

# Trial by fire

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**By John Hall**

*Texas Baptist Communications*

RINGGOLD—When Kristi Caldwell talks about the fires that torched Ringgold, she doesn't mention the size of the flames or the extensive damage they caused.

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A  
Cameron  
University  
student  
cleans a  
ceiling  
fan of a  
Ringgold  
home that  
was  
damaged  
by  
wildfires.  
Smoke  
filled the  
house and  
blew a  
wall off  
the  
structure.  
(Photos  
by John  
Hall)

She names nearly every family affected by the fires—the Andersons, Grissoms, Dukes and Moraleses, just to name a few. She remembers each of their stories and knows where they currently live.

Caldwell recalls children looking for a sense of normalcy at school, days after their families lost everything. She remembers her second- and third-grade students crying in her classroom. Some wept all day long.

The images are stuck in her head and her heart.

“I’ve just gotten to know these people. It’s a wonderful community. The people are nice. They will go out of their way to help you. When you see people hurting, your heart goes out to them,” she said.

Caldwell was joined by many other kindred spirits in her congregation, First Baptist Church in Henrietta. While she and her fellow elementary school teachers collected clothes, furniture and toys, church member Mike Campbell began recruiting volunteers to remove debris and repair buildings in Ringgold.



Two Cameron students clean the bathoom of a home damaged by smoke.

Word spread quickly about what the church was doing and soon volunteers were calling from as far away as Wichita Falls and Lawton, Okla. On Jan. 28, more than 100 people—as many people as live in Ringgold—showed up to pitch in.

“It’s overwhelming,” said Tracy Douthitt, secretary at First Baptist Church in Henrietta. “There’s a lot of love there. Our church has been really good at supporting everyone inside the church, but to see them reach out is phenomenal.”

Volunteers divided into groups and worked in multiple locations throughout the town, each time at the request of residents. Some picked up barbed-wire fence and cleared land. Others cleaned homes. Caldwell manned a gym filled with items for those affected by the fires.



A Cameron University volunteer scrubs the ceiling of a Ringgold home that sustained substantial smoke damage.

“This is our Katrina,” said Ricky Guenther, pastor of First Baptist Church in Henrietta, referring to the hurricane that ravaged the Gulf Coast. “We wanted to get involved and help.”

Texas Baptist churches provided most of the volunteers. Leaders from several congregations replaced ceiling tiles in Ringgold Baptist Church. The congregation’s facilities were surrounded by fire but sustained only minor smoke damage.

Volunteers promoted the work of Ringgold Baptist Church everywhere they went. The workers may have a quick impact, but Ringgold Baptist Church will continue to be with the residents, said Doyl McMurry, pastor of Joy Baptist Church near Henrietta. Members of the church can continue ministering to those in need.

“I hope we can represent Christ well enough that they will take notice of

the church and possibly be reached for Christ," McMurry said. "More than anything, they need to know they are loved by God, the Creator of the universe."

Eldon Johnson, pastor of Ringgold Baptist Church, said the volunteers are inspiring for his congregation and other congregations in the area. Believers are moved to action when they see other Christians living out their faith, he said.

"It's a real boost not just to our people, but also to people in surrounding areas," he said.

Cooperative efforts like this encourage Caldwell, as well. She sees people working across denominational lines to improve the community. Companies donated equipment. People without a connection to Ringgold wanted to help.

With the help of many who care, Ringgold can rebuild, Caldwell said. Workers cleared much of the debris. Some structures already have been replaced with portable buildings. Families are preparing to reconstruct their homes.

"I think this community is going to come out and be far better," she said.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.