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Tornado - A Narrative
By Darla Chambliss, Assistant Director and Community Development Librarian, Dade County Public Library

Early Morning

On the morning of Wednesday, August 27th, I heard this strange sound at my house – I thought it must be a home alarm gone wild, but it wasn’t in my house. I finished my coffee and headed off to work. My family headed to work and school as usual.

When I arrived at work I overheard a conversation in my library director’s office. Lecia Eubanks was on the telephone with Carmella Clark, the manager at our Rossville Library branch, who was explaining that she needed to leave work immediately to make sure that her home and family were safe. Lecia walked into my office and said, “Darla, is Armageddon occurring outside and we are just oblivious to it?” Then her phone rang again and the caller was Dade County Library Manager Marshana Sharp. Marshana explained to Lecia that shopping carts from the Ingles Grocery store located next door were “flying around outside the library.”

The children’s department office and storage area roof was removed by the storm in several places.
“Get home!” That was the word to staff members. “Get home!”

The day began with these odd sounds and reports, then fright. Lecia’s sister called from North Carolina to say that, according to Facebook postings, the elementary school in Chickamauga, Georgia that my 5th-grade son attends “was in lock-down and the children had been in the hall with heads covered all morning.” I was shocked. Could I have been so tired or so distracted that I drove through the worst weather event in our town without noticing? No. I drove around it. My son’s school was in the storm path at the same time I was applying mascara at a traffic light.

The sound that annoyed me that morning was a city-wide alarm system installed years ago to announce disasters.

Mid morning

We officially closed each branch of the Cherokee Regional Library system. Then we watched television news stations and learned that two tornadoes already had touched down in our area. The worst of the storms was forecast to hit our community in the early evening. We began to contact friends to make sure they were aware of the approaching storms, but one could not be contacted.

Misty Reyes, our office manager, was in the basement of a Lodge in Amicalola Falls State Park with other Georgia Public Library System folks. The storm was predicted to pass through our area and head in the direction of the GPLS accounting boot camp. The phone system was down, and we were not able to contact Misty during that evening.

Early Evening

Director Eubanks reached me at home after my family emerged from our basement. Lecia Eubanks had information from the public library manager in Dade County that was devastating. In Trenton, Georgia, and neighboring...
towns just across the Alabama state line, many people were killed during the third and fourth tornadoes in the area.

News reports also showed Ringgold, Georgia a small-town in Catoosa County not 10 minutes from my home, was brutalized by the storms. The historic business district, middle and high schools were destroyed, as were many neighborhoods in an area near Interstate 75.

During the evening I contacted my family members and all were safe. I wondered how I would sleep after this day and night, but I slept a sound sleep of exhaustion. Running kids up and down stairs while keeping an eye on weather radar and thinking about what the library would do tomorrow was wearing.

I’m thankful my family and home were spared the destruction that damaged so many of the communities in our area.

The next morning

The next morning, television news crews were able to show the damage and it was far worse than we had imagined. I was stunned, shocked ... just not able to comprehend the destruction that was being described and shown. I called my best friends and they were safe. I called Lecia and told her that I was a little disoriented, but I drove to work and met Lecia and Wendy Ellis, our cataloger. We loaded our library vans and my Suburban and headed to the Dade County Public Library. Lecia said, “We are not going to speed; but, we are going to drive with purpose.” We learned that the roof of the temporary location of the Dade library was removed by one of the tornadoes and water was pouring down on the history collection, computers and children’s book collections. (The Dade County Public Library is in the middle of a building and renovation program. The temporary location, a former drug store, made it possible for us to continue library service during the construction phase and house the history collection on site.) Lecia had the presence of mind to contact BelforUSA Property Restoration. We
were lucky we had recently attended a GLA meeting featuring a LYRASIS disaster-planning discussion. We had not revamped our disaster plan into the recommended pocket-sized format, but I think we did a pretty good job following the template.

Lee Dollar from the Sara Hightower Public Library in Rome, Georgia met our staff with a van equipped with hand trucks, paper towels and work gloves. We appreciate the help and support that Lee was able to give us during those first hours of cleanup, and we appreciate Susan Cooley, director of his library, for sending him.

The BelforUSA folks were on site by lunchtime on Thursday afternoon, with a plan was to get the collection tagged and loaded into tractor-trailer trucks equipped with freezers powered by generators. The problem — generators were hard to come by that day. The restorers explained that the moisture would begin to damage the collection as the humidity rose. By three o’clock that afternoon the smell of damp and mold was beginning to make our eyes sting. Lecia was advised by the preservation folks that the entire collection was compromised and the collection and contents of the building would have to be driven by transfer truck to Ft. Worth, Texas or Norcross, Georgia.

Later that evening Lecia and I were asked by staff members to drive through the city of Trenton to see the damage. We did. Destruction of that scale is not something I can describe. I am not sure that I have fully processed that day.

One Month Later

Exactly one month after the storms devastated our area, the Dade County Public Library has moved safely into its third temporary location. The book drop is in place, the T-1 lines were installed today and the staff is safe and well. Miraculous.

We’ve reported to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Georgia Emergency Management Agency, and our insurance agents. Lecia has contacted and conversed with about a zillion different folks about our library’s damage. We are now officially so behind in our day-to-day library work that we will never catch up. On the other hand, many people have contacted the Cherokee Regional Library System in order to send monetary donations, offers of help have poured in from other libraries and GPLS staffers. The Southwest Regional Library sent twenty computers so that the people in Trenton, Georgia would have Internet and computing ability. Thank you to all who helped! The list would be too long to print.

We know now that some of the four tornadoes swept through our area were classified as F4 tornados. The toll is greatest for our staff member who lost friends in the storm. We are not completely over the storm. I will never leave my home to travel thirty minutes away from my children without checking the weather forecast. I will never listen to the news broadcasts describing disasters with a sense of remote, detached awareness again. I will purchase a weather radio, and I will prepare a proper safe area in my basement. We will never forget those two days in April. I will pray for the people of Joplin.