

Day 1, Moore, OK
June 2014

The overwhelming thing I feel is exhaustion. That seems an exceptionally self-centered thing to say, as I have been here less than 24 hours, and this landscape has been their reality for 7 weeks.

I had come to Moore, Oklahoma, in the wake of a massive F5 tornado and on a persistent prompting from God. Armed with the address of a service organization and still groggy from 22 hours of driving, I headed out into the heat this morning to find my mission.

I was first drawn to the school where 7 children had lost their lives. I was the only one there. I dropped to my knees in front of the crosses and well-wishes and wept. The sentiments hanging from the fence were gut-wrenching; from hope to despair and everything in between.

I was drawn to a guitar hanging from the fence, with words expressing his anguish. If the little ears that had died could not hear the music, the musician would never play again. He spoke the words of so many –

“If only I had known that would have been the last time I saw you...”

The Sanctity of the Destruction

I drove through neighborhoods where homes had been. I walked across foundations, kneeling to touch phantom baseboards and praying for the families who had lived there. It is strange how accessible it all is, and I was careful to tiptoe and not step on anything. There is a required reverence when walking across someone else's property, even if it has been destroyed.

In piles of indistinct rubble, an intact item would catch my eye – a set of hangers, a golf bag, a pair of Converse sneakers, a beanbag chair. They were all stark reminders that, until that moment, people ***lived*** in these homes. And then they were gone.

In one particularly graphic scene, the entire front of the home had ripped off, and like a dollhouse, the interior had been exposed. The aftermath revealed closets full of clothes, and furniture destroyed by the weather, but still in place.

The photo would have been dramatic, but felt too personal. Too invasive. I moved on.

As I stared across about 8 blocks, with a now unobstructed view, the enormity of this tornado, its sheer width, hit home. I couldn't imagine the terror of being caught in something that big. And yet, there was a surreal dividing line – on one side, total devastation. Just a hundred feet away, a beautifully manicured, seemingly untouched home. The arbitrary unfairness of it all is overwhelming.

Stopping by the service organization, I was met with warm smiles and words of thanks. However, I was told that unless I was a contractor, my services were not really needed. For a moment, I stopped in my tracks, stunned – thinking, "I spoke to you before I drove 22 hours – that's why I came!"

But then I realized, it wasn't why I came. I came because God asked me to. So I headed back out, now with no stated purpose. I wandered back to the school, drawn, but it was now bustling with activity. I sat at a table with my Bible and began to read and pray, listening to stories being told around me.

"I lost my daughter, and this is the only place I want to be."

"My kids have nightmares every night, and scream out for their friends."

They find solace in community, meeting at a makeshift tent called "Hope Station", set up next to the school.

A Woman with a Mission of Her Own

Hope Station is no stranger to this type of thing. Founder Stephanie is a whirlwind herself, a hyper-dedicated servant of Christ who travels from disaster to disaster ministering to the children. Through coloring and stories, they help the kids put words and emotions to their grief. It seems to work on adults, too. People come and mingle just to be together, to talk to someone who understands their trauma.

Kim noticed me several times, but it took 2 hours before she said anything. I came to find out that Kim was from Dallas, and with only two short breaks at home since the tornadoes, has been living out of her car and a local church basement. "I can't go home to my nice house and leave these kids", she said.

Kim and I talked for a long time. She asked me to go to church with her on Sunday. And she put me to work cleaning and unpacking t-shirts for sale to raise money. "Please stay

here and pray for a few days”, she pleaded. “Pray alone, pray the grounds, pray with people. We would love for you to be here with us”.

For two weeks, I was exactly where I needed to be.

And I knew, deep in my soul, that my life would never be the same.

John 15:8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.