

East Tennessee Disaster Response Team Report

**“The Wind Didn’t Blow Away Her Faith”
“From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord” (Psalm 121:1-2)**

REPORT OF PWNC DISASTER RESPONSE TEAM
Union, Trinity, and First, Lincolnton Churches
October 7-12, 2003 - Wartburg, TN

The sixteen of us who rode over the mountains into Tennessee had no idea how God would bless us. Those who had participated on other mission teams had learned to expect God’s presence in unexpected places. But even the “old hands” were taken aback by the strength, faith and graciousness of the women on whose homes we worked. But let’s go back to the beginning, eleven months ago, November 10, around 8 PM (time) to be exact.

Mrs. Macel Phillips, an 82-year-old widow, had just turned on her TV. Something told her to switch channels. When she did she got news of a tornado watch. She looked out of the window of her snug brick home and saw a black funnel coming over the mountain. Remarkably, she turned off the television before she moved to the canning room in her basement. She heard the roar and then the sound of crashing. When she finally peeked out of the room, she saw that her home was essentially gone. In its place were the possessions of others in her small community of Mossy Grove. On her stove lay another. There were two refrigerators in the debris as well.

Across the road another widow, Dara Hamm and her 16-year-old son Ryan thought they had fared better. The 50 year old family home stood...but it didn’t take long to discover it had moved 18 inches off the foundation. So they, too, like many others, were homeless. They were grateful that they were alive: 5 neighbors had been killed.

It was into this community that we arrived. We first had the pleasure of finishing Ms. Macel’s basement while she fussed over us, climbing up and down the stairs to bring coffee and cups on a tray carefully covered with a towel, baking a delicious apple cake. She proudly showed us the completed upstairs, that her insurance policy had paid for. But, she remarked sadly, that there was nothing left of her husband, who died six years ago. There were no memories in this new house. Our team was glad that we could create some happy new ones for her. She clapped her hands joyfully as we painted, paneled, “mudded” and hung doors. One team member described her perfectly when she observed, “The wind didn’t blow away her faith.” Her seven-year-old great-granddaughter Sydney came to visit and she, too, developed some memories of the strangers who came to help her nana because of God’s love. Tara Boggs invited her help paint a wall so she could also be a part of the rebuilding. Ms. Macel told us that before bedtime that night, Sydney’s prayer list was “a mile long” as she brought before God our team members.

Dara’s husband Mike died three years ago of cancer. Even during Mike’s illness, Dara refused the help of members of her Baptist church. She had been raised with the notion that one shouldn’t ask or accept help from others. She would survive. When her job of 25 years went to Mexico, she survived. Her big goal was to see that Ryan got to college. Then the tornado struck. Her house had to be demolished; seven days after she moved into her parents’ new home (theirs had also been destroyed), her father

suffered a massive stroke. Most recently Ryan broke his leg playing football. But still she spoke of God's blessings.

She told of a group of men from North Carolina who stopped by her house immediately after the tornado, asking if they could help. She was trying to cover the holes in her roof with plastic, so she gulped down her notion of not asking for help and told them she could use a hand with the plastic. But God had provided roofers, so rather than put on plastic they repaired the roof.

She didn't know our group had arrived until folks coming into the pharmacy where she works started asking her, "Do you know your house is being worked on?" She didn't, but when she was able to leave work at 6 pm, she came to have a look. We had left for the day, but she told us that when she looked at the wall we had erected she cried. She knew that she would have the money to send Ryan to University of Tennessee Chattanooga next year.

On the last day as we were working, a couple stopped and asked what we were doing. Then the woman asked what we were doing for lunch. "Well," Shortie explained, "We're having a discussion about whether to eat sandwiches another day or to go to Hardee's and buy some hamburgers." "That won't do, replied the owner of Partner's Pizza in Wartburg. "Let me get your orders." She did and half an hour later returned with pizzas and hamburgers. Someone asked how much we owed. "It's on me," she said. "We're just glad you're here."

Sure, Shortie McConnell and Tara Boggs were delighted to see that all the mudding, sanding, and painting they did resulted in beautiful white walls. Van Crawford, Jan Duncan and Bob Ball were pleased to install the doors, and Wendell Boggs the hardware, as well as to serve as the go-fer extraordinaire. Lewis Brooks and Billy Wilson negotiated the challenges of putting in paneling. Also Lewis just happened to bring along his electrical pouch; he hadn't done this on previous mission trips. So when we were asked if someone was capable of putting in three electrical boxes, he was ready. David Lawson, David Dellinger, Jackie Biddix, and Greg McBryde lent their knowledge of construction and muscles to laying out the flooring and putting in walls of Dara's house. Jackie Hartman, Carole Ball, Peggy Lafferty, and Ginnie Stevens enjoyed learning how to use nail guns as well as paint brushes. Yes, it was wonderful to see how we so quickly learned how to work together in spite of the differences in our skills.

But what almost every team member spoke about when reflecting on our time in Tennessee was the faith of the two women we helped. That and their tremendous thankfulness for our help. We are to a person grateful that we were able to hear their stories, to be part of their lives, to be welcomed into their community. We are grateful that God gave us this opportunity and hope that many others will hear the call to this kind of ministry.

To have someone speak to your congregation about this trip or learn about future trips, contact Ginnie Stevens at 828-438-4217.