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After the Storm

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After the Storm

**In the wake of a tornado that destroyed his home,
John Hale '70 finds solace in others' kindness.**

**Story by LANA (WEISS)
BROWN '70**

The triumph of the human spirit trumps the story of human tragedy every time. It is no different in Joplin, Mo.

We have watched the trail left by one of America's most deadly tornadoes. It ripped through one of America's most idyllic hometowns on the edge of the Ozarks, changing the lives of its 49,000 people one Sunday night in May. By mid-June, the death toll from the massive storm had reached 155.



An overhead view of Joplin after a devastating tornado destroyed much of the town this past May.

Less than 24 hours after the tornado hit Joplin, I received a message from Mark Sheldon, a 1970 Wesleyan classmate in Hong Kong. From his post on the other side of the world, he broke the news that another of our classmates, John Hale '70, was in the direct path of the storm, and his home was demolished. Steve Burrichter '70 of Batavia, Ill., editor of the 1970 class newsletter, reinforced Mark's message, along with Ann Harding, IWU's alumni director.

Remembering John Hale was not hard. A brilliant English major whose very name seemed to fit a poet or a patriot, he was the resident advisor for Franklin Hall and president of our freshman class. Born and raised in Joplin, he intended to one day be a senator until the Vietnam War changed his career path. Following graduation, he taught American literature and creative writing at an Illinois public high school before finding his niche in human resources management. He retired last year.

Though our paths at Illinois Wesleyan crossed in humanities courses, and probably a few poetry readings at the Phoenix Coffee House, I did not know John well, but well enough to email a message of concern.

Less than 48 hours after pushing send, I received the following note:

"Lana, we now live at the Hampton Inn, but that's not all bad — free breakfast every morning and nice people have the coffee ready. Friends are helping. People coming by the house all day

serving sandwiches and water. Guys lug chainsaws clearing debris, but the losses are unbelievable.”

Later, I received another message from John through his hotel computer:

“Oddly, people who live far away initially had a far better understanding of the magnitude of the disaster here than we did. For most of two days, moving around town was very difficult. Power lines and trees blocked our street, and all streets in our area. ... We’ve been stunned as we’ve gradually come to understand the length and width of this tragedy,” John wrote.

“Nearly a mile wide when it got going, the tornado wallowed slowly along — tearing and gouging the middle of the town, west to east — for 13 awful miles,” John wrote in a later email. “Some 6,000 to 8,000 homes and businesses were badly damaged or destroyed. ... Virtually all the trees in the path were stripped of their limbs and bark. For block after block, mile after mile, my hometown looks like it was bombed.”

During the tornado, he and his wife Carolyn took cover in the interior bathroom of their home with a comforter under them and pillows over their heads.

“We had lots of warning,” he wrote. “The storm sirens sounded more than 20 minutes before the powerful storm rolled in from Kansas and descended on west Joplin. The sirens sounded again as the tornado touched down — a few minutes later it found us.”

In the midst of his devastated home, motel coffee and Sunday sandwiches, he thoughtfully answered my novice questions regarding the total loss of home and hearth.

It was time to ask, “What can we do for you?”

On Thursday, May 26 — four days after the tornado — he wrote:

“We’re going to be fine. Right now, we’re tired and sore, but working hard every day, digging out. Our adult sons are here from New York and Chicago to help. Good, close friends have pitched in. We’re healthy, unhurt and well-insured. So many people — literally thousands — have rubble piles where their homes and businesses were. ... We’re trying to see this horrible experience as an opportunity to declutter our lives, to save what matters and learn about compassion. And, boy, are we learning. Every hour, all day for three days, the church groups and volunteers have brought water up our streets, and about every three hours, volunteers bring sandwiches.

“We ask them — Who are you? Where are you from? They answer: Dallas ... Moberly ... Springfield ... on and on. Sometimes, Caroline and I weep for the sheer kindness of it all.”

This story was adapted by from an article that originally appeared in the Daily Journal (Kankakee, Ill.).

To view a listing of donating or volunteer opportunities to assist with disaster relief efforts in Missouri, [click here.](#)