

Member Spotlight:

Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau and
Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri

Thirty-One Minutes in May

One Year After the Joplin Tornado

This is not a story about tragedy,
even though it begins that way.
This is the story about people
helping each other to get through
a tragedy, joining together to rebuild
what was lost, and returning a city
to a new normal.

Sunday, May 22, 2011

5:41 pm

Joplin, Missouri - 35.56 square miles
Two Catholic churches
Two hospitals
Population 50, 559*

An EF5 tornado touches down on Joplin's southwest side.

John Reeve, the bookkeeper at St. Mary's Parish in Joplin, was at home on his computer when the warning sirens went off for a second time. As he headed out to the front porch to see what was going on, he heard the unmistakable sound of a tornado. He and his wife took cover in a closet.

Blocks away, Stephanie Elbert, St. Mary's Parish secretary, along with her mother and daughter, listened to glass shattering and debris hitting the house as they hunkered down in the utility basement of their home.

Father Justin Monaghan, pastor at St. Mary's Catholic Church, with just seconds to spare, ran into the bathroom in the rectory and jumped into the bathtub. "I wasn't in there but seconds when I heard this massive noise coming toward me. I was convinced," recalls Monaghan, "that the house was being torn up and that it was all over."

6:12 pm

Joplin, Missouri - 35.56 square miles
One Catholic church
One hospital
Population 50, 398*

The EF5 tornado dissipates.

Monaghan waited for the noise to quiet and stepped out of the bathtub onto the flooded floor. He walked over, opened the door leading to his bedroom only to find nearly 12 feet of rubble blocking his exit, and the roof missing from over the bedroom. Monaghan did the only thing he could, "I stopped and I prayed. I asked God to help me accept whatever I needed to accept. I was very much at peace." Trapped and unable to get out, Monaghan sat back and waited for help. Help came hours later in the form of a husband and wife, and two young men who dug him out of the rubble after he hoisted a piece of his bed into the air to let them know where to dig.

Elbert, who had an emergency preparedness kit in her basement, grabbed a hammer out of the kit, broke out a basement window and climbed out. What greeted her was almost beyond comprehension. "All I could see," remembers Elbert, "was flat land. Everything to the south was just totally flat. It had taken everything as far as I could see."

Reeve and his wife survived the tornado only to find their house had been lifted and moved several inches off its foundation and their cars were covered in debris with a tree on top.

Within 31 minutes, the EF5 tornado damaged or destroyed more than 18,000 vehicles, 8,000 buildings, including the complete destruction of St. John's Mercy Hospital, St. Mary's Elementary School, Church and rectory, left 161 people dead, hundreds more injured and changed the lives of the residents of Joplin forever.

* United States Census Bureau. "State and County QuickFacts." Census.gov. U.S. Census Bureau, August 30, 2012.

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Monday, May 23, 2011

While rain continued to fall and stormy weather threatened the devastated area, efforts were already underway to help the residents of Joplin. The focus that first day was to continue to help the injured, try to contact those that had been in the tornado's path, and find the missing.

St. John's Mercy Hospital, a major trauma center had been destroyed, leaving the remaining hospital in Joplin overwhelmed with a rapidly rising number of people needing medical attention. McAuley Catholic High School's gymnasium was quickly turned into a medical triage center to help with the overflow of injured in the community, and the school's multi-purpose room served as a call center.

Staff from the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau headed out to Joplin to help wherever needed. St. Mary's Church, school and rectory were completely destroyed. The only thing left standing was the large cross that had stood at the church's entrance. That morning, Stephen Jones, principal at St. Mary's Elementary School, faced the fact that the school was gone and then turned to more pressing matters, "Our teachers were already on the phone contacting students and checking on them," remembers Jones, "in all, about 30 children had some sort of damage to their homes, three teachers suffered health problems and one child died as a result of the tornado. We didn't return to school the rest of that school year."

Tuesday, May 24, 2011

Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri was a one person office before the tornado hit. The organization, while not a first responder organization,

Torn Apart



Catholic Charities staff and volunteers sift through piles of rubble and debris in the days after an EF5 tornado hit Joplin, Missouri.



The cross at St. Mary's Church and Elementary School was one of the few things still standing after the deadly tornado.



What's left of a home in Joplin, Missouri after a deadly tornado.

was still boots on the ground and assessing the situation in Joplin. Case managers from all over the country were being called to Joplin to help out.

Wednesday, May 25, 2011

The only Catholic hospital in Joplin, St. John's Mercy Hospital, had been one of the Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) providers for the Christian Brothers Employee Benefit Trust health plan for teachers, staff and employees at the Diocese's two parishes and three Catholic schools in Joplin. The destruction of the hospital meant some participants did not have another choice in Joplin. In addition, necessary medications for some plan participants were lost in the storm.

John Airola, managing director of Christian Brothers Employee Benefit Services, immediately took action. "We realized that medications may have been lost and participants needed to receive health care," stated Airola, "so we took steps to modify some of the restrictions surrounding the medical and prescription drug plans to ensure participants received the needed medications and treatments."

The Plans were amended to override any 'refill too soon' edits and allowed refills at pharmacies rather than through mail order. In addition, PPO benefits were made applicable if another hospital was required for treatment. "It worked out well," says Nancy McNamara, employee benefit coordinator for the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, "wherever people went, it was considered a PPO, so they weren't penalized for not being able to go to a hospital that wasn't there anymore."

In the Following Weeks

The staff back at the Diocese was working hard to maintain the status quo. "We focused on keeping the staff together," details Janet Smith, director of finance for the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, "we had staff at St. Mary's school and at the parish, some of them lost their homes, but no one lost their job, no one lost their benefits." Smith and her staff seamlessly took control and made sure everybody was on the payroll, the bills were paid, including all premiums and contributions to the health and retirement plans, allowing the parish staffs in Joplin to focus on the recovery efforts.

A collection was taken up by the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau and when word of the tragedy in Joplin spread throughout the rest of the country, there was a huge outpouring of support. "We called it the Bishop's Relief Fund," recounts Smith, "so many wonderful letters and donations poured in offering support. A few dioceses even made us their ongoing charity for the year."

With monetary gifts and donations coming in from all across the country, the staff in the Diocese's Office of Administration began a database to track every donation. "We wrote personal thank you notes, responding to every letter and note," states Smith, "whether it was a donation of \$5 or a truck full of books, everybody received a thank you note and the Bishop signed each one."

Help Arrives



A Catholic Charities worker comforts a mother and daughter after a tornado devastated an entire neighborhood in Joplin.



Father Justin Monaghan stands next to the altar at the new, temporary location for St. Mary's Catholic Church.



Catholic Charities workers and volunteers help to rebuild a house in Joplin.

The abundance of donations presented a bit of a storage problem.

The diocesan staff worked with the parishes and Catholic Charities to help house and distribute the donations. Once the immediate need for additional triage space was gone, the gym at McAuley High School was turned into a distribution center. "Our own school, St. Mary's, only had a couple hundred students," says Smith, "but we received enough books to start a library for a whole city!"

The two parishes in Joplin, St. Mary's and St. Peter's, worked together in the weeks after the tornado. St. Peter's had survived any damage from the storm and opened their church doors to Father Monaghan and his parishioners, giving them a place to worship.

Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri set up their disaster case management operation and began work immediately. "We handed out more than \$80,000 in gift cards over the weeks for personal hygiene items, clothing and gas, if they still had a car," recounts Maura Taylor, executive director for Catholic Charities

of Southern Missouri. Volunteers continued to stream into Joplin and the Catholic Charities staff put the volunteer's talents to good use. In the initial stages, volunteers were simply clearing debris from different sites. As Taylor recalls, "Some of the volunteers felt they hadn't done much; but six months later there was a house on that site. They started the process and had a hand in helping to build a place a family could call home again. Each one of them made a difference and touched someone's life."

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A City Comes Together

Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri continues to live out its mission - to improve the lives of the vulnerable by providing quality, compassionate social services which meet local needs, regardless of religious, socio-economic, or ethnic background.

The Summer

Focus during the summer months turned to finding space for the St. Mary's Elementary School students and teachers. Working together, the Diocese, St. Mary's parish and St. Peter's parish identified a warehouse, next to McAuley High School that would serve as a temporary location for the elementary school. St. John's Mercy Hospital gave every St. Mary's student a backpack, despite losing their own facility to the tornado. "They were really grateful for the use of the high school gym as a triage facility," explains Monaghan.



In a city that believed strongly in the separation of church and state before the tornado, cooperation between the public school system and the Catholic schools in Joplin became more common place in the days after the tornado. "Now it's not unusual to get things from the public schools," explains Reeve, "it's a feeling of 'we're all in the same boat.'" The superintendent of the Joplin public school system gave St. Mary's school audio/visual equipment and included the St. Mary's teachers on their Donate to a Joplin Teacher website.

In August, the debris removal began to wind down, just as the need for home repairs began to escalate. Repairs, in some cases, would provide the necessary measures needed for families to be able to move back into their homes.



"What people really needed were repairs on their houses," states Taylor, "that's when we started getting into home repair. People were living in deplorable conditions, substandard because there were no hotels available, nowhere else to live, they didn't want to leave, or they couldn't afford to leave town. By fixing up a few things here and there, they could live in their homes while waiting on the major repairs."

Tuesday, September 6, 2011

St. Mary's Elementary School opened its doors to 205 students a little over three months after the tornado destroyed the school. The converted warehouse provided classrooms for students and teachers. The only challenges were lunch and recess until McAuley High School stepped in and provided St. Mary's the use of their lunchroom and gym. According to Jones, "The high school just bent over backwards to accommodate and help us."

Counselors were brought in those first days to help the students, teachers and staff adjust to the changes. "Everyone had a story to tell, the kids had to talk, they just had to share," explains Jones, "and I think that made them feel better."

The Year After the Tornado

In the year since the tornado, residents of Joplin have adjusted to the new normal. Monaghan, Reeve and Elbert have moved into new homes. A site has been selected and land purchased to rebuild St. Mary's Church. In the meantime, the church has been temporarily relocated to a renovated hardware store in a strip mall. As Monaghan puts it, "We're thankful to St. Peter's for taking us in, but we're also thankful to now have a home of our own." Monaghan continued, "One of our greatest successes is how well we have been able to survive as our own church."

The St. Mary's cross that survived the storm will remain in place. Since the tornado, it has become a place where people from all over the country, both Catholic and non-Catholic alike, have come to pray and reflect.

St. Mary's Elementary School concluded a successful year and even the weather cooperated. "We had mass every Friday with our students," relates Jones, "at the old St. Mary's we just walked through a doorway and we were in the church. This year it's about a two block walk to St. Peter's. God was with us this year, and we did not have a rainy Friday all year. We had plans in case it rained, but for the entire school year we didn't have to use them." Smith

sums it up, "Right now, every child has a spot in the school system and is being educated. There's absolutely going to be a parish that will serve the people of Joplin for a long, long time."

Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri continues to live out its mission - to improve the lives of the vulnerable by providing quality, compassionate social services which meet local needs, regardless of religious, socio-economic, or ethnic background. "The Catholic community has come together," explains Taylor, "and our own Diocese has supported our efforts. We are a minority here, the number of families we're touching, some 10,000, most are not Catholic and that doesn't matter because that's not what our mission is." The Catholic Charities office in Joplin has partnered with other religious denominations in the area to continue the repairs and rebuild efforts by sharing volunteers, tools and skilled labor. "Bottom line," states Taylor, "is we're helping people recover from the trauma they've experienced, we're helping them move through a plan of recovery that will help rebuild and restore their lives."

Now that they have a permanent location and additional staff in Joplin, Catholic Charities is looking towards their next role, explains Taylor,

"We will be moving into what we call our family strengthening program. It's a way of working with families to identify their strengths and empower them with tools and resources to alleviate poverty." Taylor also stresses that they will continue to work with the other nonprofits in the area to identify gaps in service which Catholic Charities can then help to fill.

The tornado came and went. Thirty-one minutes of destruction. What followed was a year of community, a year of cooperation among many different groups - public and private sectors, the Diocese, St. Mary's and St. Peter's parishes, Catholic Charities, other nonprofits, donors and volunteers. They have all come together to rebuild Joplin. Hopefully, the St. Mary's cross will serve as a reminder, not of that terrible day in May - but of the spirit of cooperation that continues as Joplin rebuilds. A testament to the adage, small acts when multiplied can transform the world. They can even rebuild a city. Just ask the residents of Joplin. ☀

Top photo - Catholic Charities volunteers donate their time and talents to help Joplin rebuild.

Bottom photo - The St. Mary's cross still stands at the site of the former school and church.

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