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Vision in a Time of Disaster

C.J. Huff recounts how Joplin Schools reopened with the help of community partnerships and a strong vision

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On May 22, 2011, one of the most destructive tornados in U.S. history levelled much of Joplin, Missouri. Dr. C.J. Huff, superintendent of Joplin Schools, said the tornado impacted 4,200 of the district's students, destroyed 600,000 square feet of school buildings and killed one staff member and seven students.

The tornado hit Joplin on the afternoon of graduation day. Huff remembers walking out of the graduation ceremonies and hearing a tornado siren and his cell phone ringing at the same time. It was his wife, calling to say that a tornado had been spotted north of Joplin.

Huff drove south, towards his house, and away from the spotted tornado. However, as he got closer to his neighborhood, winds from the west picked up. He remembers pulling into his subdivision and seeing a tree go down in front of his car. He made it home and rode the storm out in the basement with his wife.

The tornado ended up tearing through the southern part of the city, only about a quarter mile from Huff's home. The tornado was about a mile wide and was on the ground for 32 minutes. The images from the destruction show the strength of the storm — in one photo a piece of lumber pierces a concrete curb, another photo shows a chair embedded into the side of a concrete wall.

As Huff surveyed the damage,

he soon realized he had a much bigger challenge than helping his neighbors — he had to assemble his district leadership team to decide how to handle the situation.

The district leadership team met and quickly decided to cancel school for the rest of the year. That night, Huff appeared on national television. After the interview, he got a call from his dad who told him he was proud of him and also urged him to, “Now show them what you can really do.”

“About that time I realized I had a problem because my father thought I had a plan,” Huff said. “From a leadership standpoint, I was at a very lonely place as the gravity of our situation started to sink in.”

After thinking about his district's role in the recovery effort, Huff said it was clear the district's responsibility was to take care of Joplin's children.

“We're in the kid business — that's what we do,” Huff said. “I soon realized we can take care of our community by taking care of our kids the best we can.”

Looking back, Huff says having a vision was essential to recovery.

“You have to have a vision even in a crisis situation,” Huff said. “After the tornado, Joplin was an abysmal place but our vision helped us see a better place in the future.”

With this single vision, Huff and his leadership team worked to find facilities for displaced students to go to school in the fall and rebuild the

damaged schools as quickly as possible. Additionally, a team was created to attend funerals, and undamaged schools were opened to the community as shelters.

On August 17, 2011, school started again with 91 percent enrollment.

“Teachers were hugging kids, parents were hugging teachers,” Huff remembers. “If nothing else, we proved to the world that public education matters.”

The district's response serves as a model for districts recovering from a natural disaster. In addition to vision, Huff says community partnerships the district had forged in years prior to the tornado came through when disaster struck.

In one instance, Huff was able to work with a local mall to have displaced students use their facility as a school as theirs was being rebuilt. In another example, a group of women from a local church knit hats and scarves for every single student in a high-poverty school that was completely destroyed by the tornado.

Since the tornado, Joplin Schools have rebounded tremendously. The graduation rate has improved and the district opened three new schools. Huff recalled the story of one teacher who asked a student how he liked his new school. The teacher asked the student if it “feels like school” and the second-grade boy responded, “No, it feels like happiness.” ■