

# Red Cross volunteers go where heartache is heaviest

Donation impact to the American Red Cross

**\$2/week** provides 52 snacks for people affected by a natural disaster.

**\$5/week** supplies a full day of food and shelter for five people after a natural disaster.

**\$10/week** helps a family immediately after a disaster purchase food, lodging, clothing and other critical needs to enable them to get back on their feet.

Highlights of the United Way 'Your Donation has Power' campaign

**Campaign goal:** \$1,300,000.

**Total dollars raised:** \$962,000 (74 percent).

- Great West Casualty Co. is ensuring a smoother ride for our community by increasing giving for the second year in a row and raising a powerful \$7,746 for this year's campaign.
- Old National Bank is investing in the future of our community through \$9,480 in employee contributions and a generous \$7,500 corporate gift.
- Staff at Stone Belt, a United Way member agency, are empowering our community by donating \$4,054.

## Impact

Donations to United Way help ensure that 100 percent of Stone Belt clients in supported employment programs gained new job skills.

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The woman had already lost her husband, her daughter and her home. She wasn't willing to lose her doll.

Late last month, America's heartland was victim to record-breaking amounts of rainfall, flash flooding, blizzards and tornadoes that killed dozens and displaced hundreds. In Ashland, Mississippi, a recently widowed woman found her way to an American Red Cross volunteer station after her house was destroyed by a tornado.

The woman's daughter also had died before the storm hit, leaving her with only old toys and memories. One toy, a doll with curly brown hair in a frilly red dress, held particular significance, and the woman spent days looking for it amid the rubble.

"She searched and searched for that doll, but she couldn't find it," said Fran Matheny, a volunteer with the southern Indiana chapter of the American Red Cross.

Word spread among volunteers and among other storm survivors. Before long, a call for the woman came in to the volunteer network. Someone had found her doll, which had been carried more than 30 miles away by violent winds.

"It wasn't broken or anything," Matheny said.

After disaster strikes, those affected are always visibly thankful for the food, shelter and money sent their way from government entities and concerned nonprofits. But what these victims remember most in the days, weeks and years after a disaster is intangible, Matheny said.

"What they need more — especially families that have had people die — they need the compassion and the hugs and the talks," the retired 80-year-old volunteer said. "We cried with them, we hugged them, we gave them hope."

The Red Cross deployed volunteers like Matheny to states including Mississippi, Illinois and Missouri to distribute food and supplies to disaster victims, many of whom lost their homes and all of their belongings during the harsh winter storms. Although she's an Illinois resident, Matheny only lives about seven miles from the Indiana border, making the southern Indiana chapter of the United Way agency a closer connection.

Matheny left for Mississippi on Christmas Day, and spent the next two weeks in Ashland, a small town that was particularly ravaged by tornadoes.

"Everywhere we needed to go, there were clients that needed help," Matheny said. "Volunteers make a difference in any community, whether it's a small community or a large community."

Evacuated residents, such as the woman reunited with her daughter's doll, needed blankets, water and warm clothing. They also needed

people who were willing to listen to their heartbreaking stories.

Matheny met a family of four who huddled together in a hallway while a tornado caused their home to fall apart around them. Another woman arrived at the Red Cross station covered in bruises sustained while searching her home for missing relatives. She found her mother's body, but not in one piece.

"She crawled on her hands and knees to find her mother," Matheny said. "It's not going to be anything that'll leave her memory for quite a while."

The volunteers also celebrated small miracles. Another woman who lost her home during a tornado also lost a diamond ring her grandfather had given her grandmother for their 50th wedding anniversary. After three days spent combing the woods for the ring, she saw something small and glistening in the dirt.

"That diamond was shining," Matheny said. "She said, 'It's never coming off of my finger again.'"

Matheny's trip to Mississippi was her fifth deployment with the Red Cross. She was sent to New York twice following Hurricane Sandy in 2012, to Tennessee after an ice storm last February, and to Madison, Indiana, in June to assist after severe flooding.

Although she missed Christmas with her family to work in Mississippi, Matheny said her children were proud of the way she chose to spend her holiday.

"I think volunteers are the heart of any community," she said. "We all need to volunteer, even if it's just in our own community."

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