

Devastation in Joplin: Tornado Challenges Tower Technician to Give Back A tech's account of a tornado's aftermath that challenged him to give back

July, 2011

By J.L. Lane, Communications Tower Technician, PDQ Tower Services



Tower tech J.L. Lane was one of many workers who helped restore communications to Joplin, MO after the tornado. He provides a moving description of the days he spent there and how a little girl's shoe is making a difference in his life.

On May 22, 2011, I was getting dinner ready and nestling down to watch world news and then 60 minutes, my Sunday evening ritual. In the middle of preparing the plates I heard that Joplin had been hit by a big tornado. No one really knew at

the time just how big but the first reports were looking grim. I had a strong feeling I needed to start packing a bag. I am a tower technician and crew leader with PDQ Tower Services and the main bulk of my employment is in the cellular market, a major part of my work in the southern part of Missouri.

The City of Joplin is an area where many of our long time customers are and I had no doubts where I would be headed Monday morning. I had previously seen small towns and fields where tornados had touched down and had seen a few pictures of what the Alabama tornados had done to some towers, but nothing in my life, - no movie, no news footage and no pictures - could prepare me for the mass devastation and sadness I was about to witness.

The expected Monday morning call came and they needed whatever crews were available. Jeremy, a technician in the area, said they had no service whatsoever in the impact zone. We were at Def-Con 4 status. We high-tailed it to the warehouse, got as much of everything we would need, stopped at Walmart for food and water and set off into the unknown. Some of my younger guys on the crew were anxious to get down there and see just what they had been watching on the news. Youthful curiosity, I guess. I on the other hand had an uneasy feeling about it. Something inside was telling me I was headed into a sea of sadness, I was right.

Upon arrival, I met a technician in Carthage, handed off some radio cards and was told to go on stand-by. We checked into to our rooms and decided to go on a recon of some sites that were hit. As we rolled into town another massive storm was descending upon Joplin. No tornado this time around, just torrential rains to add to an already very chaotic situation. On the outer edges of town we saw signs and debris scattered about, some but not all trees were damaged.

I knew Joplin well as my mother's family was from Lamar which is 30 miles north. As a lad I would spend summers with my aunt Paula and on Fridays she would take me to Joplin for a dinner and a movie. I also had done a considerable amount of work here so I was no stranger to the town.



The closer we got to the center of town the more the ugly face of what this tornado had done to the heart of Joplin began to reveal itself. The truck cab went silent as we all tried to take in what we were seeing; comprehension and reasoning were out the window and the overwhelming feeling of heartache and sadness set in on us all. There are no words that can accurately describe with justice what I had seen that first day and the three that followed. The closest thing I had ever seen to this destruction were pictures of Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped. It seemed to go on as far as the eye could see. People standing around on mounds that they used to call home, others walking around aimlessly looking for some kind of familiarity to gain some bearings on where they were. No animals were seen running around, no birds were flying, just debris and confusion being covered by endless rain.

Looking out at the scattered remains it all seemed like just mounds of wood, glass, drywall and steel with some clothing thrown in the mix. When I looked closer I began to see children's toys, people's pictures, a wedding dress or what was left of it in the splintered toothpick protruding from the ground that used to resemble a tree.

I am by nature a thick skinned, stern person. I have to be, I work in heavy construction and I am also a crew leader in what many call one of the most dangerous occupations in the world, but at that moment it took every bit of strength I had not to break down like a 41 year old baby.

After leaving the site of the cross and Mother Mary that were left standing we made our way back to get some rest. As we were leaving I saw a couple in their mid 70's standing on top of their home/mound of rubble. Neither had a raincoat nor did they look like they cared that they didn't. Both were bent at the waist and knees, him with his left hand, her with her right hand both extended sifting through the debris looking for any remnants that they had accumulated through a long life together. Their other hands were locked together for stability on unstable ground; the tornado took everything from them but their love for one another. I started to take a picture but then I drew my camera back, I just couldn't do it; it didn't feel right.

The next day after making some adjustments at a tower just outside the impact zone we were asked to set up a mobile tower behind the Walmart that got hit on East 20th. Upon arrival it was still chaotic. What to do, how to do it, and where do we start?



4180 E Sand Ridge Rd. | Morris, IL 60450
 800.435.1636 tel | 800.767.7605 fax
 sales@primuselectronics.com
 www.primuselectronics.com

Once everything arrived we had the site up and on air in four hours. When I arrived back at my room another worker from a different trade asked me had we put up a site near the hardest hit area of Rangeline Road. After informing him that we did he told us his signal was very much hit and miss until around 5:00 p.m. and then it went to full signal. It felt good to know that we were making some kind of contribution. At the site a 200-foot self support tower had collapsed into the apartment complexes located to the north directly behind Pepsi and Walmart.

In my downtime I had talked to some of the residents who had said no one lost their lives in the complex. I was asked to go on stand-by Wednesday while everybody figured out what sites were damaged and what we needed to do. Meanwhile I was scheduled to put up another mobile tower off of Shifferdecker Rd. that night; units were on their way from Dallas. It was going to be a very long day. That stand-by time setting between the Walmart & Home Depot, was tough on me. People were looking for any remains of their home to the right of me while search and rescue were to the left looking for bodies in Home Depot and Walmart, recovering three the day I was there. If called upon I will be there but I hope I never have to have a day like that day again as long as I live.



That night we all converged upon a field to set up the mobile tower unit and with the teamwork of all involved it went flawlessly. We finished that day and went into the next on less than two hours of sleep.

Out in that field that evening one of my crew members stumbled upon a little girl's dress shoe, the kind that she would wear to church on Easter Sunday. This shoe had no business in the middle of a field and we all could only hope and pray that the princess that this shoe belonged to was safe in the warmth of her parents' embrace.

I am home now but I am finding it hard to put behind what I have seen. It was not all negative by far. All the different companies that are otherwise competitors were working together for a common goal. The locals that weren't affected came out to help those that were. The different emergency agencies and law enforcement that are dealing with this disaster that has never been seen on this scale in this area are truly dedicated.



I know that after my experiences in Joplin I will always have a piece of Joplin in me and a piece of me will always remain in Joplin. I look forward to helping the town rebuild and move past this tragedy.

I have created a project called The Joplin Shoe Project: Soles for Souls, quality work boots and gloves for all, quality children's and elderly shoes. The little girl's shoe in the field was the inspiration and I can't just sit back while people in my own backyard are suffering. I have to do something more.



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The Joplin Shoe Project: Soles for Souls

JOIN US IN HELPING THOSE IN NEED: Relief for Joplin Tornado Victims

A nice pair of shoes has always lifted spirits from young to old & women to men. That is why J.L. Lane created The Joplin Shoe Project: Soles for Souls which is a hands-on project designed to get the donations straight to those affected by the tornado that ripped through the middle of Joplin on May 22, 2011. These good folks lost almost everything when this devastation swept down upon them which was followed with a day and a half of torrential rain, ruining what little belongings were left behind.

Lane is asking for good quality work boots, shoes, safety glasses, and glove donations so the locals can safely clean their property for weeks to come. Good quality shoes are needed in all sizes including adult and children sizes. He cannot stress enough the good quality part (please no torn shoes or gloves). A comfortable pair of shoes to clean up the devastation is a luxury item to those who lost everything. These donations will give them hope when it seems all hope has been shattered.

Working in the communications field, Lane is taking a hands-on approach to giving back to a community who desperately needs it: If interested in donating, please send donations within the next few weeks as these folks desperately need them; donations will continue being accepted as they are received. All items will be delivered by the core group involved & all deliveries will be recorded & streamed via YouTube-Joplin Shoe Project: Soles for Souls, for all to see.

JOIN PRIMUS IN HELPING THIS WORTHY FUNDRAISER FOR THOSE IN NEED:

If you would like to donate, below is a list of items needed, in all sizes and in good quality:

- Work boots, safety glasses & work gloves; please no winter gloves
- Shoes-preferably comfortable tennis/gym shoes
- Children's shoes of all types & sizes

No monetary donations can be accepted. Gift cards for shoe retailers can be sent; receipts will be retained or returned at donors request. Online purchases at WalMart will also be accepted. At this time this is a grass roots movement but with all of our help we can make it happen. Thank you for any support you may offer and rest assured: it is and will be greatly appreciated!

