

Photo: on the site where they daycare once stood.

Surviving the Storm

One UAMCC Member's Personal Experience with the Moore, Oklahoma Tornado

by Allison Hester, Editor

On May 20, shortly after Oklahoma City-residents Bryan Henson and wife Jami Sobkowiak, owners of Xstream Pressure Washing, heard that a tornado had hit their neighboring community of Moore, they loaded their dog into their work truck and headed to the area. "Honestly, the reason we went there in the first place was to assess what types of cleaning services we might be able to sell."

Never did they anticipate what they would find.

Bryan and Jami were two of the first people to arrive on the scene, even before most first responders, and before news stories of the severity of the damage had hit the air. "It looked like a war zone," he said. "Total devastation."

Bryan found he could not turn left because of all the destruction and debris on the road. To his right, where a neighborhood once stood, a single church, covered in mud remained. Jami could only mutter, "Oh my God. I don't understand."

Then they pulled over next to a police officer on the side of the road. "I remembered I had a brand new pack of work gloves in the back of the truck, so I grabbed them and started passing them out to the officers who were standing among the debris. That's all I could think to do."

When Bryan asked how they could help, the officer asked him to help clear the area because they were trying to get to the elementary school that had been hit.

Once the path was cleared, Bryan and Jami headed to the school where the young children were trapped in the debris. "We were there for the search and rescue, and people were everywhere trying to help however they could. I wasn't really even sure where to begin."

Someone told Brian to look for hard, flat surfaces that could be used for triage. They ran to the cafeteria where they scrounged up tables, then kicked doors off of hinges. Anything that could be used to carry out the

injured.

Then news of the first child fatality hit. Around that same time, the responders ordered everyone out because there were gas leaks all around. "A neighboring house caught on fire because of the gas leak, but there was nothing that could be done. They just let it burn."

Returning to their truck, they saw a young lady on the side of the road crying uncontrollably, so they asked if they could help. She explained she needed to get to the school. Her kindergarten-aged son was missing.

Bryan knew the children had been taken to "the church on the hill with a steeple" and so the young lady piled into the back of their truck, bawling, while they began their way toward the church – a mile and a half journey that took over 3 hours to reach.



Search and rescue at the elementary school. Bryan is in this photo taken by a news helicopter.

When they finally arrived, the young lady ran into the church, but there were no children there. Then they received good news. The young woman's boyfriend had picked up her son about 45 minutes prior. He had a few scrapes, but he was fine.

A Concerned Community

As Brian and Jami were experiencing the tornado's devastation first hand, industry friends from the UAMCC (United Association

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of Mobile Cleaning Contractors) – to which Bryan belongs – were frantically trying to check in on the couple. Calls. Texts. Posts on the Pressure Washing Institute (PWI) bulletin board including one entitled, “Bryan Henson, are you ok?” But he had no way to contact anyone.

Several hours later, Bryan and Jami made it home. Bryan was able to let his industry friends know he was indeed ok, and that they would be delivering water to the area the next day if anyone wanted to contribute. “The water treatment plant was down and there was no clean water.” The calls and donations from fellow UAMCC members began pouring in. “And these weren’t nickel and dime donations,” Bryan said. “These guys were donating hundreds of dollars.”

That next day, the couple headed back to Moore with their vehicles loaded down with as much water as they could carry – around \$300 worth. They could not get into the heart of the devastated area, but they found a small tent three women had set up outside of a church. The ladies had brought a kiddie pool full of ice, some water and Gatorade, and sandwiches they had made for the victims. Bryan asked if they needed some water, and they said they’d take all he had. “They were shocked to find how much we’d brought!”

More Donations

Additional UAMCC members began sending Bryan money to donate at his discretion. Additionally, Russ Johnson of Southside Equipment not only donated money out of his own pocket, he also donated Pressure Pro EB4035 – a 4 gpm, 3,500 psi belt driven pressure washer that retails for \$1650 – to auction off on PWI for the cause. It sold for \$1400 with shipping included.

“Bryan is a good customer, and I thought it admirable that he was willing to help others in his community rather than looking out for only himself. I wanted to help him,” Russ Johnson explained. “I know the money was used to benefit the people who were affected by the storm. How exactly, I left to Bryan’s



discretion. I feel sure the money went where it was needed most.”

Next, UAMCC Vice President Doug Rucker donated a flat surface cleaner he had recently purchased but decided he really didn’t need. It was bought by UAMCC member Tony Shelton for \$500, who turned around and auctioned it off again so more money could go to the victims.

Bryan chose to give the money to a preschool teacher who had lain on top of several young children when the eye of the storm passed over them. At that time, a little blonde girl, probably no more than 30 pounds, started to get sucked in by the tornado. The girl looked at her teacher, “I guess I’m flying!” The teacher grabbed the little girl’s leg and cried, “If you go, I go.” The little girl was saved. The teacher lost everything – her job, her car and her home.

“Don’t Call Me A Hero”

Since the tornado hit, Bryan has voluntarily cleaned several of Moore’s churches and homes, something he says he couldn’t have done a few years ago. “If it weren’t for the members of the UAMCC, I wouldn’t have learned how to be successful enough that I could afford to take off of work and help these people who’ve lost everything.”

Several industry members have referred to Bryan and Jami as heroes, a label Bryan is not comfortable wearing. “I’m not a hero. I’m just a vessel who was put in the right place to be able to help give back to my community that has suffered such great loss,” he explained. “Those UAMCC members who donated their resources for strangers are the real heroes. I wouldn’t have been able to help those people without their selfless generosity.”

To learn more about the UAMCC, go to www.UAMCC.org.