

Disaster

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"Zach looked out the window and said, 'Oh my, look at these trees blowing so hard!' Then I felt an absence of (air) pressure. I don't know how to explain that (feeling), but I said, 'Zach, we need to get downstairs RIGHT NOW!'" Steiner said.

"We ran downstairs, and the second we shut the door, all we heard was shattering windows that lasted about three to five minutes. Honestly, all I remember hearing is trees falling and glass breaking. I couldn't stop thinking of the Haiti earthquake as this was happening. I guess I must have blocked (out) a lot of the sounds."

Steiner considers herself fortunate, as the house she bought last August is brick. The home sustained damage, and for her personal use, she is rounding up sanitation kits and cleaning supplies, along with air mattresses.

In addition, the back window of her car was shattered, and insurance won't cover it.

Steiner found little remaining when she emerged from the storm.

"Everything's gone here — taken off somewhere that we don't know," she said. "There were tons of trees and debris everywhere."

She could only describe the scene as "complete destruction."

"Two blocks down the street

from my house, everything was gone. I couldn't even tell what street I was on, and this is a street I traveled every day for work. I couldn't even recognize it," she said.

"I saw cars wrapped around light poles and mothers holding their babies — people trying to salvage even a little bit of their house or lives."

Steiner has been in contact with some of her fellow teachers and students but not all of them. "The communication (by phone) is terrible, so I'm just trying to get a hold of all my (students)," she said.

Her fiancée has lost his job because the tornado destroyed his place of work.

The school district has set up a website at JoplinSchools.org for collecting donations to help the community, Steiner said. The relief effort can also be found on Facebook. To the best of her knowledge, shelters are set up for those without a home, but she doesn't know the long-term plan.

While it would be easy to feel despair after surviving two disasters, Steiner maintains her strong religious faith.

"Always turn to God," she said. "I have no idea why I was chosen to be allowed to go through both of these (disasters), but I just look to God for guidance and to help me get through it."

REACHING OUT FROM YANKTON

Brad Doerr and his wife, Deb, were attending a graduation party in Yankton Sunday when Brad received a strange phone call around 6 p.m.

"My brother-in-law called from Las Vegas and said he needed to talk to me," Doerr said. "He was watching The Weather Channel and had seen that this tornado hit Joplin. He wondered if we had talked to Matt. I told him that I didn't know anything about it. Then I turned to call Matt and I couldn't get through. You had all these thoughts race through your mind."

After repeated attempts at phone calls, Doerr finally reached his son through texting. The younger Doerr and Sieler were both safe, but Brad and Deb Doerr, their daughter Nicole; their son, Nate, and his girlfriend, Samantha Winckler; and Sieler's mother, Jennifer Barry, left Yankton at 11 p.m. Sunday for the eight-hour drive to Joplin.

Due to poor communication lines that still plague the Joplin area, Matt Doerr and Sieler could not be reached for this story. However, Brad Doerr provided an account of what he learned from his son and found upon arriving in Joplin.

The young couple live in neighboring Webb City and heard the sirens sounding a tornado alert. They checked online and found the tornado headed for their apartment building. The couple headed to Joplin for shelter, but the storm changed direction and the couple mistakenly headed into its path.

Matt drove at right angles to the tornado but found the need to abandon the car and find shelter.

"They were too close to the tornado, so they stopped at a gas station. People were huddled against the wall," Brad Doerr said.

"They had locked the door, and Matt and Michaela were yelling at them to open the door and let them into the gas station. They all got into the cooler just as the tornado hit."

The chaotic scene was captured on video and posted on YouTube. The five-minute clip starts with confusion as the people found their way into the cooler. The scene then goes silent, as the group sensed an ominous presence.

Then there is a roar as the tornado hits and those trapped in the cooler scream what appears to sound like prayers, cries for help and even farewells as the group didn't know if they would survive the ordeal.

"To see that on YouTube, that just brought us to tears, it was so emotional," Brad Doerr said.

"They were praying all the time (in the cooler), and God had an intervention. If you saw the convenience store, there is no way anyone should have lived."

Matt Doerr welcomed his father's offer of immediately coming to Joplin.

"We had communicated just by text, but you could tell Matt was pretty shook up," Brad said. "We had just gone there about a week and a half ago for an awards banquet. For the awards banquet, Matt said there was no need to come down, it was no big deal. But this time, when we said we were coming down (after the tornado), he didn't fight it. He just texted back, 'Thank you!'"

The Doerrs texted back and forth until 2 a.m. Monday, but the South Dakota family members

were still shocked and unprepared for what they found when they pulled into Joplin five hours later.

"It was like a war zone. It was overwhelming. We were walking down the street to Matt's car. We had to dig it out because it had been crushed (by debris)," Brad said. "His car is totaled. All of the windows are broken out, and every piece of metal is bent, but the car started right up. The worst part, all Matt carried was liability insurance, but he just texted that FEMA might help out."

The sights they encountered along the way to the car was filled with devastation, Brad said.

"It was so bad. There were branches all around and downed power lines," he said. "People were looking where their houses had been, but there was nothing but grass and trees. One house stood and the next three were hit. There are a lot of displaced people. But the college didn't get hit hard, and I think they may open up the dorms for people to stay."

The tornado cut through the commercial businesses and wreaked havoc, Brad said. "We were just down there a week and a half ago, and the same buildings aren't there," he said.

Matt Doerr went by his former apartment building, and everything was gone, his father said.

"Matt used to live with two other guys," Brad said. "One roommate pulled a mattress over him (in the bathroom) and stayed hidden. He crouched between the stool and bathtub. After the storm passed, he stood up and was the tallest thing in the house."

Brad was unable to reach his

son on Wednesday night to learn more about the other former roommate, who has not been located.

"The last we knew (Tuesday night), the roommate's house was gone, and they found his pickup with the lights on," Brad said.

Because Joplin's cell-phone service was disrupted, local radio stations filled the communications void, Brad said.

"You tuned in to the radio stations and they had quit playing music. They were using the radio stations to send messages. Every station in town was doing it," Brad said.

"People didn't know if their loved ones were alive. Search-and-rescue was going around, spray-painting an 'X' after they were done going through somewhere. You could tell if they found bodies because an area was roped off."

Because of the continued rainfall while they were in Joplin, the South Dakota family members couldn't help much and decided to return home.

Matt Doerr and Sieler have remained in Joplin and are helping with cleanup as part of their sense of community. Sieler was photographed during clean-up by Reuters, the British news agency.

Matt Doerr and Sieler are volunteering for Joplin relief efforts, Brad said. They are also continuing their jobs and plans for summer classes when normal life — or what passes for it — resumes at some point, he said.

"I'm proud of those kids," Brad said. "It's a tremendous relief to see they are all right. But it takes your breath away that anybody could survive (that tornado)."

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