

TBM responds in tornado-ravaged Onalaska

April 24, 2020

ONALASKA—A tornado left 46 homes completely destroyed, 291 more damaged and a community shaken but determined to press on.

In the heart of it all, yellow shirts began to dot the landscape April 23, as volunteers offered help, hope and healing to Onalaska, a town of 2,800 in southern East Texas.

Two Texas Baptist Men chainsaw teams were cutting up fallen trees and dragging them to the edge of the street in the Paradise Acres subdivision. The neighborhood had been hit by an EF-3 tornado the night before with winds up to 140 mph.

Residents appeared shell-shocked the next day. Pain revealed itself in tears, exhaustion and blank stares of disbelief—an understandable reaction, said David Wells, TBM associate director of disaster relief.

Some of them hadn't stopped working since the storm moved on, he noted. Their world was turned upside down—sometimes literally—in a matter of minutes.

“The tornado just wiped stuff out,” he said. “It’s devastating. Who is prepared for all the trees in your yard to suddenly be on top of your home?”

Burdens lifted

But with each limb cut and each tree removed by the volunteers at no charge, homeowners began to see a path forward. In an already tight economy, they realized they wouldn't have to worry about the expense of

hiring someone to remove limbs from their property. As weight of fallen trees was removed from their homes, some of the stress was removed from their lives.

Wells met a single woman who was struggling to figure out what to do with her tree-covered home. She'd received four estimates for the job, and she couldn't afford any of them. When Wells told her TBM would do it for free, she broke down in tears.

At other homes, volunteers visited residents who were searching for answers and meaning to their lives after the disaster. TBM volunteers talked about God's love for all people, encouraged people to follow Christ and prayed with them.

Less than 24 hours after the disaster, Wells said he could see the resilience of the community—neighbors working together, and homeowners working alongside TBM volunteers. Together, the community is beginning the long road of recovery.

"It's a small town," Wells said. "They're resilient. They're helping each other. They're going at it hard. We praise the Lord for that."

To support TBM disaster relief financially, visit TBMTX.org/donate or mail a check designated "disaster relief" to TBM at 5351 Catron Drive, Dallas, TX 75227.