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SIUE students visit Joplin one year later

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Regional

SIUE students visit Joplin one year later

In the afternoon of May 22, 2011, a devastating, multiple-vortex tornado struck Joplin, Mo. With a width of more than a mile, it destroyed the southern part of this city of about 50,000. 161 people died and almost a thousand others were injured. The cost of the damage has been estimated to be as high as \$3 billion. On the eve of the first anniversary of this tragedy we visited Joplin, accompanying students from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville who are enrolled in a class titled "Storm Chasing and Assessment" under the direction of Mark Hildebrandt, who I interviewed for this column last week. The students took the opportunity to speak with some of the survivors, including Jessica Brown, who had recently moved to Joplin from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for a job at a local Joplin TV station.

"I was at home when I heard the siren going off," Brown said. "I told my boyfriend who was with me at that time that we needed to run into the bathtub and cover ourselves with pillows. The tornado came and we could hear the sounds and the screams of people. The tub was suctioning in and out. And then silence. From then on it was unreal. People were walking around, checking for survivors. It was like in the movies."

The storm reached the highest level on the scale that is used to measure tornadoes, with winds of more than 200 mph. According to some estimates, about 2,000 buildings – roughly 20 percent of Joplin – were destroyed. The St. John's Regional Medical Center was heavily damaged and is now being demolished. Six people were killed when this hospital was struck by the tornado. Five of those deaths were patients on ventilators who died after the building lost power and the backup generator did not work.

According to a recent article in The New York Times, the Joplin tornado was the costliest in U.S. history since 1950. Insurance companies are expected to cover the \$2.8 billion in damages, while taxpayers are



Photo by Daniel Martinez

Students and others visiting a rebuilt city park across the street of St. John's Medical Center in Joplin, Mo., a year after the tornado that devastated that city. Among them are Dr. Mark Hildebrandt, second from left and a survivor, Jessica Harris, fourth from left.

supplying about \$500 million in federal and state disaster aid, low-interest loans and local bonds.

For SIUE students the experience of visiting Joplin was very emotional. Many of them are from small communities in Illinois and are keenly aware that what happened in Joplin could happen to their own home-

towns.

"I can't even imagine losing your high school and all the buildings," said one of the students. "It is devastating."

Joplin High School was destroyed. The day the tornado struck was graduation day and no one was on campus at the time of the tornado. The graduation ceremo-

nies took place about three miles away at Missouri Southern State University and had concluded shortly before the tornado struck.

A student from O'Fallon, Ill., said that she now understands how people living in houses with basements fared much better because they had a place to seek refuge.

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

"Now I know where to go when the sirens go off," she said.

In the aftermath of the tornado, Joplin officials announced plans to require fasteners between houses and their foundations, but so far no requirement for concrete basements in new houses has been issued.

Another SIUE student from Springfield, Ill., had experienced first hand the 2006 tornado that struck that city. Yet, he said that there was no comparison between what hit the Illinois capital and the one in Joplin when it came to intensity.

Some of the stories at Joplin were both heroic and horrifying. Such was the case of the Pizza Hut restaurant on South Range Line Road, where the store manager, Christopher Lucas, led four employees and 15 customers into a walk-in freezer. The door could not be shut so Lucas wrapped a cable holding the door shut around his arm to protect the people inside. He was sucked into the tornado. His body was recovered later.

The SIUE students who went to Joplin brought back many lessons – as many about human nature as about natural disasters.

"Disaster kind of brings us together," said one student. "Because the street lights went off people took cues from each other to direct traffic while many food drives were set up."

Brown echoed this sentiment. "Everyone is terrified every time we hear about a storm coming," she said. Yet, she added, "Everyone came together to heal each other."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.