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## Mending the Path of Destruction

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## Students, alumni help community decimated by tornado

By KIM HILL



***Communities in Central Illinois were devastated by an EF-4 tornado on Nov. 17. Days later, IWU student athletes mobilized to assist cleanup efforts. (Photo by Kristy Duncan)***

Before Nov. 17, 2013, when Al Black '79 told AT&T colleagues across the country that he lives in Washington, Ill., they invariably asked, "Where is that?" Now, people respond to a reference to Washington with a knowing nod and "Oh, yes, we know where that is."

Washington became the epicenter of national attention that day after an EF-4 tornado struck the central Illinois community of about 15,000 people. The storm damaged or leveled buildings in nearby Pekin, East Peoria and other communities in the area. Washington, however, received the brunt of the storm's fury, with winds peaking at 190 mph when they hit the community. Approximately 1,100 homes were destroyed, including those of at least 13 alumni.

That Sunday morning Black was playing basketball with several other men in an elementary school gymnasium when the town's tornado sirens blared. "A few of the guys went out to look at the sky, but like idiots, we kept playing," says Black. "Then the lights went off and everybody ran for cover."

Thankfully, no Illinois Wesleyan lives were lost that day. Outside of Chicago and McLean County, the greater Peoria area is home to more IWU alumni than anywhere else in Illinois.

The winds had hardly died down before IWU alumni and staff began to check on each other and to organize help wherever assistance could be offered. "Early Monday morning I received calls from [IWU President] Dick Wilson, from Adriane [Powell, Assistant Director of Alumni Relations], and from Stew Salowitz [Sports Information Director]," says Black, who serves as president of the Peoria Alumni Region. "They were all calling to see if we needed help." The property of Al and his wife, Beth (Uphoff) '81, suffered no damage, but the home of their son Randy and his family was heavily damaged and could not be salvaged.

By Tuesday, IWU's Student-Athlete Advisory Committee had mobilized, led by Mike Wagner, associate athletic director and director of the Shirk Athletic Complex, and Assistant Volleyball Coach Kristy Duncan, whose sister lives in Washington. More than 100 student-athletes and several coaches assisted with cleanup efforts in the community. At home basketball games and the football game during the weekend of Nov. 22-23, Titan supporters donated about \$1,000 for the Washington School District and more than 3,000 items of clothing and other items.

Others with IWU connections reported similar acts of generosity. For several years Mike Melick '02 has run an annual English-style cross-country race to benefit the El Paso-Gridley Cross Country team. The team and their parents voted that proceeds this year would go to help their neighbors in Washington.

Halfway across the country, IWU alumni led by Scott Huch '86, president of the University's Washington, D.C. Regional Club — along with a coalition of alumni from Illinois State, Bradley and other central Illinois colleges and universities — raised more than \$9,000 for the American Red Cross through a Happy Hour event.

Al Black reports that Washington has received overwhelming care and support not just from friends such as IWU but also from complete strangers around the world. As of late December, Black reported that Washington was still in “recovery mode” with people from throughout central Illinois volunteering to remove the tons of debris that remain. “This help allows the locals to focus on the tasks at hand to get back to a new level of normal, whether that is moving to a temporary home or trying to inventory all the belongings that were lost.”

One week after the tornado hit, student-athletes were still helping homeowners recover whatever they could. “Several of them were looking for homeowners' wedding rings,” says Wagner. “My daughter's group found a homeowner's sport watch, which thrilled the owner. It's a small thing, but it was the owner's favorite, and it meant a lot to her to find it. Those were the things the athletes talked a lot about on the ride home.”

Beth Black grew up in Washington, and she and Al moved to the community from Chicago's northwest suburbs in 2000 because they believed it was a great place to raise a family. That's still true, says Al, who estimates it may be three to four years before Washington is rebuilt. “This is a strong community, and we will build it so it's better,” Black vows. “The emotions are still very raw right now, but the caring concern and support we have received from IWU and from around the world has been overwhelming and is greatly appreciated.”