



Remembering One of Worst Disasters in Missouri's History: Red Cross Volunteers Recall Joplin Tornado 10 years later

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ST. LOUIS, MO. - Within hours after a historic, mile-wide tornado hit Joplin, MO, the American Red Cross arrived to provide protection and comfort to thousands whose homes were damaged and destroyed.

That May 22, 2011, storm killed 162 people, caused more than 1,000 injuries, damaged more than 4,000 homes and displaced 9,200. The Red Cross brought in nearly 900 trained disaster response volunteers from all over the nation to provide food and shelter, comfort kits, tarpaulins, coolers, tools for cleaning up and the services of Red Cross Disaster Mental Health and Disaster Spiritual Care teams.

Just before the disaster, the Red Cross had signed a memorandum of understanding with Missouri Southern State University in Joplin, establishing MSSU as a shelter partner in case of a major emergency. When the tornado hit, MSSU served an essential role in offering shelter and food to displaced residents.

“We had no cellphone service, so we were communicating through ham radio channels,” recalled Chris Harmon, Regional Disaster Officer for American Red Cross, Missouri and Arkansas Region. “My first job was to get volunteers to MSSU to open the shelter, then find a rallying point for what would be hundreds of Red Cross volunteers coming in from places as far away as Hawaii. Eventually we had a headquarters set up to start the coordinated response.

During the aftermath of the Joplin disaster, Harmon, then Red Cross Director of Emergency Services for southwestern Missouri, moved back and forth between his base in Springfield, MO, where he had to deploy volunteers to multiple other storms, and Joplin. The Joplin tornado was one of many natural disasters that year.

“At the time, my wife also worked in Springfield, and I had to figure out child care since I was at the office all day and into the night,” Harmon recalled. “So I brought my then one-year-old and four-year-old to work. Quickly one of our volunteers took on child care duties in the ‘can-do’ spirit of the Red Cross.”

During the few hours when he slept the first couple nights, Harmon recalled waking up worried about Joplin residents who were Red Cross volunteers and who had not been accounted for--- they were found alive. He was thankful his Red Cross team was accounted for, but also thought about all the many others who did not manage to survive.

Now working in **St. Louis** and a resident of **Imperial, MO**, Harmon said his first deployment was in New York City in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers. He was a Red Cross Case Worker who interviewed shoe shiners and gave them emergency funds. That experience impacted him to this day. Since then, he’s served leadership roles at roughly 70 disasters – from floods, to wildfires, tornados, hurricanes and manmade catastrophes like 9-11. Joplin stands out for him as a site of some of the greatest devastation he has ever seen.

“When we first went down there, we were in awe. Weeks after, I remember standing next to now national American Red Cross CEO and President Gail McGovern who had come down to Joplin. Her jaw dropped at the scene. I remember her thanking me for making sure we took care of everyone impacted by this disaster.”

The citizens noticed the attention senior leadership was paying to Joplin and the resources Red Cross poured into the community. “Usually at least 68 percent of disaster respondents rank Red Cross performance as ‘excellent,’” Harmon said. “But Joplin respondents gave us a 96 percent ‘excellent’ rating.”

Red Cross Regional Volunteer Services Officer Kobi Gillespie also led teams of Red Cross staff in Joplin—but she was there a year later. “While much of the rubble has been cleared, and new houses and stores had sprouted up, many scars remained, not all of them visible. The path of the tornado was still very apparent because all the trees had been wiped out, and only new houses stood in that area. Even a year later, for many survivors the memory of May 22 was still raw and painful.”

During her two-year stint in Joplin, Gillespie directed a team of several long-term case workers who advocated for survivors, finding resources for them and helping them navigate through the thicket of programs offered by multiple agencies.

In that period, Gillespie also served as Regional Preparedness and Recovery Officer, working with multiple agencies to coordinate recovery efforts and supporting Red Cross volunteers who came to Joplin to help.

Gillespie began her Red Cross career as Executive Director of the Southwest Missouri Chapter based in Joplin. The native of Lubbock, Texas, had lived in Miami and Los Angeles before moving to Joplin. After earning her bachelor's degree, Gillespie decided to apply for a CPR instructor job at the Red Cross.

"I went in for an interview, and they hired me to become the Executive Director instead," she said, laughing.

In 2004, Gillespie moved to **St. Louis** to serve as the liaison between the national Red Cross organization and chapters in Missouri, Illinois and Iowa. The resident of **St. Charles County** has worked for the Red Cross in various support roles since then, with the exception of four years, when she held training and community relations positions in other organizations. During that time, Gillespie also earned a master's degree in applied communications with a graduate certificate in conflict and dispute resolution.

"I keep coming back to the Red Cross," said Gillespie. "I just love working for an organization that is so dedicated to helping others."

She added that in her many years with the Red Cross she has seen what a difference the organization can make in the recovery of so many communities. "Every community works hard to come back from a traumatic event. But the people of Joplin were remarkable in their spirit of perseverance and resilience. They were determined to rebuild and restore their community. I was grateful to play a small role in helping them do that."

Summary of Red Cross support to Joplin following tornado May 22, 2011 tornado:

- In the days following the tornado, Red Cross provided 3,450 overnight shelter stays, nearly 86,000 meals, and nearly 200,000 items for clean-up efforts.
- The Red Cross assisted more than 1,500 families helping them with immediate needs and through the recovery process by connecting them with local partner organizations.
- Red Cross made nearly 5,800 health contacts and nearly 6,800 mental health contacts following the tornado.

- Nearly 900 Red Cross disaster workers supported the Joplin community.