

Reporter's Notebook: Moments after Destruction in Joplin

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The dark, sometimes green-hued storm clouds passed to our south. The sun lit up the western sky. I watched out the car window, eyeing the cell that had just knocked a community back in time. Homes and business districts that took years to build, entire stretches of town, were reduced to an outline of what they once were. Parts of the city looked more like the plains of yesteryear than lines of shops and houses.

We heard reports of devastation: St. John's Regional Medical Center, Home Depot, Walmart, Pizza Hut, all torn apart by a tornado. I wondered how much of it was true and how much was exaggeration.

The stories were not inflated by emotion or made bigger through a trail of rumors. No amount of innocent extrapolation could have prepared me for what I saw Sunday.

When we first pulled into town, families gathered outside their homes. Houses along the outskirts of the city stood mostly intact. However, they rested in ruffled yards. Tree limbs lined the streets.

Pickup trucks passed our car with young men piled in the back. Their faces held no emotion. It was too soon. Their stares revealed numbness, disbelief, and shock -- the only things protecting them from the harsh realization of the damage and loss. Their collective gaze screamed out, "You have not seen what I have seen". And something told me, I didn't want to.

We began to spot homes missing roofs. Insulation was scattered across the ground.

As we pulled onto Katherine Avenue, I caught my first glimpse of the true scope of the destruction. I had trouble processing the sight.

The wanderers , the eerie quiet accented by a distant symphony of car alarms and emergency sirens, the sunshine, and the smell of gas spreading from a broken line forced the visuals into an even more unnatural frame.

I looked up a hill and turned to my partner, photographer Eric Redus. I pointed to an apartment building that was missing a roof. He cautioned that the building may not have been as badly damaged as it seemed from a distance. He told me, from what he could tell, the building may have been under construction.

We were fooled by the visible labels on insulation and drywall. I was staring at the Plaza apartments. The tornado stripped the building down to an unrecognizable state.

It seems strange to describe a car as tattered. However, the cars in the parking lot of that building were tossed like pieces of paper into a trash can. Their exteriors were beyond dented. They were ruffled as if they were no more than stationery.

We talked to a few people walking around the building. Some of them were looking for survivors. Others were recovering what belongings they could salvage and searching for a place to stay. They had just lived through one of the most powerful events nature can conjure into one place

Surprisingly, the victims were willing to talk. They approached us, looking for answers. Sadly, we had little to offer.

The tornado did not destroy the entirety of Joplin. Some officials say nearly a third of the city sustained major or severe damage. The destruction, though, hit at the city's core.

Communication and movement through the most badly damaged areas became nearly impossible. Families paced as they tried to make cell phone calls on overloaded networks. A simple phone call, one to pass along a basic message -- "I'm alive" --became a game of chance in an area that's luck seemed non-existent.

We pressed on. The problems with communication networks made it more difficult to get the information people needed: where to find medical help; where to find shelter; how to find sons, daughters, husbands, wives and friends.

And while questions loomed, each person seemed prompted to give their own answer, through action.

If you needed help finding medical treatment, a neighbor down the road was waiting with a first aid kit while you searched for professional care. If you needed to find a loved one, it should not have been difficult to find someone to accompany on your search.

The survivors seemed concerned only with helping the victims to their right and left. If they had escaped harm, they felt as if they had been instilled with the duty to aid the families around them who were not as fortunate. By nightfall, I had run into a number of people who had walked miles to aid whoever they could or find aid themselves.

As darkness crept over the city and flickers of distant lightning lit up the sky, we made it to a triage and coordination center outside the ruins of a Home Depot. The orange stripe on one of the few standing walls was the only marking to distinguish the pile of metal from any other heap of destruction.

EMS workers in neon vests packed the parking lot, the pavement covered with blue tarp and supplies. Volunteers loaded water.

A group of people, likely a family, passed by me: two women and several children. The kids wore shoes. The adults had on slippers and sandals.

One of the younger children walked, wrapped in a blanket, holding a woman's hand. The kids gave off an air of innocence. They did not fully understand what had happened. Although, how could I blame them? I couldn't either.

For the adults, the reality was beginning to set in. I saw fewer people staring through a glaze of numbness and shock. No doubt, they were still in shock, but the pain was beginning to bleed through. The eyelids of the women in that group hung heavy with the weight of exhaustion, stress and despair.

Desperation began to creep out, although masked in the passion and drive to help the victims of the storm. That motivation shined a small light of hope through the darkness.

Joplin, Missouri is in its hour of need. Sadly, the recovery will not be counted in minutes or even hours. Not even single days will be enough to mark the time it will take for the community to rise from the rubble.

This will not be an easy process. It will not be a quick one. From my vantage point, Joplin may never fully recover. The scars of May 22 will always carry with the community.

The tornado will make the town stronger, in time. Neighbors are realizing perhaps what they suspected, but never talked about: they are not alone.

And it's that sense of oneness, of collaboration and compassion for humankind that no storm can ever tarnish, tear or take away. And as

the world watches Joplin, Missouri, it's something we should all emulate. If there is any good to come from the scene one man described to me as "hell", you will not find it in the wreckage or ruins. You'll find it in the people of Joplin and the crews pouring into that city.

Their drive, strength, and resilience is what carries on in this darkness. And it is that spirit that, above all, will remain burned in my consciousness.