

Tornado damages former hurricane recovery worker's farm


written by Tara Little |



As former case management coordinator of the Hurricane Recovery Office, Jamie Deere is no stranger to the impact a natural disaster can have on a person's life. Unfortunately, now she has personal experience to back it up.

A tornado heavily damaged her family's farm near Haskell (Saline County) April 3. Her mother, Deborah Keene, who lives on the farm, was in the bathroom when the storm hit.

"When she stepped out of the bathroom the roof was gone," Deere said. "The house is the only thing standing, but literally if you blew on it with any force, it would fall over."

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Deere was at her Little Rock home when the tornado occurred. She and her mother inherited the 300-acre cattle and horse farm from her grandparents. It is located off Highway 70 between Benton and Hot Springs.

According to the National Weather Service in Little Rock, the tornado was an EF1 on the Enhanced Fujita Scale. As of April 8, the weather service reported that 10 tornadoes struck five counties in central Arkansas the evening of April 3. The tornadoes ranged from EF1 to EF2, which have wind speeds from 86 to 135 miles per hour.

Deere said the livestock on her farm were not hurt, but most of the structures on the property "are demolished." A second house has roof damage, but is structurally salvageable.

"There's so many trees down that you can't even get down the driveway," she said. A utility pole smashed her mother's car.

The Diocese of Little Rock rehired Deere after the Hurricane Recovery Office closed March 31. Now she is director of the Office of Parish Social Ministry, a new program in Catholic Charities of Arkansas. The office opened April 1. A component of the new program is to develop and train volunteer parish teams to assist victims after in-state disasters.

On April 5 and 6, Deere organized eight volunteers, mostly friends and family, to cover damaged roofs with tarps in the more rural areas of Saline County.

The Parish Social Ministry Office will help parishes develop various programs and ministries, Deere said, but with all the recent weather-related destruction, setting up disaster response teams has jumped to the top of the priority list.

She said she hopes to set up and train a parish team in Saline County and reactivate former hurricane teams in Pulaski County to assist tornado victims.

The state has been hit repeatedly by severe weather since February with storms, tornadoes and flooding. As of April 7, 46 counties have been declared disaster areas, which covers half the state.

Deere admits to being overwhelmed.

"We've only been able to really work our most recent disasters for about three days and in the middle of it got hit by more tornadoes," she said.

Her office is also handling flood cases with the assistance of parish disaster teams already in place in northern Arkansas. They are continuing to be supervised by Brigid Ryan, former northeast regional case manager for the Hurricane Recovery Office. She was asked to stay on for three months as the disaster case management coordinator for parish social ministry, Deere said.

Based in Mountain Home, Ryan will organize and train volunteer teams in northern Arkansas and Deere will cover the central and southern part of the state.

Catholic churches and schools spared in April 3 storms

✘ Even though 10 tornadoes hit central Arkansas April 3, according to Jim Driedric, diocesan property services manager, no Catholic church or school reported any significant damage because of the storm.

"With all that activity and all of our churches we were very, very fortunate," he said.

The same holds true for the recent flooding and earlier tornado in February. Only minor wind and water damage was reported, he said.

✘ St. John Center, the administrative offices for the Diocese of Little Rock, lost electricity during the storm when a tree fell over power lines behind the Dining Hall. The offices were closed Friday afternoon because of the power outage, which also affected phone service.

Dennis Lee, chancellor of administrative affairs, said power was restored by 9 p.m. April 5.

The retired priests who live at St. John Manor stayed at The Guesthouse at St. Vincent Infirmary Medical Center in Little Rock until the power was restored, Lee said.

The April 4-5 sessions of Little Rock Theology Institute, which are usually held in Fitzgerald Hall, were relocated to Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church.

✘ Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock served as one of two shelters set up by the American Red Cross in central Arkansas April 3. The shelter was set up in the gymnasium, but was closed by April 5 because no one came for assistance.