

Moving Forward: My Reflections on the Tuscaloosa Tornado

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On April 27, 2011, a devastating tornado barreled through Tuscaloosa, Alabama, leaving a brutal six-mile scar in the heart of the small college town. Largely defined by the state's flagship institution, Tuscaloosa is home to the University of Alabama. In this article, I chronicle my experiences as an administrator at the university while working alongside a unique group of students whose mission to serve their community would soon gain new significance. The emotions, thoughts, and responses captured here are my own, and my story is one perspective of many.

This particular Wednesday was bustling in the office of Orientation and Special Programs. Only a few weeks shy of the summer orientation season, I rushed to finalize projects and prepare for our upcoming orientation leader retreat. Meteorologists predicted severe weather, so we were dismissed at 3 p.m. Responding with sleepy complacency, I drove home, enjoying my extra moments of freedom. I did not fear the worst until the Tuscaloosa SkyCam projected horrifying images of what would later be identified as an EF4 tornado. In the hours following the storm, social media sites spawned images of naked homes, dangling power lines, and mangled cars. News anchors speckled the perimeter of the worst damage, and I held my breath wondering, *Could it be this bad?*

The following day, the university suspended its regular hours of operation. This time, the unexpected freedom stripped me of a foolish hope that all would fall back into place quickly. The hours of April 28 advanced at an excruciatingly slow rate, punctuated by outreach from others seeking to confirm my well-being. One particular message alerted me to the reality of the situation and to my responsibility for students. Only slightly coming out of the fog I was enveloped in, I read carefully, "Just wanted to let you know I texted the entire orientation team and everyone I have heard from is o.k." *Could any one of our 50-member orientation team be anything but safe?* Grateful for the text from one of our senior leaders, I sent an e-mail offering support to our students.

As my fears heightened about the security of our students, the university responded efficiently and with constant communication. Classes were suspended, graduation postponed, and students were encouraged to travel home as soon as they could do so safely. The campus had remained untouched by the storm, allowing the university to become an immediate resource for recovery efforts. With the Student Recreation Center used as a temporary shelter—and soon the

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residence halls and the stadium as well—the typical procedures enforced by any of our facilities operations became no longer relevant. In fact, most daily tasks seemed inappropriate. In my own world, the planning process for orientation lost importance. But for the office and for the team, our greatest responsibilities in Tuscaloosa were just beginning. This unfortunate circumstance of timing caused a series of curious and beautiful events to unfold among the orientation team.

Some of our orientation leaders left Tuscaloosa immediately, while others began volunteering the same evening of the storm. I did not know myself if orientation would proceed as planned, leaving me to question how we could possibly transition more than 7,000 new students to our community without inviting them to Tuscaloosa. Hypothetical scenarios permeated my thoughts until I finally received confirmation that our first orientation program would take place as scheduled on May 16. My focus shifted quickly to the team; I announced to our students that training would resume without delay. Our off-site retreat would be the first of their obligations since the storm. I faced resistance: “Our time would be better served rebuilding the community.”

I sensed that some of the student orientation leaders felt guilty, even angry, that we would inhibit their commitment to Tuscaloosa. Several of our students had not paused, volunteering each day from dawn to dusk to remove tree limbs and sort through the rubble alongside first responders. These were the ones who needed most to get away from the rebuilding efforts. A proliferation of Facebook messages, e-mails, and texts imparted their daily volunteer efforts. Amidst their desire to help, these students were neglecting to take care of themselves.

With encouragement, everyone attended the retreat one week post-tornado. The opportunity to take our students far from Tuscaloosa to process recent events seemed perfect and, in retrospect, I would say crucial. I knew it would be difficult with 50 students, but we needed a reflection period. The enormity of what had happened was too great to address with a high-ropes course activity. A trust fall seemed rudimentary. The magnitude of this tragedy appeared to accelerate the group’s development by months; we needed to directly confront our experiences. As our first evening at the retreat came to a close, we sat in a large, oddly-shaped circle, tentatively preparing to share emotions, stories and perspectives related to April 27. I stepped into the center, nervously holding my handouts on “How to Cope.”

I cannot say what breadth of experiences I imagined our students would bring to light. I did know we had students present whose lives had been directly threatened, not just affected, by the storm. The “safe space” we created for conversations was soon filled with fear, sadness, compassion, and hope. I was naïve to think that we could seek some sort of solace in one meeting.

Our dialogue was not limited to the tornado. One student drew parallels between the storm and a fire that consumed her childhood home years before. Another came forward, expressing fear she had for her family in Louisiana where current floods threatened her hometown. Others spoke of having two “homes” devastated by the storm’s wrath in one day. We were reminded that darkness befell more cities than Tuscaloosa on April 27.

We heard from the most outspoken and the most reticent. Without prompts, the students spoke of “dealing differently.” After the tornado, some immediately sought distance—both physically and mentally—from the city, the media coverage, and the clean-up efforts. Others needed to find a distraction or a sense of control among the chaos, something the physical labor of removing tree limbs or the monotonous act of sorting donations could offer. Immersion into the thick of it all can, strangely enough, resurrect a sense of calm.

We had visited a range of emotions and found ourselves exhausted by the sheer scope of our experiences. For the first time, many spoke openly about a historic event that would change their lives. We learned about individuals’ faith and spirituality, a collectively renewed gratitude for life, and an altered sense of our team’s meaning. I then understood that these students would be perfect role models for new students at the university; a trauma for the community had turned out to be a revolution for the team. The strengths we identified in selecting team leaders were brilliantly illuminated by the stress of their environment. When we returned to our responsibilities as an orientation staff, it was as though we all carried with us a secret, extraordinary bond.

Orientation commenced as planned. The losses suffered within our community were not easy to move past as we continued with our summer program. We were fortunate for our students leaders who displayed resilience and a constant hope for a better future. They taught me the truest form of servant leadership and to raise my expectations. They taught me that even the most challenging of times can unite people if you allow them the opportunity.

Our orientation team has a unique but fitting name developed by a former orientation director in 1975 for his love of a classic American automobile and its Italian meaning, “to move forward.” He believed that these student leaders helped others move forward with their pursuit of a higher education. Thirty-six years later, this team continues to fulfill that role in the lives of incoming students, yet April 27 brought about a new meaning of moving forward for each of us in the orientation frontier at UA. As one student stated simply at the retreat, “We are the Avanti Team, and Avanti means to move forward. We will move forward from this.” I am proud and humbled that our orientation leaders enabled incoming students to do just that.