Written by Debbie Gregory
Tuesday, February 5, 2013

The eyes of the world were on Macon County following the Tuesday, February 5, 2008 outbreak of tornadoes that was produced by powerful storm cells that moved into Middle Tennessee. It's hard to believe it's been five years since parts of our beloved community vanished forever, when homes were lifted – then tossed into the air, trees snatched from the ground, and numerous lives lost when a massive twister touched down and left a 20 mile path of wreckage across our county.

Throughout the years I have spoken with so many people and written so many stories that I have lost count. But the one thing I will never forgot is the county and city officials, emergency agencies and countless volunteers working together for the greater good of the people who were affected by this catastrophe that came in the dark of night.

The Macon County EMS, Lafayette Police Department, Macon County Sheriffs Office, Lafayette Fire Department, Macon County Rescue Squad, and the County & City Mayors, were united in their efforts during the chaos and despair that followed when the cyclone left Macon County.

The furious winds came as the weatherman predicted on that fateful night. When I stood outside on the porch to look at the strange orange glow that was lighting up the sky, the gale force was shaking Macon County so violently I could actually feel the vibrations of the twister that tore across the outskirts of downtown Lafayette not far from where I was. Within only a matter of minutes 100% of the electricity was gone in the county.

When Officer Garrett Flatt's chilling message came over the police radio, "It's got me and I can't get away from it," people had no idea what had happened and how our faith would be tested in the days and weeks to follow.

The path of the tornado, as it headed toward Macon County, began at the Columbia Gulf gas plant, in the Green Grove Community. The facility was completely destroyed in a matter of seconds and when it erupted in flames that lit up the night sky, witnesses stated that it could be seen as far away as Cookeville.

EMA Director Keith Scruggs said that the tornado remained on the ground as it crossed diagonally across Macon County. “It brushed the west edge of Lafayette near the Golf Course around 10:20 p.m. ravaging Maple Grove Road, Long Creek Road and Golf Course Drive. The twister showed no mercy as it continued its’ path of destruction across the Scottsville Road, down Tuck Road, through the Akersville Road/Williams Road area, down Cave Hollow Road to the Antioch and Galen Roads, then on into Kentucky.”

A command post was set up at the LPD, a field command center was immediately established at the Brattontown intersection, a command center was also set up in the Akersville area, the Emergency Operation Center was organized at the EMS building, and Sheriff Mark Gammons added two more phone lines along with the other five to keep up with the volume of phone calls coming into the Macon County Sheriffs Office. Gammons said that correctional officers and jailers offered their assistance in the dispatch station.

A search was set up that night and crews were sent to every road, house, ditch, field, barn and shed that as in the storm’s path. However, the search was broadened to areas harder to reach with multiple volunteers involved.

When dawn began to break in Macon County, people stood in shock as their eyes took in the unfamiliar scenery. You could quickly see that Mother Nature had dealt our community the worst natural disaster imaginable. Other neighboring emergency agencies and law enforcement personnel came in to assist and officials barricaded the hardest hit areas to search for the presumed dead and to protect people’s property.

Tri-County and North Central worked hard to restore power and phone service, while local churches and the Lafayette National Guard opened their doors for the victims who lost everything. The American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Nashville Humane Society, along with other organizations and individuals responded in only a matter of hours to get units here ASAP to tend to our needs. The road crews and the Tennessee Highway Patrol were also helpful in their effort to aid the people in Macon County.

The earliest damage assessment according to EMA Director Scruggs listed 194 homes completely destroyed by the storm; 63 more homes had several structural damage and 54 had enough damage to render them uninhabitable. He also said that 257 households were homeless.

Television and radio stations rushed to our county with CNN broadcasting live on Thursday morning.

With the promise of federal aid, President George W. Bush arrived on Friday, February 8, 2008 to survive the damage and he met with state and local elected officials as well as the heads of FEMA and TEMA at the Lafayette fire station. In attendance were United States Senators Bob Corker and Lamar Alexander, Tennessee Senator Mae Beavers, Governor Phil Bredesen, Lt. Governor Ron Ramsey, Congressman Bart Gordon, and Macon County Sheriff Mark Gammons, County Mayor Shelvy Linville and Lafayette Fire Chief Keith Scruggs.

It's been a long road toward recovery for Macon County and a lot of time and effort have 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 five years ago, you will see that the rebuilding process was remarkably and definitely worth the effort as our community has moved toward brighter days.

"It was wonderful to see the President of the United States take the time to visit our community," said Sheriff Mark Gammons. "I was also overwhelmed with gratitude when all the law enforcement agencies came to our aid. Today, looking back to five years ago, it's hard to comprehend the extent of the devastation. It all seems like a bad dream that I wish I could wakeup from and it had never happened."

"Of all my memories, the one that I am most proud of," said Mayor Linville, is the way our community pulled together. Macon County has come a long way since the tornado but let's not forget what happened that fateful night of February 5, 2008 and those who perished."

On the fifth anniversary of the heartbreaking tragedy that struck our community, the Macon

County Chronicle would like to pay tribute to those who lost their lives in the storms. They are:

Mark Aaron Brown

Carol Irene Boyd

Javier Castillo Bueno

William “Bill” Clark

Johnnie Dollin

Dixie Marie Ellis

Stanley Eugene Francis

William “Tom” Manier

Joan Rodriquez

Courtney Lynn Payne

Rex Douglas Payne

Jimmy Carter Shaw

Pablo Osorio

Michael L. Welch

Julie Welch

Jesse Welch

Hannah Welch

Randy Wilkerson