

Joplin

One Year Later



What happened to Joplin?

At 5:41 p.m. on May 22, 2011, a tornado touched down in Joplin and was on the ground for six miles.

It tracked into the neighboring town of Duquesne and then rural areas. At times it was at least one mile wide. It damaged or destroyed 8,000 homes, 18,000 cars, 400 businesses, injured more than 1,000 people and killed 161.

Some of the buildings damaged or destroyed included schools, churches, restaurants and other businesses, and St. John's Medical Center — one of the town's two hospitals.

After the tornado, there was no electricity in the destruction zone for about a week, and the city was without water. The area was declared a federal disaster area.

Safety: What should I do?

Emergency management officials say the most important thing anyone can do to prevent injury or death during a tornado is to seek shelter as soon as tornado sirens sound. The safest places are tornado shelters, basements, and closets, bathrooms or rooms with no windows. Many people who survived the Joplin tornado took cover in their bathtubs and covered themselves with blankets to protect against flying debris.

FEMA advises families to prepare for stormy weather by making a plan for what they will do when the tornado sirens sound and by putting together a home emergency kit. A basic emergency supply kit could include the following recommended items:

- Water (one gallon of water per person per day for at least three days, for drinking and sanitation)
- Food (at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food)
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio and a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert and extra batteries for both
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- First aid kit
- Whistle to signal for help
- Dust mask (to help filter contaminated air) and plastic sheeting and duct tape to shelter-in-place
- Wrench or pliers to turn off utilities
- Local maps
- Cell phone with chargers, inverter or solar charger



What is a Tornado?

"Tornado" was a 14-century sailor's word for a violent, windy thunderstorm. The word may have come from the Spanish word "tronada," which means thunderstorm. Tornadoes are funnel- or cone-shaped clouds with winds that can reach up to 300 miles per hour and cause damage for miles.

They usually occur in March through August, but they can form at any time. They can happen in any state, but usually touch down in the Central Plains or Midwestern states — an area known as "Tornado Alley."

Meteorologists rate tornadoes according to their size and strength on a scale of 1 to 5. An EF-5, the kind that hit Joplin and Duquesne, is the most powerful. It also was the deadliest tornado in 60 years.

First responders: Heroes to the rescue



Many people went to work immediately to help rescue those trapped in the debris or to care for those who were injured. Others organized shelters where people could sleep, eat and get clothing and other basic necessities. Among the first responders were 119 fire and rescue services and 68 ambulance districts from across Missouri. They were honored in April at a ceremony at the state Capitol in Jefferson City, and all received medals.

Making Progress

In the weeks and months that followed, more than 125,000 volunteers from across the U.S. poured into Joplin to help shovel debris, to set up distribution centers where people could go for food and toiletries, and to begin rebuilding or repairing homes. Some of them ended up staying and still are volunteering today.

Progress has been made: Schools were set up in vacant warehouses and a local mall and started on time on Aug. 17. Many of the damaged or destroyed businesses have rebuilt and reopened, and new homes are popping up every day.

On May 22, the city will remember those who lost their lives and those who helped with a Unity Walk.

The Joplin Globe newspaper went to press just one hour late—at 1 a.m.—on the morning of May 23. Despite the loss of a colleague and many of their own homes in the tornado, the staff was on the job providing news and information for their readers. Missouri Press Association has documented the staff's efforts in a film, "Deadline in Disaster."



Augie's bike helmet saves the day!

Augie, a 9-year-old Joplin boy, was safe because of good decisions by his mother, Natalie. She instructed him to put on his bike helmet, thinking of potential debris thrown up by the twister. When the tornado hit their home, the bathroom toilet was ripped from the floor and thrown through the air, striking Augie in the head. "I saw the tornado warning, I heard the sirens, I looked outside and I saw the dark cloud, and we made the split-second decision to take a blanket, take a pillow and our little puppy" and put them all with Augie inside the tub, overlaying it with a bed mattress, Natalie said. Their home was badly damaged, but Augie, his mother and the puppy survived.



Lexi, an everyday hero!

Eight-year-old Lexi, heard a warning on television that a tornado was heading toward her city. She insisted that her parents stop what they were doing and get in the car immediately to seek shelter at her grandparents' house, which has a basement.

Her mom and dad thought they would finish dinner first, but Lexi wouldn't let them. By going to her grandparents' house, they were safe and later learned that their home was destroyed. Had they stayed there, they might not have survived. Lexi was honored by the American Red Cross as an Everyday Hero and will receive a bronze cross for lifesaving this fall from the Girl Scouts.



This special feature was written by Andra Stefanoni of The Joplin Globe and produced by the Missouri Press Foundation.