

## Six Years After the Tornado...

Written by Debbie Gregory  
Tuesday, February 4, 2014

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It was a long road to recovery after a tornado shook Macon County on February 5, 2008, and the only way to truly understand the magnitude of what happened is to start from the very beginning.

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E-911 Director Steve Jones stopped by the *Macon County Chronicle* last Saturday afternoon and six years after a massive twister touched down in our county we discussed that fateful day and how it changed our lives forever. Macon County had to rebuild lives and bury their dead.

“It was a different kind of February day – unusually warm for that time of the year and breezy,” said E-911 Director Steve Jones. “Like everybody else we were at home that night on Akersville Road, and Hunter, Latise and I were just fixing to go to bed.”

Jones said he had just sat down on the edge of the bed when he heard this roaring sound and went to the window and looked out. “I saw the glow in the sky and I was stunned. Trees were bending in the wind and it sounded like a train coming through.”

“When I realized it was a twister we started looking for the safest place in the house which was a closet, but by the time we got inside it was gone,” he said. “Although we could feel the vibrations, it was actually gone as fast as it came.”

Frantic, as soon as the winds subsided Jones rushed next door to check on his parents, who

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were safe. "When I looked up the road, I saw major TVA power lines laying on the ground and I got on my cell phone (which was still working at that time) and called dispatch. I told them they needed to get Tri County in route but of course at that time nobody could get up and down the road."

After the funnel cloud barreled on down the road, Nicky and Paula Roark, who lived on the Williams Road called Steve on his cell phone and said their home had been destroyed and they were hurt. "She thought her husband's back was broke and her and their children were also injured," he continued. "They wanted to know if I could come and get them and I said we'd head that way."

Jones got his Kawasaki Mule ATV and him and Latise started down that way. "I didn't see a lot of damage around my house, but when we traveled down Akersville Road toward Tuck Road we started seeing all the damage."

The director said trees were snatched from the ground, power lines were down, homes were lifted then tossed in the air and the tattered landscape looked like a war zone. "That's when we started seeing injured people coming out of what was left of their homes as we made our way to where the New Zion Baptist Church had once stood."

Steve said when they got to the Roark's they found Nicky, Paula and their three children, the youngest was only 9 months old. "They were all scared to death and after they were all loaded in the back of the Kawasaki, I brought the family back out to a waiting ambulance, that couldn't get down there because of the power lines across the road."

Tri County Electric was overwhelmed with everything going on, but they had one of their large trucks to pick up those lines so the ambulances and other emergency traffic could get through. "Latise went to work at the hospital and I went back into what was later termed "Ground Zero" and brought four more people to waiting ambulances."

By this time a house to house search had begun and Jones said it was the first time in his life (he had been trained in triage and mass casualties) that he actually triaged, looked at somebody and said 'these are your injuries, you are going to be okay, somebody else will be here to take care of you' and went on to the next person. "I was still on the Akersville/Williams Road area and we checked every house, ditch, field, barn and shed in the storm's path, however by day break multiple volunteers became involved and the search was broadened to areas harder to reach. I went to the ambulance service where our office where our E-911 Office was and started setting up."

"TEMA got there and I talked with an official and I told him to set up in the EMS rooms," said Jones. "I contacted NCTC and they started setting up phone lines and just in a short period of

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time we had a ECO (Emergency Operation Center) up and operating. Other departments were working at their locations. EMA Director Keith Scruggs (also Lafayette Fire Chief) came over, set up and started operating there at the ambulance service building. Therefore, the EMS became the operating center.”

The THP also came in set up and said they were there to help.

When a disaster happens, Keith Scruggs makes the calls asking for help. “He is very knowledgeable and stays up to date on everything including the different agencies,” Jones said. “The EMA Director and Mayor Shelvy Linville became the two contact people. Once the mayor declared a state of emergency, EMA Director Scruggs began asking for help. He then involved TEMA and they contacted FEMA.”

They started setting up everything that had to be done. “The first thing was to make sure that all the injured people had been taken care of, and then came the grim task of recovering the bodies of the people who died in the storm. Shortly after we had a map put together and we came up with the swath that was seen across the tornado map. We flew the route with a THP pilot and the National Guard.”

Director Jones said the thing that was so great was how everybody worked together. “It was a community that came together.”

During the next few weeks agencies were setting up short term recovery, long term recovery and everything they did had to be documented so the county and agencies could be reimbursed through federal funds. “Keith Scruggs and I worked together very well during the disaster. “My department is a support department of all the agencies.”

Steve said he experienced massive injuries and mass casualties and although he had extensive training, you are never really prepared for something of this magnitude. “We all think it can’t happen to us, but it can,” he added. “I have always said in my career that people don’t realize that in a split second life can change forever, either with an injury or illness. IT doesn’t matter how much money you have, how rich you are, it can all change and people need to appreciate their lives.”

”When the cyclone went through it didn’t matter if you lived in the strongest brick structure or a

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mobile home, they were both destroyed. Mother Nature doesn't pick and choose."

"The disaster has made me think a lot more," Steve said. "Through the years I have seen a lot of tragedy, but that is part of what you have to deal with in the emergency service field."

"Today, people are much more cautious of the weather," he said. "We are getting grants now to help build our emergency services. We are in the process of redesigning our communication by installing 14 outdoor warning sirens across the county. So, when you are inside you have your TV or weather radio and when you are outside you have emergency warning sirens. We are also building a staging area/morgue as well."

"I want to commend our EMS, legislative leaders, mayors, city councilmen, county commissioners, and all the utilities who worked for hours on end trying to get everything back up and operational. It was just amazing how quickly everything was fixed."

"When all was said and done the citizens of this county should be proud of their leadership and emergency service that came together and worked through this," commented Jones. "The people should be proud of themselves, helping each other and working together."

"At the time of the twister Macon County didn't have an official E-911 Emergency Operation Center. We received a CDBG Grant and the new E-911 building located next to the Justice Center was completed in 2012 at a cost of \$1,000,000 including equipment. This was a 100% grant and we consolidated the 911 dispatch, Sheriff's Office and the ambulance services and it is called 911 Central Dispatch, which all resulted from the tornado disaster."

The E-911 building is equipped with two overhead projectors, three large screen TV's that can be on multiple news channels at a time and they are also connected to computers. "We have a 70 inch touch screen that can have an overlay over it. We are setting up to have video sent to us and during a disaster all department heads will coordinate from the 911 Center. You are never truly prepared for a disaster, but you can make sure you have everything ready."

"Be proud to live in a community where people can come together as quick as they did after the tornado. "I'm proud of the people of Macon County. Mother Nature didn't defeat us, she made us stronger by giving us an insight to what can happen, to be better prepared next time. We can't control her, can't control the weather and unfortunately we have slipped into the tornado

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belt. We know what she is capable of and now we

have all had a taste of a disaster is all about.”

It's been a long road to recovery for Macon County and a lot of time and effort has been put forth and sacrifices made to rebuild our community, along with the three churches that were destroyed. It was amazing how everyone pulled together and if you drive through the areas that were affected six years ago, you will see that the rebuilding process was remarkably and definitely worth the effort as our community has moved toward brighter days.