the Emergency Operations Center in the police department.

“That morning I took a tour with Chief Delaney, the mayor, and Police Chaplain Bill Wade out to ground zero in the Moss Meadows and Creekwood areas.

“When we got there I was in total shock of the magnitude of the devastation; the houses that had been swept off of their foundations with nothing left, the massive damage to vehicles overturned and just debris everywhere you looked was difficult to process. We happened upon the coroner’s van and stopped to talk to him. It was (Deputy Coroner) Dwayne Lawrence. He told us the news about the children he had to pick up with tears in his eyes. And that’s when it all hit me like a ton of bricks what our

community was facing.

“Besides the search and rescue efforts, we also had a mammoth loss of power throughout the city. We were in close contact with Mark Iverson at BGMU given it was mostly the BGMU service area.

“My role became one where I needed to find some additional manpower whether it be city staff or volunteers to help keep the public out of these areas to allow police and fire to continue their rescue efforts as well as to allow BGMU to start their work in restoring power. Unfortunately, the tornadoes took the worst path in terms of our power grid and knocked out 22,000 customers.



“Day one was certainly the most challenging day being that we had never experienced this level of disaster before,” he said.

The level of planning by Bowling Green and Warren County’s public safety departments mitigated the lack of experience in responding to a local disaster of this magnitude.

“Warren County Emergency Management Director Ronnie Pearson had already reached out to Red Cross and FEMA and by that afternoon or

midday, Red Cross had established a victims’ shelter at Jennings Creek Elementary where the heaviest hit neighborhood was in close vicinity.



“Red Cross did unbelievable work in the first five days in sheltering and meeting immediate needs. FEMA was also quick to respond with sending their regional directors up from Atlanta by Day 2. So things were moving along as well as they could be, I thought, those first two days. But on Day 2 is when I realized we have to find a way to control the volunteers that want to get in and start helping.

“One of my pastors, Pastor Clay Mullins at Living Hope Baptist Church called me and asked what they could do to help. I told him that the best thing they could do for me and the city would be to somehow manage the numerous volunteer groups that were wanting to go into these damaged areas and help. I told him that I felt that we needed organization and keeping them out of certain areas where search and rescue was going on as well as the Nutwood/ Magnolia area where all of the utility work was going on, that being our main line of transmission poles.

“We set up a meeting first thing Monday morning, Day 3, he brought a group with

him from Living Hope. We had maps prepared of the areas where the greatest damage was and had assigned zone numbers to those areas. Zone 1 was ground zero, and we told him we had to keep volunteers out of that zone in order to not disturb the police and fire efforts of rescue and recovery.

“I had gotten word that WKU was willing to offer up the Center for Research and Development. I contacted Buddy Steen and his staff to get their permission to use the lobby. They agreed and so by the early afternoon of Day 3 Living Hope had set up an intake center for volunteers to assign them work zones for clean-up assistance in the areas that were safe to go into.

“This helping hand from Living Hope was tremendous in that the city had maxed out its manpower resources to manage that activity,” he said. Every day introduced new and different challenges.



“Days 1 through 4 we had compiled a list of possible missing persons that we were searching for,” Meisel said. Initially, the police department received 244 missing persons calls. “That list was quickly dwindled down by

Day 4 to just a few people after talking and speaking to relatives and confirming where people had moved to and working with Red Cross and other agencies.

“By Day 5 we had decided that we were down to one missing person, the little girl. Police and fire had covered the Moss Meadows, Whispering Hills, and Jennings Creek areas multiple times over checking every apartment, every house still standing, the creek area, and the wooded areas, without any success.



“After conferring with Chief Brooks and Chief Delaney we decided that it was best to allow volunteers to enter into Zone 1 ground zero on Day 6 to help start the clean up and continue with the search. We realized we needed the public’s assistance,” he said.

By mid-morning on Day 6 the last missing person was found deceased, 13-year-old Nyssa Brown.

“It just happened that a group of city code enforcement officers out in that area came upon Nyssa Brown,” Meisel said. “While it was devastating to discover her remains, it provided answers to the family and closure to our police and fire departments and other

agencies assisting us that had worked incredibly hard around the clock searching for her.

“Those first five days there was a decision to be made almost every five to 10 minutes, just keeping up with the texts, phones calls with emergency management, the meetings, the briefings, the operational decisions was almost overwhelming. The mayor and I divided the duties. He handled all of the interviews with the press very well. I told him that I would handle and cover all of the operational duties and decisions that had to be covered,” he said.



All of those decisions had to be made quickly and one was establishing a system to handle monetary donations. Money came into the community from many different donors.

“I had already decided the city did not need to be involved in taking or receiving any monetary donations,” Meisel said.

“United Way offered to set up a bank account to handle all of the monetary donations that were already starting to be offered. This was also a huge help for me knowing it was going to be in good hands with an established non-profit that’s well suited to manage that,” he said.

In addition to monetary donations, people from across the country wanted to send help in the form of donated goods. Those donations arrived quickly and needed to be warehoused until they could be given out to people in need.

“Ronnie Ward was instrumental in taking on the task of finding warehouse space for those truckloads of supplies that were on their way,” Meisel said. “Ronnie Pearson and I started to discuss a location for FEMA to set up and the idea of the former Sears building came to mind given that we had set up there for COVID vaccines not too long ago.

“So Ronnie Pearson reached out to the landlord of Sears and managed to set up a lease deal for the old Sears space. Collaboratively, we thought a one-stop shop for the community would be optimal for people to get assistance from FEMA, supplies, and other assistance. So we decided that we should set up the Sears space with all of the supplies that were starting to come in. We had truckloads of bottled water, baby diapers, baby food, pretty much all of the necessities that people would need that had lost everything.

While no one ever imagined a disaster of this magnitude in Bowling Green,

departmental planning and sound fiscal footing helped the City recover.

Prior to being named City Manager in 2018, Meisel was the city’s chief financial officer. When he took that position in 2006, the city had a policy to maintain a monetary reserve of 15 percent of the city’s overall general fund.

“I realized that we need to raise that percentage given that our main revenue source was occupational taxes that were heavily reliant upon a good economy,” he said. “After the 2008 recession hit, I made a recommendation to the city manager that we change that to a 20 percent minimum and to work towards getting to a 25 percent minimum reserve in the general fund.

“The City has maintained a 25 percent fund balance reserve in the general fund for many years leading up to this disaster.



“This gave us the flexibility and resiliency when an event like this occurs,” he said.

In addition to that balance reserve, the city maintains a second account called an unassigned fund balance that as of December 2022 has \$8.8 million in it.

While FEMA was quick to respond to the area and stayed in Bowling Green for a few months following the disaster, FEMA does not pay service providers directly. That meant the City had to have millions of dollars on hand to pay the FEMA debris contractors and the additional personnel costs associated with storm response.



The debris removal alone cost \$3.4 million and an additional \$550,000 was paid out in extra personnel costs. The city’s unencumbered funds enabled the city officials to immediately pay those costs up front while waiting for federal and other types of reimbursement. This was paid without having to adjust the city’s general fund.

“Knowing you have that reserve gives you the peace of mind and the flexibility to do whatever is necessary to get through the day. There was never hesitation or the worry about finances when you’ve had loss of life and devastation of this magnitude,” Meisel said.

Never Forget

A year later, the landscape still has many empty spaces where businesses and homes once stood. The community continues to rebuild, and signs of recovery are visible everywhere along the path of the tornadoes’ destruction.

As the anniversary of the storms approached, Neighborhood Services Coordinator Karen Foley, who is the heartbeat of many labors of love in Bowling Green, came up with the idea of a memorial event dubbed “Light the Path.” It was held at 6:11 p.m. on Dec. 11, 2022 along the massive path of the tornadoes.

Residents were encouraged to bring any light source to any point along the path and hold it up for 17 minutes in honor of the lives lost here. First responders and utility providers came into areas with their trucks and light sources. Neighbors once again gathered together with some holding lights and others setting up luminarias.

While the 17 minutes of light was a solemn remembrance of the people who are no longer living with us here in Bowling Green and Rockfield, in the hours leading up to the event, many people gathered to celebrate the rebirth of their neighborhoods, their favorite businesses reopening, and the entire recovery process.

We will continue to rebuild.

We will never forget.

We are BGStrong.



Personal Accounts

Michael Delaney, Bowling Green Police Department Chief

December 10, 2021 the entire city and county had been made aware of the potential of disruptive and potentially dangerous storms. The police



department was on alert of the potential of bad weather. These warnings were taken seriously, but nobody understood the gravity of what would transpire in

the hours, days, weeks, and months to follow.

Late on December 10th I was at the police station tracking the storm along with Deputy Chief Harrell. The storm started into Warren County but as we followed along the updates appeared that it might turn and miss Warren County. These optimistic views would soon be changed with the reality of the storm. WBKO lost their signal and at that moment we realized the storm was in Warren County.

As we waited at the police station for the storm to make its way through the city, officers took cover in a stairwell. Some officers were not able to make it back to the station and found cover in parking structures and car washes. Officers in the field witnessed the storm pass through the city and started relaying information to dispatch.

After we knew the first portion of the storm had passed through the city we left the station and started the mission of rescuing injured people. The first section of the city that officers responded to was in the Nutwood area. Due to electric poles and trees covering the streets, officers had to park and walk from house to house. This area had a significant amount of damage but this would not be the area that fatalities occurred.

The early part of the night dispatch started receiving calls from the Jennings Creek area. One of the callers advised they had located a person upstairs in their townhouse. The storm had taken this person from their house and they ended up in another residence. We quickly realized the storm had gone through a residential neighborhood and due to the time of night many residents were asleep. The calls continued to pour into dispatch of injured and deceased people in the Jennings Creek area.



The Emergency Operations Center was initially set up in the dispatch center. Deputy Chief Bret Smith from the fire department started to utilize a white board to track the locations of injured or deceased people. The number of deceased people continued to grow and emergency management arrived at the police department to assist. The Emergency Operations Center was moved to the police community room as we started to develop a long-term rescue and recovery plan.



During the first eight hours we set up an Emergency Operations Center and phone lines for staff to answer the thousands of calls coming into dispatch. The police department, fire department, Warren County Sheriff's Office, Coroner's office and BGMU began to collaborate and see what resources we have and what do we need. All of the agencies worked together to develop strategies on how to execute the rescue and later the recovery mission.

During the first day of the search police departments and sheriff offices from across the state called to see how they could assist. The police department started working 12-hour shifts and continued with the rescue efforts. Police agencies that responded to help were

utilized for traffic direction and keeping the disaster area secured. The National Guard was activated and responded to assist with traffic control.



There are five divisions within the police department that all played an integral role during this disaster. Dispatch was the first division that was affected. At the time of the tornado there were three dispatchers and one supervisor on duty. From the time of 0120-220 the dispatch center received 474 calls. To put that in context, during the same time frame the previous year, the dispatch center received four calls.

- The first need was to get additional personnel in to help dispatch. Seven additional dispatch personnel responded to assist with the effort. During this time both centers were utilized, headquarters and the alternate center at Greenwood Fire. Unfortunately, the alternate center lost fiber connection and the Computer Aided Design (CAD) did not function. As a result, dispatchers took non-emergency calls and relayed the information to headquarters via phone.
- 12-hour shifts were immediately implemented for all dispatch center employees. 12-hour shifts remained in effect until Dec. 19.

The next need was to assist patrol officers who were attempting to rescue and help the injured. We started to designate people in charge of each portion of the response (division of labor). We had to make sure each person's responsibility was balanced and manageable. One of the early problems that patrol encountered was the loss of internet. Patrol had been utilizing maps on the internet for grid searches. Once the internet went out they had to rely on large printed maps. The hours for patrol officers were long and weary. Patrol officers were paired with firefighters to help in the rescue and clearing of residences. Many people wanted to help and volunteer but the disaster area was not safe to enter. Patrol had to designate someone to coordinate volunteers and assign them duties based on certain criteria.



The Criminal Investigations Division (CID) responded to the affected areas. The mission of CID was to locate people who were unaccounted for and make notifications. One of the challenges the division faced was the internet was not operational. Traditional ways of finding people had been taken away. CID worked collaboratively with our local FBI and ATF office to utilize resources to locate people. CID was also able to filter

through information and reports to give an accurate account for those that perished during the storm.



The Professional Standards Division, comprised of six people, worked 248 hours during the tornado response. The division was mobilized on December 11 and stayed mobilized until December 17. The Professional Standards Division was responsible for coordination of personnel, checking the status of personnel off-duty in the tornado path, assisting with search at the scene, Governor Security liaison, media liaison, Capitol Police liaison, and assisted with Senator McConnell's visit. During this time the Professional Standards team would fill any job needed and provided relief at the scene.

The Logistics Division was in charge of organizing and coordinating the response of all volunteers, law enforcement, National Guard, Public Works, BGMU, and AT&T. This task was enormous and required someone to utilize the relationships of many different entities to get the mission accomplished. It was very time consuming and tedious making and changing schedules based on the needs of the day. The Logistics Division created a schedule for all of the traffic details for the entire city. They

made sure that all of the areas were covered and provided relief to the outside agencies who were working those posts. The Logistics Division was also in charge of the chaplains who arrived on scene to help with notifications and for the officers who had witnessed the casualties first hand.

The Office of Public Information became a vital part of this operation. The position was responsible for gathering accurate information, setting up press conferences, contacting local media, coordinating with national media stations (30 agencies), providing approximately 20 interviews, liaison between the city and volunteer sites, addressing misinformation, providing social media updates regularly, working with the coroner's office, and working with the fire department public information officer. The role of the public information officer is paramount during a disaster. The public wants information on what to do and how to help in a timely manner.



One of the best take-aways from this disaster was how a unified command works to get the mission completed. The entire city from all different divisions, outside agencies, volunteers, church groups, and state resources all worked together. During this disaster the focus was not on who is in charge, but how can we help. The mission of service was never so clear on December 11, 2021. This day is like September 11th, I will always remember what I was doing and where I was at when a tornado ripped through our city. There is something else I will always remember: the storm tore down buildings and took lives, but the citizens of Bowling Green came together and helped each other get back up.

Justin Brooks, Bowling Green Fire Department Chief

The challenge to meet the mission had never been greater than on December 11th 2021 for the Bowling Green Fire Department. The BGFD received over 5,800 calls in the 2021 calendar year to serve, save, and protect our City. During and after the tornadoes carved a path through our City, the BGFD responded to the unimaginable. This account is an attempt to place the efforts of the men and women of the BGFD into perspective.

As the fire chief of this great organization, I find myself today with more respect for the profession and more pride for our organization because of the efforts of our people who answered the bell, time after time. I have often compared the efforts of our firefighters to that of a prize fighter in the last round of a title fight. Our people continued to get off the stool, walk to the middle of the ring (the storm), and we chose to fight for all of those affected. The mission of the BGFD is to serve, save, and protect. To make it better. When most were asleep, taking shelter, or even fleeing our city, the BGFD traveled straight to the middle of the storm and "made it better." For their efforts, I call them all heroes.



December 11th arrived to the BGFD, not by surprise, but with destruction not yet found in the history of our department. In the week leading up to the tornadoes, we communicated the possibility of

severe weather for our immediate area. Our crews on all three shifts spent time preparing chain saws, generator fuel levels, reviewing the storm mode policy, and making adjustments to the daily schedule as the hours neared. Crews that were made up of firefighters, engineers, captains, and battalion chiefs would spend hours on Friday, December 10th monitoring the weather. The administration was preparing to assist with any and all needs related to challenges derived from the weather.

As the clock clicked near midnight, citizens from across the city started to show up at fire stations seeking shelter. Our people, knowing full well that our fire stations are not designed to act as storm shelters, allowed the panicked citizens inside the fire stations. Over 40+ citizens were allowed in Station 4 (Westside Fire Station) and placed in the safest possible location within the structure. Soon after the citizens would arrive, the power feed was lost to the local news stations, the wind increased, debris began to move outside, and the backup generators to our fire stations in the affected area would activate. Crews stated that everyone could feel when the tornadoes had arrived by the sounds and shakes of the structure.



Right after the tornado tore through, rain began to fall from the sky uncontrollably. Then the bell would ring, time after time, until morning light would finally arrive. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best when he said there is greatness in all of us, not because of fame or fortune, but because greatness is determined by service. The display of a public servant's responsibility would arrive in a moment's notice for the entire city to see and feel. I can promise anyone that enters and stays in the City of Bowling Green, you are protected by the best in the fire service.

Each crew began responding to calls that ranged from structural collapse, structure fires, gas leaks, motor vehicle accidents, downed power lines, arcing transformers, missing persons reports, death and dismemberment, and many more coded emergencies. One call at a time, our crews began to understand that the area of greatest need for resources was the Creekwood area, which is located between Russellville Road and Veterans Memorial Highway. First arriving crews would start the initial radio traffic which painted a grim size-up of the area: no power, no street signs to designate location of crews, entire houses were in the roadway, uprooted trees impeding the direction of responding units, and most landmarks used to orient crews were gone.



No one on duty or responding from home would be able to pull from experience or textbooks to help understand the level of destruction. With no time to formulate a plan of action and an urgent need to act, our people began to process and perform with each and every need.

After a massive five-day operation of search, rescue, and recovery efforts, the BGFD closed down all active search operations. Five days of work had taken its toll on the department. Firefighters, who had gone without sleep, handled the worst of what the tornado had brought, and were left with finding balance to a forever-changed mindset. The nature of death and destruction still resonates with our personnel today as we find peace in knowing we did our best at that moment.



Winston Churchill once said, "To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour." The unique moment found a department ready, willing, and able to perform. To many in this city, this was the BGFD's finest hour.

We learned a great deal about ourselves, our department, and our city. We reflect on this event often to keep our focus on what truly matters when setting our vision on today and the future. We are hopeful for the future, because we confirmed how special the people of this organization are during the tragic events of the tornadoes. Through tragedy comes triumph.



The BGFD owes a lot of gratitude for the multiple agencies, volunteers, and retirees that came to assist with the efforts. The BGFD will pay it forward if the opportunity presents itself in the future.



Going forward, the mission is the same: to serve, save, and protect. To make it better. Being a firefighter is the greatest job in the world. The job is hard sometimes. But our people are resilient and will continue to answer the bell, time after time.



In 2021, we went through challenges that tested our mental and physical limits. We now find ourselves standing taller, stronger, and more importantly, we are standing together.



Brent Childers, Director of Neighborhood and Community Services for the City of Bowling Green

Tuscaloosa.

Tuscaloosa is a familiar place to me based on my visits during college and, when I started working in public administration, Tuscaloosa became a comparison model for data, similar to Bowling Green and Warren County; college town, similar demographic trends, the place you could use to compare and contrast in the world of community and economic development and the issues and problems of cities and towns.

In April of 2011, an EF-4 multi-vortex tornado tore through Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, with several smaller communities in between, and a “what if” seed planted itself in the back of my mind. What if that happened here, not states away in my old college stomping grounds but here, in my hometown? In our backyard?

The “what if” seed is itching. It’s on a long list of things to tend to.



I lead Neighborhood & Community Services. Call us the “utility drawer” of municipal government. We’re the collection of odds and ends tools and you may not even know exactly what all the gadgets even do. But believe me when I say you’re going to want us working for you.

You don’t even know you need us. Maybe you’re not even convinced you do. It’s OK. We’re in the utility drawer. We get it.

Then, it’s 2016.

I’ve worked “around” emergency preparedness since my days as a public administrator at the area development district. As an administrator, I’ve been writing plans, reviewing plans, rewriting plans, reading plans, and planning plans almost my whole career.



Tuscaloosa inspires me to start with a template plan, meaning I find one from another community to use as a base. I save it. I start having the “what if” talk. Only now, it’s not just an unanswered question in my mind.

I’m searching out the story of Tuscaloosa, in depth now with the hindsight of five years’ recovery. And I’m spit-balling with senior managers, “what if a tornado hits Bowling Green?”

And then I’m talking it with my own department. We’re imagining, we’re watching videos from Tuscaloosa, we’re reading articles and case studies. We’re



assessing our department. What do we have (skills, tools, resources) to bring to a tornado response? And the long build back that comes afterwards? We don’t know what we don’t know, but we are searching.

A couple of my staffers go to a training on the subject. They come back armed with ideas and info, and we start crafting our imaginary scenario and our imaginary plan. It’s spring of 2017.

In our NCS community room that is also our own training/meeting room, we spend some time as a department running the different parts of different scenarios. We use the 1998 hailstorm as a “war story” but we also spend time watching film, like a sports team does. Film from Tuscaloosa. Film re-imagined as Bowling Green, only we’re training

and writing a playbook knowing we may never dress for a game. Only the film is recorded on cell phones and posted on YouTube.

Our building inspectors all get trained on doing disaster damage assessments. They practice on a building at Kereiakes Park that’s scheduled to be demolished. After the fire department has a go at running suppression/extrication scenarios on it, all of our inspectors from both the building side and the code enforcement side get to practice doing training on it. We drill it. We write damage assessments into the playbook.

During COVID, we all got a dress rehearsal and full-on rewrite of the script of what needs to happen in an emergency. Our playbook suddenly was helpful in unintended ways when a

worldwide pandemic shut down suddenly meant “essential services” like electrical permits and building permits had to go quasi-virtual and our migration to a digital world suddenly accelerated.

Our Housing Division streamlined and re-oriented processes on a dime, essentially customizing services so that group activities became self-guided or one-on-one activities. As a highly specialized unit, they learned how to adjust their coverage for the plays they saw on the field. They and other divisions learned to pivot and be prepared to make adjustments on the fly, to realign and rotate staff to account for rest or injury or whatever circumstance erupted new by the week or by the day.

Our International Communities Liaison Division and Neighborhoods Division are on the pro-active end of a reactive City government. They’re in the business of getting out ahead of the information, building relationships with people, networking and connecting people. Sometimes from the outside it looks like they’re not part of the action on the field at all. But they’re all over the game making the action understandable for everyone, marking the field, managing the scoreboard, broadcasting the stats, and sometimes they’re in the press box, spotting the plays, or reporting the color commentary.

Our NCS departmental skills inventory reveals employees with electrical and building expertise, computer skills, specialized communication skills, and

also people who have public safety experience: people who have previously served in the military or in communities as 911 operators, police officers, firefighters, and EMTs. We speak and write at least a handful of languages besides English. We can write, we can speak, we can enforce, we can build, we can teach. We have children and aging parents. We have specialized training with animals. With maps. With infrastructure. With grants. With planning. With systems. We know builders. Neighborhoods. Community groups. Venues. Volunteers. Landlords. The media.



Tuscaloosa was our case study. Our film. We wrote a playbook based on that case study. A month before the COVID shutdown, another tornado hit our neighbors in Nashville. We watched their response via traditional media and this time, with the lens of social media and the “reporting” of neighborhood groups and other community organizations on the ground in Nashville.

We watched, we absorbed, and took notes. We added it to our watercooler play review. And then the world shut down and so did we, in the middle of March 2020.

We tweaked our Tuscaloosa play book and practiced it during the pandemic. We reviewed it, we updated it as staff turned over, took on new responsibilities, and hired new people.

By the first week of December 2021, we were enjoying new management appointments and new additions to our department having completed training. COVID still lingered, but we were hopeful for a New Year.

December 10, many of us were having holiday celebrations and watching the weather. One of my division managers is married to our state climatologist. He watched her face turn white as she was monitoring the weather activity from her cell phone. There would be no Bowling Green bubble to intervene today.

Midnight came and went.

December 11, shortly after 1 a.m., a tornado-warned storm cell moving from Logan County crossed into Warren County, then over the community of Rockfield, spinning off damage in Hadley, crossing the Natcher Parkway and forging a line of devastation that bisected Bowling Green, skirting the WKU campus, but casting damage along the U.S. 31-W Bypass, through residential neighborhoods, across the Barren River and all the way to the Transpark and into northern Warren County.



First thing in the playbook for every NCS member?

1. Check on your family. Family is first. If you and your family aren’t OK, you’re off the field.

The second thing in the playbook for every NCS member?

2. Check on your work peers.



This is when I learned that one of our own members was sheltering in a neighbor's garage. Our Housing Division Manager and her husband had emerged from a storm shelter they'd built in their home when they built it new after the 1998 hailstorm. The tornado destroyed her home and exposed most of her belongings to torrential rain and the elements. But she and her family had escaped with their lives. We would later learn that her parents' townhome also was badly damaged as the tornado traveled along its path.

We did not know, at that time, that this was a tornado. It was dark, it was pouring down rain, and power was out.

I drove into downtown to check on the Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS) building. Power had gone out briefly, but things appeared normal. It was too dark to see very much on Cemetery Road (my route into the office). I knew it was a bad storm. I didn't know how bad.



I made it back home safely. It had been a long night. I went to bed, not knowing our Tuscaloosa had happened. It was dark. I was tired. But, the NCS building was safe and downtown looked OK, the Christmas lights were still on in Fountain Square Park.

At daylight, Saturday morning, I was sleeping when I heard banging on the front door only to find our Grants Manager Nick pacing on my front porch. I started to invite Nick in, but he immediately urged me to check my phone, that "everyone" had been trying to get in touch with me. That's when I found countless texts and missed calls.

Tuscaloosa.

I returned to the office, but this time I was meeting other NCS staff there, many reporting to the building according to the playbook to get briefed and get prepared for whatever the next steps would be. Others would need to wait until Sunday or Monday and were awaiting a fuller picture of what the daylight hours would reveal.

In an instant, we were utilizing all of the same virtual tools we'd come to master during the pandemic: texting, phone calls, laptops and devices in tow. From wherever we were, from home, from the office, from the field, from the Emergency Operations

Center, from everywhere.

Some of us had slept through the night unaware of the storm and wouldn't know until they started hearing the news reports or reading about it on social media.

Others would have damage themselves but not realize the extent of the destruction until making phone calls to other families and learning that their homes were completely destroyed. And that there were fatalities.

In our community/training room, we began making lists of streets. Analog. Hard copy lists. With giant post it notes on the windows.

We began pulling up documents and printing them. We had power, we had access to our servers on Saturday. We began pulling out all of the equipment and materials we might need to use: clipboards, hard hats, markers, etc.

We started pulling everything we needed to do assessments. We started accumulating the data. We began trying to figure out what we didn't yet know: how many housing units, how many families displaced, where were the areas, what coordinating help did we need, how do we support the public information effort? The response effort? How do we protect people from additional harm?

Over the first 48 hours, we had staff at the Emergency Operations Center directly assisting with public information efforts, we had staff at NCS (and

later, volunteers) who were preparing for damage assessments and for a flood of permitting activity.



We started figuring out what to prioritize for the following week: we put out information suspending NEW construction permits not related to tornado, so that staff could focus their efforts on damage assessment, electrical permits and permits for repair/demolition first. We got some push back complaints on this, but in reality there were only five days that we did not accept new construction permits. Remember, this was two weeks before Christmas, so a week delay shouldn't make or break a project. And the reality is, our staff NEEDED to prioritize needs. We are not super humans.

Our local damage assessments occurred in two phases: the first set to help immediately identify structures that

were unsafe for people to be in, and to begin identifying housing units where people might be displaced. People needed to know what kind of risk they would be taking by dwelling in some of the damaged housing units. Where would permits be needed? How many displaced people might need housing and/or other critical assistance for the short and long term? The second set was more detailed, capturing a ballpark estimate of the financial losses for our planning purposes.



We weren't the only ones doing damage assessments: the National Weather Service, the Red Cross, Emergency Management and FEMA all had different kinds of assessors looking at different things. But our inspectors, from the code compliance officers to the building inspectors and even the planners and others who assisted them KNOW our neighborhoods. And they found and identified damage that others didn't have on record.

Following assessment protocols we'd learned in training years ago, our staff started first assessing in the areas of the path furthest from the neighborhoods where search and rescue was still ongoing.

And so it was that on Thursday, December 16, during the first daylight hours after the scene had been reluctantly "released" by police and fire departments with one person still missing from the storm, we had staff in the field conducting a damage assessment on a multi-unit apartment building when they heard someone screaming for help.

This team of inspectors ran to assist a volunteer who had been walking and searching near a briar thicket in the area, and the search for 13-year-old Nyssa Brown came to an end. Nyssa was the last of her entire family, including her parents, grandmother and siblings, to be a confirmed fatality of the storm. Our inspectors left out that morning intending to assess damaged buildings but had no idea they would become a part of the recovery mission, assuming command of the scene while waiting for public safety to arrive.



Meanwhile, on the same day, we had staff at the old Sears store in the Greenwood Mall preparing to welcome survivors at an impromptu disaster recovery center. FEMA would co-locate there, and we would work with staff and volunteers from multiple agencies, including Lifeskills, Hillvue Heights

Church, and Christian Appalachian Project to organize and open a relief center set up as a "store" where survivors could select pantry goods, household items, clothing, over the counter medicine, school supplies, and more for their family.

Shelving, signage, donations all had to be obtained, sorted and moved in. Staff from Emergency Management, BGPD and NCS tapped their existing networks plus new ones to sort and manage the influx of donations and the demand for short-term needs as hundreds of families were temporarily displaced from damaged homes or homes without electricity.



I knew during those first 48 hours of the aftermath of the storm that the mission would reorient and begin to shift from emergency response to recovery. And while I'd thought about what that would mean for NCS, I had studied as much as I could from Tuscaloosa and also Joplin,

Mo. to mentally prepare myself for what the next steps might be. Staff from SBP (formerly known as St. Bernard Project) from Louisiana, showed up at NCS on Monday to let us know they were in the area and committed to helping our community shorten the time from disaster to recovery. I had heard of this agency and jumped at the chance to have them coordinate and train our local officials on what disaster recovery entails.

I also had a brand new staff person show up for orientation on Monday, December 13. She would be our Downtown Development Coordinator, a brand new position, and after completing her onboard paperwork and other introductory tasks, I advised her to return on Tuesday dressed to work "in the field," ready to be pressed into service anywhere for anything. Because all hands, especially new ones with communications skills and their own existing networks, were needed to meet the challenges that seemed to change by the hour.

Thursday afternoon, December 16, mere hours after a press conference when BGPD announced that the search for the last missing person had been concluded, I would head a convening



briefing of as many local, state, and even federal officials as we could assemble in the community room at NCS.

I knew that our community was reeling from long days of search and rescue, chainsaw brigades, immediate disaster response, and navigating around streets blocked by downed power poles, debris, and utility lines. We all felt the pressure of doing so up against holidays that were fast approaching. We all seemed to feel the anguish of families approaching Christmas and the New Year without the comfort of their own homes, or without power, or without their loved ones.

This would be the first briefing to occur

outside of the Emergency Operations Center. As the “emergency” was concluding, it was time for those of us who would continue to engage with relief and recovery efforts to take over.

My staff and I prepared the room with tent cards around a large U-shaped conference table. The tent cards bore categories like “Utilities,” “Communications,” “Schools,” and so on. We didn’t have time for anyone to carve out territory or lean on their name tag or uniform. We needed EVERYONE to rally around community. There would be no jurisdictional posturing for this endeavor. Not today.

“This is about the community.”



That’s how I opened the meeting. It would be the tightest I’ve ever held a meeting to its agenda.

For the first time, we looked around the room and saw the faces of leaders across agencies and departments, systems and elected offices, and shared in the magnitude of what had happened, the challenge remaining ahead of us, and the shared commitment that we all had to carrying it through to the absolute best of our ability.

We also knew, looking around, that some of us would conclude their missions sooner than others. There would be benchmarks that would show us our progress, and that the numbers of us present in the room would, necessarily diminish. And while that would be a good and healthy sign of recovery, I also knew that the pressure was high for those of us who would be in it for the long haul.

Prior to December 11, our community had no long-term disaster recovery group in place. No chapter in the Emergency Operations Plan for managing donations or disaster communications for language access or in an age where social media is the crowd-sourcing of news and emergency communications. We had never experienced a disaster that would warrant us to form one until now. And while NCS had been ingrained in the immediate disaster response since hours after the tornadoes tore through, we were about to root ourselves in the long-term recovery and not look back.



By December 16, my department, the Utility Drawer, was fully ingrained and engaged in doing what it does best: recruiting and mobilizing with minimal resources, tapping its volunteer networks, gathering and analyzing data, and providing boots on the ground to fill gaps to protect and enhance our community, all while watching out for our socially vulnerable populations like those who speak languages besides English, who are living on fixed incomes, or are aging in place.

From the building and electrical permits, to the relocated families, to the public information and community organizing across multiple languages and geographic neighborhoods, to the disaster recovery funding that would come our way and need to be programmed and administered, we would be living and reliving the impacts of the tornado for months, if not years to come.

Tuscaloosa taught us a lot. The “film” we watched and the plays we practiced gave us “just enough” muscle memory to suit up and show up.

But we’re not playing a Tuscaloosa offense or a Joplin defense.

We suited up for Bowling Green and Warren County.

This is our house. We are resilient. We have grit. We can scramble when we need to. Cheer when we need to. Rally and come from behind.

We have lost much. But don’t call this a comeback.

Our community is working to heal and is on the rise, in spite of the damage the tornadoes inflicted.

NCS, the Utility Drawer, will be doing all we can on the field, in the press box, on the bench to make sure our whole community can enjoy the celebration that comes with a hard-fought victory. And our community deserves to win.



Connie Smith, President & CEO of Med Center Health

At 9 a.m. on December 10, 2021, during our Daily Safety Huddle call, leaders across Med Center Health were briefed on the impending weather forecast, and



its potential for severity. Leaders were instructed to communicate with their staff about the weather and to review the severe weather response plan in preparation

for the storm.

In the early morning hours of December 11, 2021, the predicted storm impacted Bowling Green with forces from multiple tornadoes. One of these tornado’s destructive path was less than a mile from The Medical Center at Bowling Green, Med Center Health’s flagship hospital. The EF2 and EF3 category tornadoes’ destruction and aftermath will have a long lasting effect on our community. The damage left most of the area without power, mobile phone, and internet service.

The hospital was able to continue providing services with emergency generator power. Although, the mobile phone service in the area suffered from intermittent outages, our leadership team successfully initiated and communicated our emergency operation plan. A Code Yellow External Disaster was declared, which is activated when an event outside of our facility occurs and has the potential to overwhelm our normal resources. The declaration of Code

Yellow triggered our leaders to begin the process of mobilizing staff members to prepare for a multiple casualty event. This included calling off duty personnel from our medical staff, nursing, and ancillary departments to assist in patient care.

We started preparing logistically for the potential multiple injuries by gathering supplies from various areas such as pharmacy, lab, respiratory care, and our medical supply chain. Our Emergency Operations Center was activated and an Incident Command was established. The Incident Commander began coordinating efforts with local Emergency Management and other state officials. All on-call surgical staff, additional nursing staff, and physician support were deployed to assist our Emergency Department.



Within 30 minutes, our Emergency Department received 17 injured patients with that number rising to 33 in the next three and a half hours. Before dawn, a total of 58 patients were treated for storm related injuries. Seven of those patients required surgery as a result of their injuries and another seven were transferred to other facilities for a higher level of care.

Within hours, we realized that beyond the immediate impact to the community, many of our own Med Center Health employees and their families needed our help. In total, 68 Med Center Health employees were affected by the tornadoes through the loss of housing, destruction of vehicles, and emotional terror. The Med Center Health Foundation Employee Tornado Relief Fund was quickly established with 100% of every donation assisting our employees in need. This fund provided immediate shelter, food and clothing, and then assisted in closing the gap between insurance recovery and FEMA assistance. Some of our team members' needs were quickly met while others would need support for an extended period of time due to complete loss of homes, rented properties, vehicles and personal belongings.

Our Mission Statement affirms, “to care for people and improve the quality of life in the communities we serve.” Med Center Health remains steadfastly committed to the wellbeing of the people we serve, and we continue to seek ways to assist our community devastated by this historic event.

Gary Fields, Bowling Green Independent Schools Superintendent

In the early morning hours of December 11, 2021, our cell phones started blaring with tornado warnings. My family skeptically got out of bed and moved to the basement. Weather conditions were favorable for tornadoes, but we had seen these warnings before. Storms would blow over in a few minutes. By the time we made it downstairs, we lost power and the sounds from outside seemed loud and intense. Then, after the storm settled, we walked upstairs, looked around outside in the darkness, and saw the outdoor wreaths still on the doors. We thought it was over.



We had no idea.



A few hours later, still very early, my phone again started buzzing with calls and texts. I quickly learned the damage of the storm was far worse than I had known, very close by. I got in my car to go see how to help and couldn't travel far.

One street over from our home were houses with no roofs. Large, mature trees uprooted, some of them crushing houses and vehicles. Utility poles broken in half like toothpicks, leaving power and utility lines scattered across roadways and lawns. Debris. So much debris. Roads were completely impassible. It was unlike anything I had ever seen.

As the sun came up, showing more of the devastation, I called our district's leadership team to check on their families and homes, and then asked for help creating a plan of action. All of us had been taking calls and making lists, and the next steps and details seemed overwhelming.

By this time, we knew there had been loss of life, people were missing, and the Red Cross was working to set up temporary shelters in our community. Coming together as a team, our district's priority became connecting with our families and working to serve the community around our schools.

Schools and campuses had only minor damage from the storm, but all were without power and phones. Our buses, although none damaged, were limited in their ability to navigate local streets.



Photo courtesy of Bowling Green Independent Schools

Bowling Green High School's cafeteria was functioning on a generator, so food in school freezers was divided by what could be given out unthawed and what needed to be cooked/heated. Within a few hours, we had teams of staff preparing and serving food to the community around damaged schools and where we could navigate the streets. Other employees were coming to schools to help support Family Resource and Youth Services Centers, distributing food, clothing, blankets, and household items. Groups were working throughout the community offering assistance to colleagues, families, and neighbors.



Photos courtesy of Bowling Green Independent Schools

On Sunday, December 12, we announced that schools would be closed December 13-14, however we asked employees who could, to help us with a coordinated effort to communicate with all students. We continued to serve meals, and school nurses and counselors were available to families at school locations. Finally, we made the decision to collect a list of items that

were being requested as immediate needs at Bowling Green Junior High. We encouraged monetary donations to go through Stuff the Bus Foundation, which could in turn, be donated to our Family Resource Centers. Other local organizations also made donations throughout the weekend to help immediate needs of families who were displaced.

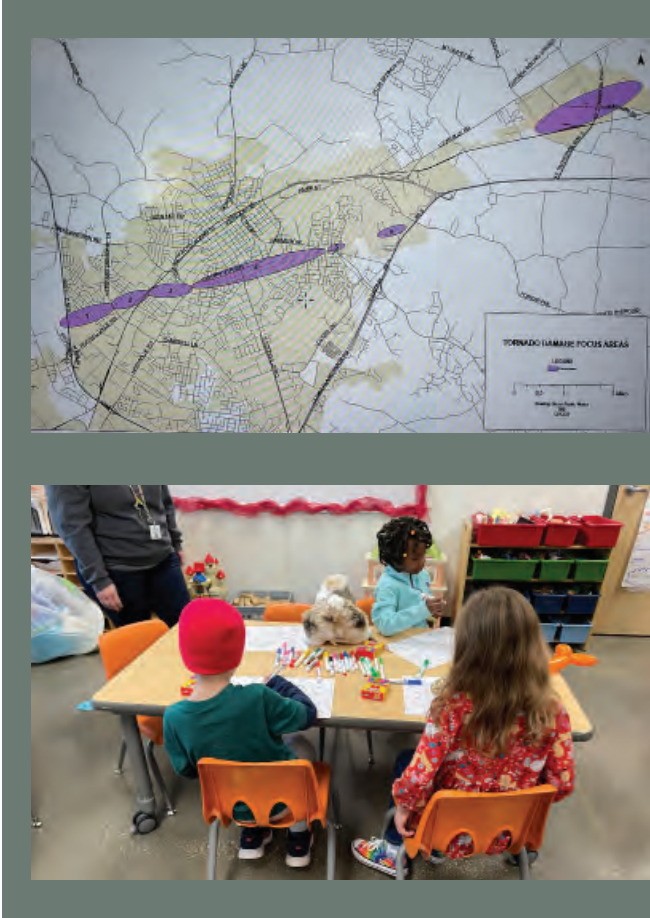
After working throughout Monday to connect with all families, we announced that our district would be closed until January 3, 2022. It was a decision that, while necessary, was not easy. As I shared in my message that day, this was the third time in two years we said “see ya Monday” to our kids and then not seen them again for weeks or more.

According to the map provided by the City of Bowling Green, a total of 603 Bowling Green Independent Schools students, or 14% of students, were in the path of the December 11th tornadoes. Thirty employee homes were impacted, causing temporary or long-term displacement.

When we returned to school in January 2022 27 student families remained displaced, including 15 families living in hotels, and 12 staying with relatives or friends while attending their home schools. Two student families moved out of the district as a result.

Ten months later, I continue to be proud of our district and our community’s response to meeting the needs of our families, however the work continues and the effects remain. The days and weeks that followed the December tornadoes included a grassroots, team effort focused on meeting the needs of families. We continue to focus on the needs of our families, now more specifically related to supporting our mental health, and overcoming trauma.

I’ve heard many people say, “kids are resilient.” And that’s true, but our students, families, and employees have experienced two years of uncertainty and stress as we lived and worked through a global pandemic. Then, as we were working through the pandemic, we experienced this natural disaster. Again, experiencing loss of life, loss of homes, uncertainty, and stress. Although kids are resilient, they are human, and all of us have had a lot to process and overcome.



Across the school district, we are seeing the physical rebuilding and construction. Homes and neighborhoods are coming back to the streets around our schools, trees are being replanted. We have begun another school year and started the year with the excitement and anticipation of great things to come. Our team is strong, we support each other, and we will continue to work together to support our students and their families.

Rob Clayton, Superintendent, Warren County Public Schools

Around 1:30 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 11, 2021, the first of three tornadoes touched down in Warren County, reducing homes and businesses to rubble. In close proximity to several Warren County Public Schools (WCPS), the storms claimed the lives of 17



people, including four of our WCPS students. In total, more than 500 families, including 169 WCPS students and 22 staff members were impacted by the destructive tornadoes.

I was advised that our Jennings Creek Elementary School neighborhood had sustained significant damage. I raced to the area, and it was a complete shock to see the level of devastation, including several homes completely destroyed. The shock and disbelief quickly disappeared due to the inspirational work of so many WCPS employees who were already there leading the effort to provide food, shelter, and comfort to impacted families. The list of both classified and certified staff who took on significant leadership roles during the

tornado recovery is too vast to list.

How did our district prepare for a moment like this? WCPS has long been a willing participant in planning meetings with our local emergency management agency. However, this situation was unique in that WCPS employees were among the first responders on the scene. During the initial storm response, limited communication forced several agencies, including WCPS, to work autonomously. Collaborative leadership and effective communication are key drivers in all of our district’s professional learning and both were critical in our emergency response.



Within hours, in service to our entire impacted community, our WCPS team had established a command center, community and first responder shelters, approved transportation processes, monetary and supply collection

and mobilized food service operations. Our staff even opened a daycare for the children of affected families to help them get back on their feet and return to work after the devastation.

Although the experience was heartbreaking, the teamwork and empathy demonstrated by our staff continues to give everyone a great sense of hope and optimism as we work to help our community heal.

Melanie Watts, Director of Community Engagement for Lifeskills

Many of us don't want to go back. Many of us don't want to remember. But how can we learn without acknowledging and understanding what our community went through on December 11, 2021? A uniquely warm winter day and warnings of weather to come. But did we really have to worry about those warnings? Bowling Green was gearing up for the holidays with downtown Fountain Square lit up and holiday parties planned. What was to come would scare, test, challenge, break, and ultimately unify us. We just never dreamed it would happen to us.



The Saturday morning following the storms, a sense of loss resonated. After the initial check-ins for our personnel, Lifeskills' employees joined others in efforts to help. Our Wellness Connection opened its doors Saturday morning to offer essentials for those displaced, and small groups of employees began to work through the Creekwood area assisting the first responders and others in talking to the

survivors on Sunday. Our President, Joe Dan Beavers recalled, "I'll never forget the sound of all the home/car alarms going off against the dozens of chainsaws running." The images were overwhelming on television and even more overwhelming in person.



Bowling Green responded in the only way we knew how, unified in the effort. We were not separated by barriers of race, religion or beliefs, only by actual physical barriers of trees and debris in the roadways. We were a family checking on our neighbors and friends,

and only then, after everyone was accounted for, did we see the totality of damage. Not only the structural damage, but the mental and physical damage it had taken on all of us.

The Command Center for all emergency services was at the Bowling Green Police Department. It is always a wonderful thing to see all entities working together - federal, state, and local with one common goal - helping the community. There were no egos, it was just a shared sense of urgency to help. I inserted myself into the command center answering phones, yielding calls from across the United States wanting to help and send relief. It was me falling back into a once familiar role of officer, a sense of needing to do something bigger than myself, and of knowing those officers walking in may need a smile or two. I saw the despair on the officer's faces as they came in from the field still trying to find the one last remaining missing child. And then the call came in. I volunteered to answer the phone for my friend sitting next to me, and how I wish she had let me. It was the call no one wanted to hear - the call telling us where the child was - deceased. My friend, Beverly, who answered the phone, was in shock and tearful. All I could do was hug her and tell her what a great job she had done. There were lots of hugs that day.

Five days later, Lifeskills was also planning the leap to the Greenwood Mall where the Command Center and FEMA were to relocate. The mall, or the BG Strong Center as it became known, would house FEMA, Lifeskills, and the

community store where donations were being sent. We felt it was important for the community to have the assistance they needed mentally. Joe Beavers himself was there every day for the first week - not only assisting those walking in, but supporting his employees, some of who had also lost their homes and belongings but were there to help others. It's not often the President of the company dedicates himself in that manner. Within eight hours, he had coordinated the physical set up of the Center with working counseling stations, computers, and general mental health information available. We were ready to go. Lifeskills employees were there every day. It became a second home for some. We saw people walking in with no shoes or coats on - it was December, a little over a week before Christmas and they were walking in with nothing. They had lost everything. Everything but their spirit to keep going. Lifeskills was on deck daily. We greeted, we hugged, and we loved and listened. Sometimes that's all that was wanted or needed - someone to listen.



Many who volunteered at the BG Strong Center were there to help as well as to heal. Volunteers weren't immune to the stories being told to them of Mother Nature's wrath. Some came and utilized our services as well. Not only did the Center serve as a main point of help for many, it solidified relationships of all organizations working there. More understanding and patience was given to each other and deeper relationships were born.

March 11th was Lifeskills' last day of service at the Center. We had contact with more than 1,400 people walking through the doors who just needed help. We continue to be a part of the on-going effort to restore our community, being a partner in the Long Term Recovery Group headed by the City.

Mark Iverson, Bowling Green Municipal Utilities

We had been warned. The atmosphere was charged and primed for strong storms and possible tornadoes on the late evening of Friday, December 10, 2021. But we had seen this set up before. While not widely discussed as



to not jinx ourselves, we came to trust in "the Bowling Green Bubble," a fictitious dome of protection that past experience falsely taught us that bad storms either dissipated before

getting to Bowling Green, or worked their way around the city. In the early hours of December 11, that bubble burst.

Sometime around 1:20 a.m., a tornado transected through Bowling Green, west to east, right through the middle of the city. We later learned that two tornadoes touched down in Bowling Green. A second twister started near the airport, travelling northeast before meeting up with the main-stem tornado

in the Indian Hills area.

As the storm line was approaching Bowling Green, I was watching WBKO weather for updates on the storm. The station was reporting radar-indicated rotation. When the station unexpectedly went off the air, I thought, "Well that's not a good sign." For reference, the station is located in the west side of town, near the Creekwood neighborhood where the most significant damage and loss of life occurred.



After a period of time pondering what I should do, I decided to drive into town to see if anything had happened. Grabbing a large flashlight, BGMU keys, hardhat and ID, and some rain gear, I headed out traveling into the city via Scottsville Road. As I came to the intersection of

Covington Street, the Bowling Green Police had Broadway Avenue closed off. There were no lights on anywhere, and it was eerily quiet except for the rain that was still falling. After showing my BGMU ID to the officer, I pulled up farther on Broadway, noticing a flipped over pick-up truck in the street. I parked at the Southern Building off Nutwood Street and proceeded to look around. About this time I noticed damage to poles and downed trees in the alley behind the Southern Building and suspected this was a larger than normal event; little did I know. I ventured further up Broadway, approaching Magnolia and saw much more damage. People (I assume the owners and staff) were already attempting to salvage meats and other inventory from the heavily-damaged Fatted Calf. Magnolia was unrecognizable. There wasn't a passable street, in fact it didn't even look like a street. Cars, trailers, poles, transformers, huge trees, and roofing materials were all strewn about into one large comingled mess from one side of Magnolia to the other. It was shocking to experience. After leading some residents from a house on the 1100 block of Magnolia to the Speedway station on Covington, where they were going to meet someone to get them to shelter, I decided to proceed to the office to see what damages the electrical system had encountered. I backtracked through Covington, turning on 10th to downtown, but quickly came across debris that made passing impossible. Such was the case at every intersection along the Magnolia/Nutwood corridor. I eventually went around the yet unknown

(to me) damages in the Briarwood area via Lovers Lane and Cemetery Road, still shocked to see damages along Cemetery Road (although to what extent, I did not know at the time). Arriving at the office, the realization of what Bowling Green had experienced came to full light.



Photo courtesy of BGMU



Photo courtesy of BGMU



Photo courtesy of BGMU

To date, the December 2021 tornado is the single largest “event” we’ve ever faced. At the outset, 22,000 of our 31,000 customers were without power. By the time we were able to triage and close in breakers and back-feed power into undamaged areas, we were down to about 8,800 customers as the “core outage.” A copy of our electrical outage map at that time shows the extent of the core damage.

As the outage map shows, the damage was throughout the middle of Bowling Green. Damage assessment was that we lost 250+ distribution poles, including 52 69-kV transmission poles: 69-kV transmission poles are a key component of electrical power delivery as they deliver bulk power to substations from where circuits distribute power to homes and businesses. We were fortunate that while the main stem tornado traveled just feet from our Cabell Drive

substation and did extensive damage to the poles serving the station, the power transformer and other major station equipment did not sustain significant damage. We attribute that to the decision made decades earlier to install a brick wall around the station. That wall did sustain damage and by “absorbing the flying debris” may have saved the \$1 million+ power transformer. No other substations were impacted by the tornado.



Photo courtesy of BGMU



Map courtesy of BGMU

In addition to the damage the tornado did to our electrical system, it did a number on our fiber optic telecommunication system as well. In addition to the extensive fiber cuts on services to individual customers, somewhere along the heavily-damaged Russellville Road pole circuit, our 288-count fiber optic backbone circuit was cut. In fact, our 288-count fiber, designed and built in a looped configuration for redundancy, was cut on the west end (Russellville Road) and the east end of the loop (Magnolia Ave). As a result, the whole network was down until that backbone circuit could be repaired. So, you might ask? Well, that meant in the middle of a significant emergency event where communication is critical, BGMU had no internet or phone service; our customers could not contact us (unless they had an employee’s cell number). In addition, the public could not contact Warren RECC or Warren County Water District

as those local utilities are our internet and phone customers. The City of Bowling Green, Warren County Government, WBKO, WNKY, Graves Gilbert Clinic and the Medical Center Regional Hospital are also our phone and internet customers, so they too were dead in the water from a communications perspective. The pressure was on for these important entities deeply involved in responding to the tornado emergency. On the bright side, E-911, cell phones, and radio dispatch were still operational. Of all the competing priorities in a widespread event like we were experiencing, rebuilding the Russellville Road pole circuit and splicing in a new 288-count fiber backbone was high on the list, followed closely by the Magnolia Avenue circuit. Basic communications to a community’s core institutions is critical, and we needed to get that operational ASAP.



Photo courtesy of BGMU



Photo courtesy of BGMU

An event of this magnitude requires three critical workforce components: leadership, motivation, and institutional knowledge. I’ve long advocated that stability in a utility workforce is critical to long-term success. Stability undergirds institutional knowledge of the system: where assets are and how they operate. That institutional knowledge is INVALUABLE in an event like this. Long tenured employees have seen damages before and know how to do “work arounds” to deliver power from a different circuit. Yes, this tornado event was at a scale not seen locally before, but linemen’s prior storm experiences help them from not getting stuck and overwhelmed with the hard work ahead of them. Secondly, giving linemen experiences in mutual aid work to other

systems damaged by major ice, tornado, or hurricane storms is also INVALUABLE in how to tackle “big” events. And institutional knowledge isn’t limited to linemen. Prior storm work by warehouse personnel, substation technicians, metermen, and dispatch operators all lead to a smooth “all hands on deck” mobilization. As to motivation, the lineman culture – as is the case in the other utility operating divisions – is anchored in the satisfaction of “getting the lights back on.” They know and appreciate how important electric power is to everyday life; they know all too well that nothing feels right without electric power. To that end, linemen take great pride delivering “normalcy” to their community. As to leadership, this event was led – on the electric side of the house - by Division Manager Chad Spencer, Line Crew Supervisor Jason Price, Electric Engineering Supervisor Eric Phillips, Dispatch and Technical Services Supervisor Kathleen Duval, and Metering and Substation Supervisor Brent Norris. As an aside, – Jason Price, a 21-year employee with BGMU – was just one week into his new role as Line Crew Supervisor. And Chad Spencer, a 29-year employee, as the Electric System Manager was just four months into his new role. And yet the wealth of experience they brought to the table, including managing prior storm events, helped them to face this event head-on without missing a beat. All five leaders collaborated regularly on strategy, material and equipment needs, resource allocation, safety, etc. Their own institutional knowledge and interpersonal communications with each other – active listening and critical

thinking – were key attributes to their success as leaders.



Photo courtesy of BGMU

Once an initial damage assessment was made, calling up resources was imperative. Materials needed to be ordered. Streets needed to be cleared for equipment to enter into neighborhoods to begin work. Broken poles needed to be removed and transformers recovered for proper disposal. Mutual aid from regional partners was needed as well. Some of these resource calls emanated from our outreach, yet many of these efforts came from others asking, “What do you need?” One area of concern at the time was how difficult it may be to find materials timely, as the supply chain for electric components (transformers and meter sets, for example) following the COVID-19 pandemic was all gummed up. As the restoration and reconstruction effort got underway, it seemed that materials arrived just as they were needed; there wasn’t any

downtime waiting on materials. It seems an event like this brought our supply needs to the front of the line. That was fortunate, because we were throwing a lot of manpower and equipment to the effort. To that end, our mutual aid calls resulted in 22 crews from 19 utilities in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia to supplement BGMU’s four electric line crews and two electric service crews already hard at work. In addition, we called in 11 retirees to provide assistance to guide mutual aid crews around town, deliver materials, provide targeted damage assessment, etc. Between the additional manpower from retirees and mutual aid crews, and everyone working 16-hour days, we had, in effect, a 10-fold increase in manpower to tackle the storm damage.



One advantage of being a multi-service utility is having employees and equipment available from another division. Thankfully, our drinking water treatment plant and our water recovery facility (wastewater treatment plant) were not damaged in the storm, so we were able to call upon the Water-Sewer Division crew members to assist electric crews to aid in their reconstruction work. They ran materials to crews; they chained together transmission pole segments and with

their own backhoes transported them to pole sites; they used their hydro-excavator/Vactor truck to prepare holes for pole installation, a huge time-saver from traditional digger and hand-digging hole prep work. The neatest thing to witness is the mutual respect that water and electric crews gained from each other: water crews were amazed at the craftsmanship and coordination it took electric crews to build a circuit, and electric crews were amazed at how hard and diligent water crews worked to provide assistance.



Photo courtesy of BGMU

I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the leadership and efforts to restore communication by the BGMU Fiber Division team. That effort was led by Division Manager Teresa Newman, Outside Plant Engineer Jason Reynolds, and Network Analyst Todd Crosby. They too brought their own leadership traits and focused restoration efforts to bear. As to the 288-count trunk line restoration

project mentioned earlier, the Russellville Road task was completed Monday night, at least a day ahead of what we were communicating to our telecom customers; the Magnolia Avenue side of the loop was repaired on Tuesday. In addition to the core trunk line restoration, the Fiber team was facing approximately 50 additional circuit or service line cuts. They mobilized material acquisition and contract crews for restoration assistance. They were also putting in 16-hour days in an effort to normalize customers' communications. Much like the Electric Division's fortune to not have substations impacted (other than Cabell Drive), the Fiber Division did not have any of their nine node structures damaged by the tornadoes (fiber nodes serve communications traffic much like substations do with power flow).



With that many hands on deck, safety and pace became a concern. Jason Price and others communicated at every morning meeting that this power restoration event wasn't a sprint, but rather a marathon. Pace, rest, and attention to safety was communicated regularly. Pace was an important reminder for everyone, including dispatch. Being sure we tracked and pinned all circuit statuses, tracked crew locations, and communicated "all clear" procedures before closing in a circuit was critical for safety. It was important from a safety perspective to not get in a hurry and rush through safety procedures. For all of the worksites, dangers from damages, and the sheer number of personnel thrown at power restoration, we were fortunate that we only experienced one safety incident – without injury – throughout the event.



Communication to the general public had some challenges. Many times folks want to know, "When will my lights be on?" An understandable question, but one not easily answered, at least during an event of this scale. With the system sliced in half, a large portion of our transmission system inoperable, and many temporary tie-ins, answering specific locational questions was impossible. The standard "general" answer I gave, after reminding the audience of the extent of the damage, was that power restoration will take weeks, not days, and that the general public should plan accordingly. Another communication challenge, both internally and externally, was reporting the exact number of customers without power at any point in time. The deeper we got into triage and restoration work, the more challenging that became. Our dispatch operations' system generally provides that information based on

communications received from meters (our advanced metering infrastructure provides two-way communication to and from the meter, including meter power status). With wireless relay antennas inoperable, circuits operating in a non-traditional status, and a growing number of meters destroyed or pulled due to property damage, it was hard to know what data to rely on to get an accurate count. While guessing at times, we did the best we could under the circumstances.



Photo courtesy of BGMU

Internally, I invited the Mayor to speak to the linemen at the morning breakfast on the fifth day into the event (at this time, most of the mutual aid crews were in town). He invited the city commissioners to join him as well. He climbed a warehouse mobile staircase and spoke to the gathered crowd and did a fantastic job expressing the community's gratefulness to their work and efforts. On the second Sunday morning (December 19th), as the grind of long 16-hour days was taking its toll, I asked my pastor, Gregg Farrell, if he would speak to the linemen at the morning breakfast. He knocked it out of the park with a pep talk about character from Romans 5: 3-4 (suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope). They were

suffering, persevering and reflecting great character, and they were giving the community hope. Many commented on how much they needed that "pick me up."

As each day progressed, the volume of manpower used to restore power to customers whose property wasn't damaged or destroyed from the storm was quickly gaining momentum and paying dividends. What initially looked to be a three- or four-week power restoration event, eventually turned out to be completed in 12 days. How? In addition to the lineman's culture and pride to get the lights back on, I believe an extra motivator was the upcoming Christmas break. Out-of-town crews wanted to get home to their families, as did our own crews. But they all wanted to "gift" to the community the normalcy of electric power in time to salvage Christmas. And they did it!



Many stories will be documented about the events of December 2021. Institutions were stepping up to meet the challenges of meeting human needs: shelter, food, aid, etc. In addition, groups throughout the community were spontaneously clearing away debris, providing food and water, praying for impacted families and first responders,

making monetary donations, and generally being great neighbors. Individuals treated our employees and mutual aid crews with respect and appreciation. They dropped off water, Gatorades, cakes and snacks, as well as meals to be sure crews had what they needed. So impressed were members of our mutual aid team, they quipped that this event might be the first time they gained weight when on a storm response effort. In January 2022, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) held their quarterly board meeting in Bowling Green (an event long-scheduled before the tornado). At the beginning of their meeting, board members were given an opportunity to say a few words about their time in Kentucky. One board member who spoke reflected about their tour of the storm damage in Bowling Green the previous day, and a reception the community held for them that evening. He recalled three separate conversations from three separate individuals who spoke about their own observations about how the community responded to this event, and each of those individuals told him that “it’s restored my faith in humanity to watch my community respond.” He said our community should be incredibly proud of that, and I couldn’t agree more.



Subsequent to the storm, we’ve had internal and external conversations about what worked, what didn’t, and where improvements could be made to BGMU’s response. Briefly, areas identified that could be improved include:

- BGMU Fiber Division’s nine fiber huts / nodes need to be hardened to withstand storm events. Many of the existing nodes were constructed without regard to “survivability.”
- Dispatch and electric engineering need to work together in large events to provide accurate, “hand calculated” outage numbers when software and/or communication channels cannot provide accurate numbers.
- BGMU and the City’s Neighborhoods and Community Services Department (responsible for damage assessment, occupancy determinations, and electrical inspections) could have had better coordination regarding electrical reconnections. While normal coordination between BGMU and the City’s electrical inspector works well, BGMU and the City have already worked towards improving this process in abnormal conditions.



Dewayne McDonald, President and CEO of Warren RECC

By now, you’re well aware of the devastation and destruction caused by the December 11th tornadoes. Though we have shared the numbers – 28,000 members restored in five days – I want to share the story of what happened to



your electrical system on December 11th and how your Warren RECC staff brought it back to life.

The damage to our system was

significant. The EF-2 and EF-3 tornadoes that came through that night tore down 14 of our transmission poles, 302 of our distribution poles, and did substantial damage at our Magna Substation. The tornadoes also damaged TVA’s 161kV line to three of our substations.

Early Saturday morning, Warren RECC employees gathered at our offices to begin restoration work. Most of our work control and communication systems were down, but we found other ways to get the job done. The Warren RECC team and those that came to our aid worked long hours around the clock, constantly adjusting based on challenges met in the field. By Wednesday night, we had restored power to all of our members who could receive power and assembled a temporary substation.

The success of this restoration effort is a story of cooperation and community

spirit. Through the duration of the effort, we managed 48 mutual aid and contract crews, feeding and housing roughly 250 men from around the state. Without their willingness to leave their homes and help their neighbors in need, we would not have been able to tackle the damage with the speed and efficiency that we did. We are deeply thankful for those that pitched in to help.



Photo courtesy of Warren RECC

We also want to thank our members for their patience and for the many kind words, prayers, and random acts of kindness shared with us during that time. From the farmers pulling our trucks through rain-soaked fields to the people feeding our line crews out in the field to the kind words and prayers sent through social media, phone calls, and emails, we truly felt the support of our Warren RECC family.

We hope that we don’t see another storm like this one for many years to come, but we are grateful for the teamwork, cooperation, and community support.

Meredith Rozanski, Chief Operating Officer of the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce

December 11th began early as calls from our local utilities alerted us to severe tornado damage in the Kentucky Transpark, our premier industrial park. In the early hours of the morning, we were on the phone with contractors tracking down generators and mobilizing construction crews to aid in the assessment and mitigation of damage. We knew that several manufacturers within the park were hit as well as a fire at the General Motors Corvette Assembly plant from debris that flew from a neighboring gas station that penetrated their roof. The full extent of the damage across our community was yet unknown until additional reports started trickling in – family calling from out of state due to the shocking video they were seeing of the area and many others along the path (we didn’t have a TV signal).



Driving into the office around 7 a.m. after fielding several requests from home, the reality of a much larger magnitude problem began to sink in. The devastation was throughout our community due to multiple tornadoes making landfall during the night. If 10 years working for a Chamber in Florida having survived multiple hurricanes and the BP Oil Spill taught me anything, it was that in times of crises the premium is on accurate, actionable information. Most crisis turn into the worst game

of telephone ever played as everyone deals with stress differently. It was paramount for our Chamber to remain the voice of reason and provide only first-hand verified information – just as we did throughout the COVID pandemic.

Our team started calling all businesses located within the known tornado track at the time to ask if they had no damage, minimal damage, severe damage, or complete loss. As the weekend went on more and more areas were identified and more calls were made. As the week began, the Planning and Zoning team was able to GIS track the storm across our community which allowed us to pull parcel ID information and contact owners we may have missed. The use of technology to cross-reference our calls, with those of city/county inspectors to create a robust listing of impact businesses created an accurate and efficient accounting. Our local



Photo courtesy of Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce

social service entities ran a parallel tract to account for the residential damage and aid impacted families. These calls also allowed us to aid those impacted by helping to identify temporary space, find needed supplies, or provide places to donate for those who were not impacted

but wanted to help. We were also able to provide the information to our elected officials so that they could reach out directly to those impacted within the community.

The Chamber set up a website providing information on where to receive aid and where to donate needed supplies and updated the information daily to ensure accuracy. Only information the Chamber team verified with the organization directly was provided on the website.

Our community quickly pulled together a regular update across multiple entities/agencies to ensure a coordinated effort with everyone reporting their direct information. This cut down on misinformation and allowed gaps in response to being identified and filled efficiently.

During the days and weeks following the storm, the Chamber was called to fill many roles, we secured and manned a warehouse for the receipt of donations coming from across the country, and we provided support to the FEMA distribution center by tracking down needed supplies such as propane for the forklifts. We sent daily email updates to area businesses on where to find aid for those who were impacted and where/what to donate to those entities helping in the recovery.

When facing a natural disaster it is important to remain calm and seek primary sources of information. While everyone is well-intentioned it is too easy to have misinformation circulate

as fact. Those in need, need help, not rumors.

There should be one community conversation where the leaders sit across the table from one another and discuss what is and what needs to be done. Cooperation is the only path forward!



Photo courtesy of Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce



Photo courtesy of Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce

Above all, give everyone grace. An event of this magnitude impacts everyone either directly or indirectly and therefore everyone is dealing with trauma whether you can see it or not. Mistakes are inevitable, not intentional, and there is one common goal – to aid everyone in recovering as quickly as possible. December 10 was the worst night in Bowling Green/Warren County and December 11 showed us the best of how a community can come together to serve the greater good!

Karen Foley, Neighborhood Services Coordinator



Neighbors at Play.

Those were the words we put on a flashing reader board sign back in 2017, long before COVID, when Emily Angel and I worked with neighbors Angela Ross and Patti Sawyer to plan and host their first block party on Creekwood Avenue, just past Stonebridge Lane, right where the greenway intersects and crosses over the street.

This block party was part of our #BGGovToGo neighborhood outreach initiative, which aims to bring City government departments and neighbors together. That first year was such a hit with neighbors that the next summer, in 2018, we didn't try to keep a lane open. We posted a detour, and we shut the whole street down.

DJ Roop-A-Loop lived in the neighborhood and he reached out ahead of time. Would it be okay if he came and set up his sound system and played music? Absolutely, let's get permission from another neighbor to use some electricity and let's do this!

The street was filled with neighbors, from little kids playing with bubbles and coloring the asphalt with sidewalk chalk, to the elders seated at card tables with hot dogs and popsicles. Firefighters showed off the gear on their truck while a patrol officer helped to inflate and tie helium balloons.

Angela had gotten together door prizes for the neighbors and both her and Patti's kids had helped to deliver invites and bring coolers and ice. The library came out with free books that folks could take home to keep and also brought some yard games - Hula hoops, corn hole, temporary tattoos.

Toddlers in strollers, dogs on leashes. Moms carrying or wearing babies. Someone in a mobility scooter, another with a cane. Teenagers with looks on their faces that let me know they were undecided if this event would be worth sticking around for. People still in uniform after getting off work. Some wearing head scarves, others in ball caps.



In my memory of that night, virtually everyone is dressed for a hot August night in Kentucky. DJ Roop-A-Loop is definitely a motivator for the teens to stay. At some point they stop looking skeptical. They stay. They even chat with the adults. When people talk, they speak using all kinds of languages and accents. During the evening I meet a guy who asks me if we do these all the time. He just moved here, from Michigan. People are already looking forward to when the next one will be.

Neighbors getting to know one another. Making connections. Planning things together. Doing things together, even if it's just having hotdogs and popsicles. Angela, Patti, Emily and me--by the end of the night, we're scheming the "next time" in this neighborhood. But the next time doesn't come in 2019. Or 2020. Or even 2021.

In the days following December 11, 2021, that block of Creekwood near Stonebridge Lane would be a kind of mile post marking a main entrance into the tornado damage path. Angela would be one of the first neighbors in the area I texted to check on, and she would tell me that while her home had very little damage, at the other end of Stonebridge Lane, where Patti lived near Whispering Hills, the damage was great.



The natural tree-line of the Jennings Creek there, and the greenway running alongside it, would become part of a grid search for search and rescue. The exact block where we'd shut down the street would be the spot where the very first contracted FEMA debris trucks to arrive, would stage on their very first day.



I've spent an entire career getting to know Bowling Green, Kentucky and the people in its neighborhoods. My job title is Neighborhood Services Coordinator and when it was first created, there were two things in particular that I was meant to do:

1. Be a liaison to neighbors, neighborhood groups and local government, especially the City of Bowling Green.
2. Be a catalyst for positive change.

I've heard people say (about disasters and their role in them) that it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. And that is true. But from my standpoint, as someone who works with community development, neighborhood groups, social media, volunteers, and both public information and outreach, going through the response and recovery of the December 11 tornadoes has felt more like a decathlon. At both the winter and summer Olympics. When you're not sure

what the order of events is going to be and maybe you’ve spent too much time warming up for the shotput instead of the triple jump and you left your AirPods behind so you can’t even “get hype” during the downtime.

And maybe that sounds flippant or disrespectful in some way, but that is not at all my intention.

The reality is that everyone watches the action adventure movie for the special effects and to root for the protagonist and whether he (usually it’s a he) gets the girl and the promotion and the sunset at the end. No one is much interested in what happens when the credits start rolling unless ... there’s going to be a sequel. And I promise you, no one here is rooting for a sequel. Truth is, the Eastern Kentucky floods in July are too close of a sequel for me. And telling parts of the story just plain hurts.

I’ve spent a career studying neighborhoods and neighbors, especially the ones here in this Goldilocks town I’ve come to love and claim as mine. Bowling Green in Warren County, is not too big, not too small: it’s juuust right and I am not alone in calling it a special place. If I am biased, then I’ll just argue that every human should feel the way I do about their hometown. That it’s special and worth caring for. Deep down, I hope we’re not special but I’m going to love it like it is anyway.

“We are so rich in community-based organizations steeped in the spirit of generosity—this is what we do.”—Me,

describing the post-tornado volunteer efforts to a CNN producer.

From the time that dawn came on the morning of December 11, people in Bowling Green were ON. THE. MOVE. Well before noon, information on how and where to help was being crowd-sourced on social media.



A number of Tornado Info Hub groups sprang up on Facebook, some focused on Bowling Green/Warren County and others extending to west Kentucky. Meanwhile, several of the pre-existing neighborhood Facebook groups/pages became instantly more active, especially the ones nearest the tornado damage path.

Even groups that had formed in response to COVID redirected their posts and shares to tornado response, and of course traditional media sources had utilized their online streaming tools while monitoring the weather event AS IT HAPPENED.

The path narrowly missed schools, fire stations, nursing homes, WKU, hospitals, government buildings, community centers, our downtown, and so many parts of our public infrastructure. And for that I am grateful.

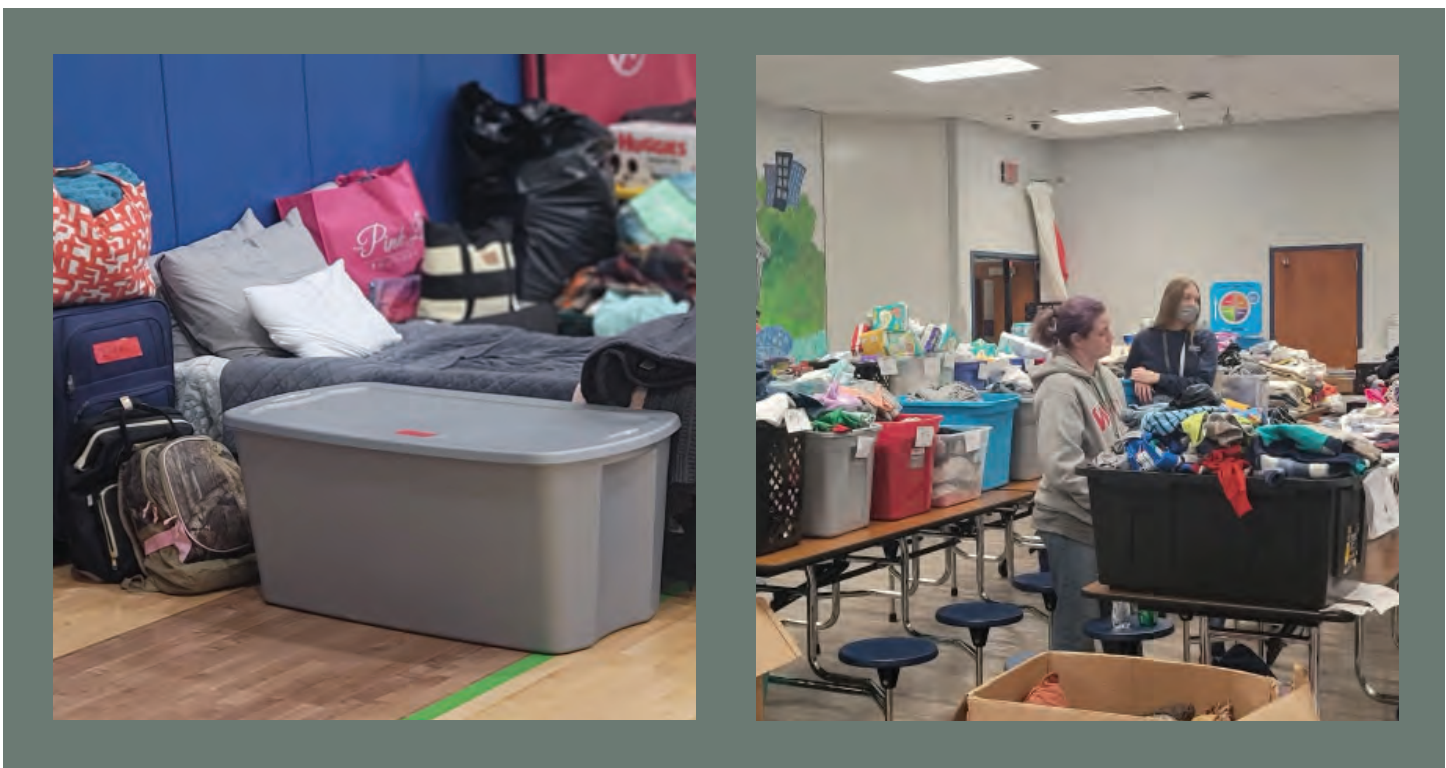
But our neighborhoods? They took a beating. From the southwest to the northeast, all types and ages of construction and housing, very rural to very dense, and with populations just as diverse as the housing stock. Every socio-economic level, age, language, race: the tornadoes did not discriminate.

And volunteers came from every walk of life as well. From the volunteer firefighters who responded to the first damage reports and first loss of life in Rockfield, to the volunteer interpreters who went with the injured to the hospital, high school football players helping clear debris and a work-from-home mom without electricity clearing her freezer

and firing up the grill with other neighbors to start what would become the Creekwood Cookout.

We were NEIGHBORS AT WORK.

- Rockfield
- Old Tram Road & Rembrandt Court
- Moss Meadows
- Jennings Creek
- Whispering Hills
- Springhill
- Crestmoor
- Cedar Ridge Area
- Russellville Road Corridor
- US 31W Bypass
- TC Cherry Area
- Magnolia, Nutwood & Covington
- Briarwood
- The Hub
- Indian Hills
- LindCliff Meadows/McFaddin Station
- North Warren County
- The TransPark



I've spent an entire career looking at maps, imagining maps and envisioning the places, landmarks and people oriented on them. I started in 1995 as a 911 dispatcher for the Bowling Green Police Department, where I first learned to use maps and paper run cards with cross streets, before we converted to a computer-aided dispatch system that would give you that information at your fingertips.

I've stood at neighborhood watch meetings and explained over and over again that it matters first WHERE help needs to go, then WHAT kind of help is needed, at least in an emergency. But what does disaster response and recovery look like in real life?

It's NEIGHBORS AT RISK. And NEIGHBORS AT WORK.



It's complicated. It's expanding out and back in, re-assessing and re-analyzing, and witnessing secondary aftershocks and secondary responses. And missteps and split decisions that you have to retrain your brain to understand are being made with the benefit of information that you yourself do not have access to. There are conditions on the ground that are changing in real time. We are, all of us, living our part in a feature film with a myriad of alternate plot lines.

Part of the hook for recruiting people years ago to be trained to form or join Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) was the fact that, in an emergency, people will WANT to help. They will rush to do so, whether they know exactly WHAT to do or not. Isn't it better if people have training ahead of time? And know their neighbors and neighborhoods well enough to better assist responders?

In the first 24 hours, I didn't think about that once, but it was undeniable that people wanted to help and were rushing to the area to do so.

A disaster rearranges all of the knowns you thought you knew, shuffles them, and introduces a whole new set of ground rules. A new set of expectations. And suddenly, you're getting to know your community all over again. When an EF-3 tornado rides the ground for more than 20 miles, from one end of the county to the other, you think you will know what that looks like. You think you know who will show up and how, but in all your imagining and preparedness planning, there remains that which you can't plan for, which is the very real and very personal consequences of WHO YOU KNOW will be

impacted and how-- and the ways in which you will find yourself called upon to act and do that are over your head, above your paygrade, beyond your skill set, and capacity.

It's all too much, and it must be done anyway. Because here's the thing: when it's YOUR community, YOUR neighbors, YOUR coworkers and friends, it all hits different. You want to do your best by them. Because it very nearly was you, only it wasn't. Instead it was your coworker. And her parents. Your former neighbor. And your kids' classmates. The woman I volunteered alongside for years, and the fella who stood up next to me at a police briefing and spoke about giving to United Way.

It's personal.

It's YOUR neighbors at risk. And your neighbors at work.

The story of our neighborhoods and my part in it follows a trajectory that is intense and fast and then, it is slower and grinding, and then.... all that remains is either a) the "final touches" or b) the things that will take years to complete, or that simply won't get done.

On day one, it was all systems going into the dark to rescue and save. Find the injured and transport them. With daylight, we were confronting what the dark had concealed: miles and miles of wreckage in neighborhoods, along business corridors, and into our northernmost industrial areas and armland. Because it's also a weekend, the whole community is mobilizing to

seek and find neighbors who need help.

On day two, we were finding additional areas of damage and power lines under strain for more than a day finally gave way. Community volunteers are spending their Sunday out with chainsaws and shovels and meals, organizing and improvising as they go. At the Emergency Operations Center, we're still focused on search and recovery and trying to figure out a way to structure the coordination of these efforts.

And by day three, we were getting communications systems back online and the mission was tilting into full on damage assessment and preparing for the next phases: volunteer coordination, donations management, and debris removal. All while the search continued for missing persons and power was being slowly restored. Donated in-kind



items are pouring in and being staged or warehoused in various places. We don't have a chapter in our Emergency Operations Plan for this and we are scrambling to figure it all out. Our local school systems have started their holiday breaks early, but their staff is working to address the needs of their families. Everyone is working toward helping families get to safe spaces before the holidays. Christmas is coming.



By day four, there is a plan to co-locate a central disaster resource center alongside FEMA, who will soon be on the way to set up shop. Debris removal contracts are being fleshed out. Emily gets tapped to help out with all things volunteer related. The shelter operations are looking to get people into hotel rooms and other temporary housing. The questions of day two and three are sorted and being put in motion, but another threat is looming: the possibility of heavy rains coming Thursday-Saturday, bringing possibly 4 more inches of rain. The EOC room is focused on data collection now. One person remains missing.

By day five, we have keys to the old Sears building at Greenwood Mall, and a huge effort is being coordinated to set up a disaster resource center and “load

in” of donated supplies to make available to tornado survivors from all over Warren County. Meanwhile, debris is piling high along the streets. We're already advising people to sort vegetative and tree debris from household and construction material type debris. The search and rescue effort will conclude today, with one person not yet accounted for. Hearts are heavy.

On day six, things are loading in, and everything from shelving to laptops, clipboards and tables are arriving from every kind of local resource to outfit what would become the BGStrong Disaster Resource Center, co-located with FEMA and a handful of other agencies. The very first survivors are arriving, seeking guidance and basic necessities. We have volunteers with social work experience leading the training on the intake. Everything about the structure of the intake is designed to minimize a survivor having to retell their story and designed so that they can come as many times as they need, as long as they need, for the duration of



this operation. We will be here at least 90 days. My friend, Ronnie Ward, will stand at the podium in the Emergency Operations Center and announce that our girl we have been searching for, Nyssa Brown has been found, the last of an entire family.



Meanwhile, there is a Tornado Recovery Briefing to signal the beginning of the long-haul recovery that lies ahead. My boss, Brent Childers, sets the tone with a focus on the community as lead, not agencies or individuals, and structural categories of the community represented around a very large table in the Community Room at NCS. There are table tents that mark places around the table for public safety, utilities, housing, transportation, volunteer coordination, and more. It will be the seed planted for what will eventually become our long-term disaster recovery group. Simultaneously, a briefing of community helpers is also taking place, as a check-in for non-profit organizations who have been working for six days straight at various locations across the tornado path. They need a moment to take a breath, hear what others are seeing and doing, before they orient their work for the next week, month, and longer.

On day seven, the doors for the ad hoc disaster recovery center are open and receiving survivors and donations. We are scheduling additional staff and volunteers to man the center at times over the weekend and for the days leading up until Christmas. Living Hope Baptist Church will be the lead coordinator for the neighborhood volunteers helping to clear and move debris, staging from WKU's Center for Research and Development, the “old Bowling Green Mall.” Hillvue Heights Church will be the lead for keeping the warehouse/store setting sorted and stocked, moving tons of overflow supplies from the schools and other locations into the BG Strong Center. Christian Appalachian Project (CAP) from eastern Kentucky will also cover part of this large operation.

At the end of day seven, I will leave the Emergency Operations Center that has now closed at the Police Department Community Room. Operations have turned now from emergency to management and resolution of the disaster: relief, repair, cleanup, data tracking and documentation, rebuilding and recovery. One long mission concluded, and several more just beginning



Week Two is an emphasis on relief, getting people immediate needs like temporary housing, food, clothing, gift cards for gas, and yes, some semblance of Christmas in the midst of excruciating loss and upheaval. American Red Cross and FEMA are fully engaged in registering people for assistance and coordinating temporary housing, finding additional survivors, and communicating how the Disaster Resource Center and other agencies can help. Christmas will be a pause. Deadlines for volunteer groups begin to emerge. Volunteers cannot go forever. We are already lining up the next groups that will come in to help. Americorps will end up sending two different groups from two different regions.

On Saturday, December 18, the very first debris removal trucks from the City and County’s debris removal contractor rolled for the first time. Jerry Mills from eastern Kentucky will be the first truck to roll.



Another group will stage on Creekwood Avenue, near the greenway at Stonebridge Lane, where we had that block party. If you look closely, you’ll see their trucks marked “Dusk Til Dawn.”



So for the next 90 days, my and Emily’s world will revolve around being a clearinghouse for information and resources for tornado relief and recovery.

She will end up being the point person over everything at BGStrong, and I will be a liaison for neighborhood groups, community organizations, and anyone else coordinating volunteer efforts and planning for next phases.

We will do everything from intake with tornado survivors, to planning for VIP visits from the governor and First Lady, to posting signs, to scheduling meals to be delivered, to updating content for the wearebgstrong.com website, to shuffling the volunteer coordination effort from the old Bowling Green mall to consolidate WITH the BGStrong Center, to streamlining phone lines down from a high mark of seven to three.

We will find and hire additional tornado staffing. We will attend planning meetings with FEMA and learn new acronyms like VALs and VOADs and sign off on volunteer sheets. We will rearrange the BGStrong center multiple times and we will finally close it to the public in March.

We take the data from the BGStrong Center and try to reconnect with everyone who came through, encouraging them to connect with 2-1-1 to link in with a disaster case manager who can assist them with accessing funds and charitable gifts that have been established to help fill gaps that FEMA and insurance won’t cover. This will be a critical link for our Long Term Recovery Group.

In May, we will plan a subdued BikeWalk BG event at the greenway behind the school. The connecting bridge had opened during COVID, and we want to reconnect with neighbors there. The weather is rainy but we send bicycles home with a family who lost their bikes during the tornado.

Then later in the month, there will be a tree planting and tree giveaway at Jennings Creek Elementary School. I will meet the principal Jamie Woosley for the first time there. I have heard the story of how he called his parents, bus drivers for the system, and they drove into the rain and rubble in the dark to get neighbors behind the school out of the weather and into shelter at the school. It is the close of the school year, and Jamie announces to his faculty and staff that he is taking another job with the school system.



(As Principal Jamie Woosley looks on (at left) Mayor Todd Albott welcomes attendees at a commemorative tree planting event at Jennings Creek Elementary School in May, where Operation PRIDE, International Paper, and the Arbor Day Foundation have partnered to plant trees along the playground and greenway at the school.)

For a brief season, Emily and I will step back into our “normal” roles: a community block party to reintroduce our #BGGovToGo series while still diving back in for tree plantings in the spring. But all throughout the year, we will be reconnecting over and over again with tornado survivors, driving the path, and helping to shepherd the new Long Term Recovery Group in its role.



It has been very much like putting together a vehicle you are driving at the same time.

By July, six months from the tornado, we are doing disaster recovery events to reach more survivors, to help enroll them for disaster case management, and connect with some on insurance issues or other obstacles they've encountered. We make sure to keep Marieca Brown, our tornado project person who joined us back at the BGStrong Center, onboard to continue as project coordinator. Her experience as a retired police officer and as a long time disaster relief volunteer responder in other disasters is invaluable.

And then tragedy strikes our state again, this time with flooding across multiple counties in eastern Kentucky.

The Long Term Recovery Group rebrands so that it may be a new piece of our organizational infrastructure. Not everyone knows what an LTRG is, so we rebrand as Bowling Green-Warren County Disaster Recovery.

And in September, we're planning additional disaster recovery events,

before schools are out for Fall Break. At these events, we learn how long lasting the effects of PTSD, financial strain, and other fallout from a disaster can be. Children and adults alike experience anxiety with rain, wind, and thunder.



People are exasperated with insurance companies and contractors and supply chain issues.

Meanwhile, an anniversary is looming. In the final quarter of the year, there are still Neighbors at Risk. Many getting close to being home while others still have plans of reopening their business. One this week, another next, and another after the new year. And there are still Neighbors at Work. To get back to recovery. To make plans for the future. To reconnect and build anew.

Approximately one year and 17 hours after the moment that tornadoes were on the ground here in Warren County, neighbors and agencies and organizations all along the path lifted white lights skyward to honor the memory of the 17 precious souls we lost to the whirlwind. We reflected on the resilience and strength and generosity of our community. We resolved to complete the work of restoration and recovery and healing.

Today is Recovery Day #368.



I am remembering driving the tornado path on Sunday, one last time before the vigil. Some houses and buildings have been completely rebuilt. Others are under construction and others are still a slab on the ground.

I saw two young boys on the sidewalk, one on a scooter and the other on a bike. They are just around the corner from where the ground is still gouged from the tornado a year ago.

They are Neighbors at Play. And they take my breath away.

