

Lyon students become part of building hope in Joplin

By Hannah Keller, Lyon Communications Specialist

Driving into Joplin, all appears as life as usual. People go about their business in shops and restaurants. A jogger can be seen making her way down the sidewalk.

But after a closer look, little signs of the destruction the town experienced when an EF-5 tornado struck May 22, 2011 can still be seen three years later. The barren look of the land that was directly in the tornado's path, the new buildings and those still being constructed, parking lots that appear out of place in empty fields, a piece of aluminum siding twisted around the top branch of a lone tree that survived the storm — all of these are part of the signature the record-breaking twister left behind.



Beyond that, the strength and perseverance of the people in the community comes shining through. Memorials to those who were lost and symbols of the hope for a new future can be found around every corner. Four Lyon College students and two staff members became part of that hope during a service trip over spring break.

The Trip

William "Bill" Branch, interim chaplain at Lyon College, consulted Presbyterian Disaster Assistance about areas that were in need of volunteers to help with rebuilding.

The Lyon group consisted of students Caitlin Bumpous, Tamara Edgin, Amanda Klipp, John Pope along with Branch. The facility at South Joplin Christian Church, dubbed "The Station," became their home over spring break. The church opened The Station on March 18, 2012 to be a self-contained living space for volunteer groups that were coming to help with Joplin's tornado recovery efforts.

Branch told the students they were there not only to provide help with the physical rebuild, but also to provide emotional and spiritual support.

"Be prepared to listen if people want to share their stories or vent their frustrations," Branch told the group. "That is as big a part of what we are here for as the physical rebuild."

"These young people were not only good, hard workers, but they really related to this woman and gave her a lot of emotional support as well." Branch said.

Amy's Story

Amy, 36, rented her grandmother's home. The day of the storm, she and her best friend, Elizabeth, had been shopping and then gone for a late lunch. "Everyone in the restaurant was talking about the weather and about storm chasers being in town. Liz checked her phone and there was not anything on the radar," Amy said. "We thought everything was fine."

The women went back to the house, and Amy told Elizabeth she was going to lie down for a nap and then they could fix dinner. Amy hadn't been resting long when she woke up with the sense that something wasn't right.

"I woke up about 5:30, and I just had this feeling. I looked out my window and the sky was a dark green-grey — the kind of sky that you don't want to see."

She told Elizabeth to come look at the ominous sky. Elizabeth checked the weather report on her phone again and told Amy they needed to get into the bathroom immediately. Amy got her miniature Pomeranian, Colbee, and took shelter in the bathroom with Liz and her two dogs.

Then it began.

"Rain just started pelting the house," Amy said. "... I thought, 'This is getting pretty bad. I better get my purse so I'll have my ID when they find my body.'"



She ran to her car outside, retrieved her purse and dashed back into the house. That's when the lights went out. The house began to shake, and a backdraft of air slammed the bathroom door shut. Amy struggled with the door and finally made it back into the small sanctuary.

I thought, 'This is it. We're going with it. It's just going to pick the house up, and we'll be gone. This is how I'm going to die.' It was this feeling of numbness but also so many overwhelming emotions and memories of people you want to see again so you can tell them you love them and will miss them, but you don't know if you are ever going to see them again," she said.

Amy said she heard a loud snap, which she thinks was when the tornado ripped the front porch off of her home. Eventually, calm settled in. Amy said she could only stand gripping her bathroom sink, shaking and crying. Liz said they needed to go see what was left of the house.

"My legs gave out from the exhaustion of terror, so I began to crawl feeling my way with my hands. It was pitch black," she said. They made it to the front door crawling on their hands and knees. The scene that met her eyes was something out of a post-apocalyptic movie.

"Patients that had been told to evacuate from St. John were walking in the streets in their hospital gowns rolling their stands with I.V. fluids. There was smoke in the distance where a building had caught fire. Dogs and cats were running everywhere. There were lights and sirens. It was chaos," Amy said.

Amy moved in with her father for about a month and a half. She moved back to her home after the electricity was turned back on and began to "just make it work" living there. A downward spiral began in her life after the tornado hit. She left her job at the hospital to help in the family business, which was struggling. A family feud began over what to do with the house she called home, and she had to battle in court to win the right to remain living there. During this time, she also lost her mother to an unknown illness.

Today, as the pieces of her home are put back together, she's piecing her life back together as well. She helps care for her nieces and said she is certain she'll always work as a caregiver in some capacity.

"I've always been a caregiver. I honestly believe that's my life's calling. I worked at the hospital, I volunteered and tutored students in college, and I believe I'll find a job in some sort of role as a caregiver again. That's just what I do," she said.

Amanda Klipp, a junior biology major, said she glad to be part of the process of helping Amy get her life back on track. "I thought it was sad that she had been through so much after the tornado. The tornado really wasn't the worst thing that happened to her, it just caused this whole cascade of events. I was glad to be able to help her start to turn it back around," Klipp said.

Rebuilding

Amy was hesitant at first to contact Rebuild Joplin for help with her home. "Everything I had tried so far had fallen through, and I was really discouraged. Plus there were stories about people pretending to be volunteers that were scamming and stealing from tornado victims," she said.

After representatives left a flyer about Rebuild Joplin on her door one day she finally decided to set up the initial appointment. She met the income and need guidelines, so she decided to move forward with the application process.



She was selected to receive assistance. Among the repairs needed, the home would receive a new roof, new doors and windows, a new front porch, and have the living room remodeled. The Lyon students spent the bulk of their time working on the roof. They also helped with cleaning the yard and repairing chain link fence around her property.

John Pope, a senior mathematics and computer science major, said he couldn't believe the condition of Amy's home when the group first arrived. "I thought, 'Have you really been living in this house for three years?'"

Caitlin Bumpous, a junior biology major, shared similar thoughts, "Three years is a long time to go without feeling like you have it together. You could tell she had done what she could with what she had. I thought she just needed someone to step in and help her."

Amy's home is one of 70 that Rebuild Joplin hopes to complete repairs on this year, according to Courtney Powell, volunteer coordinator for Rebuild Joplin.

"There is still work to be done," Powell said. "We can't do our work without volunteers. Your hands are what ultimately help us get the job done." Since Rebuild Joplin's ground breaking in March 2012, the organization had helped rebuild and repair 124 homes.

Kathryn Wilson, minister of mission and outreach at South Joplin Christian Church, spoke to the group during a dinner hosted by the church to thank the group for giving their time to volunteer. She said that while Joplin would never be the same as it was before, it was beginning to find its place in the world again.

"There is hope here for the future. You are now part of that hope," Wilson told the students. "By giving your time to volunteer, you let people see the light of Christ in you, and we are so thankful to you."