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The power of coping as a community

In a crowd or in solitude, residents have learned to handle loss and look ahead

By **Lisa Singleton-Rickman**
Staff Writer



Matt McKean/TimesDaily

Bobcat footprints at the football stadium were dedicated to Phil Campbell Elementary School students Edgar Mojica, Nathan Knox and teacher Patricia Gentry, who all died April 27. A memorial also was erected outside of the school in their honor.

Janice Taylor is a funeral home director, but she still struggled emotionally as she dealt with deaths in the days and weeks after the April 27 tornadoes.

But all the deaths, this time, were personal.

"We knew every person, and we were personally grieving with the families, but we still had to deal with the details of preparing for funerals and burials, said Taylor, who works at Akins Funeral Home in Russellville.

Coping became another normal for laymen and professionals, many of whom had just survived the worst disaster of their lives.

Taylor said her funeral home had nine victims from the storm, two of them children.

"It was tough, anyway, but then you had the horror of hearing ambulances and you'd think, 'There they go again,' but then you'd realize that no siren was a bad sign," she said.

Taylor said it was difficult when the bodies began arriving, but even worse when their family members would arrive looking "like casualties themselves."

"They didn't have forms of identification, they didn't have the insurance cards, and they didn't have any viable means of getting these things," she said. "We'd lost families, worship centers, community centers. We cried with our families, but we don't typically do that.

"We cried because we knew we'd also lost a lot of people we loved."

It took about three weeks to conduct funerals for the tornado victims, Taylor said.

"It affects you to see a mother and father in their early 30s that have an 8-month-old baby who's now been left all alone," she said.

The funeral home directors became overwhelmed by the volume of people who came to visitations, she added.

"Sometimes it would be 11 or 12 at night before we could get out of there, because people were still coming in from all over," Taylor said. "The community was really trying to rally around everybody and let them know they were there. When things got to be a little bit much, we just tried to step back and go to the break room for a few minutes alone."

Still, Taylor said everything came together, and it wasn't as if bodies and caskets were piling up.

"Those that were not in really bad shape, we held there in the morgue," she said. "We also had some that were cremations, so holding them (at the funeral home) was not an issue. Some, we made (cremation) recommendations for, and some just decided that's what they wanted to do.

"Everybody was given a chance to do whatever they wanted."

Massive trauma

Coping mechanisms have varied among the residents of Franklin and Marion counties, two of the hardest hit areas in the state with extensive damage to Phil Campbell and Hackleburg.

Amy Aldridge, a crisis counselor for Alabama's Project Rebound, in the Housing Resource Center in Hackleburg, said counseling was initially delayed mainly because of individual pride.

"Alabama's people have a lot of pride, so we weren't surprised that people worked so hard to deal with such traumatic events on their own before they asked for help," she said. "We took a lot of referrals and followed up. People pretty quickly began to realize there are triggers — hearing, seeing, smelling or touching — and in a split second it all comes rushing back.

"With the anniversary upon us, flashbacks are not uncommon in people. But when it starts interfering with everyday life, then it's a problem."

That's when counselors from Project Rebound step in to guide individuals to service providers who can help.

"People will say, 'I feel like I'm going crazy,' but we just explain the massive trauma

they've been through and that it's all right, even normal, for them to feel the way they're feeling," she said.

In Marion and Winston counties alone, an estimated 3,200 people have had personal contact with Project Rebound counselors, including about 400 children from Hackleburg.

"We've spent a lot of time in the schools with children, and many will share their feelings in that environment before they will in front of their parents," Aldridge said.

Lisa Turley, the state coordinator for Project Rebound, said her staff doesn't present themselves as mental health professionals, just support providers.

"We're not a Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. kind of a program," Turley said. "We go out to where people are and listen and reassure them that they'll come through this all right. We educate them about the typical reactions to such horrific events. They've responded in a healthy way. We work on stress management and coping.

"Across the state, we've counseled with more than 100,000 people. We'll be here through June."

Priority: Helping people

Hackleburg Police Chief Kenny Hallmark said helping people cope with their circumstances has been the priority since the tornado.

In the past two months, he said more people have admitted a need for counseling.

"Being back in the (spring) storm season has put it all heavily back on people's minds again," he said.

He said town is doing well, overall, with the return of familiar businesses.

"It's encouraging to the people as a whole to see signs of life coming back to Hackleburg," he said. "We've had a lot of help and support available to us and that's been a blessing, for sure."

Lisa Singleton-Rickman can be reached at

256-740-5735 or lisa.singleton-rickman@TimesDaily.com.

How Project Rebound helps

- The Alabama Department of Mental Health founded Project Rebound to offer relief and aid along with community organizations in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Teams of trained crisis counselors are sent into affected communities and offer services such as individual assistance, classroom presentations, public education and community support.

- Contact: 1-800-639-7326 (calls must be from Alabama area code to use Project Rebound)
- Online: projectrebound.org and mh.alabama.gov/projectrebound