

TBM teams help Perryton families with new beginnings

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Octavia Uribe stands inside her home, a newly-added vinyl inscription over her shoulder: “Family, where life begins and love never ends.”



TBM volunteer Anne Neal shares a moment with Andy Uribe. The 11-year-old threw his body over his cousin, age 7, while the tornado shook the car they were in. His family’s home was condemned and destroyed after the storm. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

The phrase, she says, has new meaning. All of her family survived last week’s EF-3 tornado in Perryton.

Others weren't that fortunate. The storm killed three people in this small town, injured at least 75 more and destroyed as many as 200 houses like Uribe's.

The home saved her life. After tornado sirens started, she, her daughter, son and grandson ran to her car to escape. She returned for her purse, and never made it out. The storm swept away the porch and carport. She crawled to a wall in the kitchen with her English bulldog.

A few days later, structural engineers were on their way to condemn and board up the stucco home that stood in Perryton for more than 100 years.

But first, Texas Baptist Men disaster relief volunteers helped Uribe collect her few remaining possessions from the rubble.



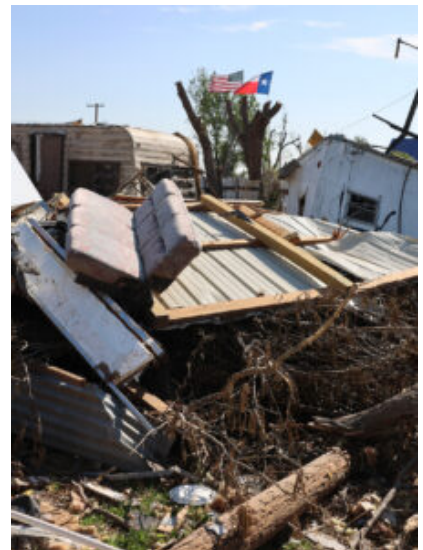
The Uribe family sit outside their destroyed home in Perryton. The historic stucco, more than 100 years old, was assessed as structurally dangerous and destroyed. TBM volunteers helped the family box and remove their possessions. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

“They came in yesterday and helped us with everything we could salvage. My house isn’t safe, the structure is bad, so it will be knocked down.

“They made me feel like I had someone to help me take out my things—my memories—and they made me feel like I had someone to count on.”

TBM volunteer Missy Mehringer, a member of First Baptist Church in Saginaw, was among volunteers who helped Uribe clear her home.

“It’s a daunting task, and you don’t know where to start. You’re in shock,” Mehringer recalled. “We helped her with the practical things. It was go-time. We had boxes, paper and tape. She made the hard decisions. We just helped her with the practical help of packing before the home was destroyed.”



A jumble of RVs and mobile homes are a testament to the fury of the Perryton tornado that killed three and injured more than 100 people. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

Uribe appreciated their help.

“At a moment like this, you’re grateful for the help and grateful to be alive, and that there are people who volunteer to help you for nothing,” she said. “It makes you realize how to appreciate the small things in life. Today, it’s you. Tomorrow, it may be you helping others.”

Mehringer is one of many TBM volunteers scattered across Perryton, providing free boxes, helping homeowners sort through debris, running mobile shower and laundry units, and removing ruined homes with heavy machinery.

Jim Lawton, a member of First Baptist Church of Waxahachie, is the on-site coordinator for the Perryton tornado recovery deployment. He said the tornado caused “complete damage.” In one part of town, the trailers and homes were just destroyed. But God brought the people to Perryton who could best minister after the storm.



A warped cell tower in the middle of Perryton is testimony to the storm’s power. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

“We have 44 people on site,” Lawton said. “In the evening after supper, we have a debrief, and the debrief lets them talk about their experiences during the day. A lot of our volunteers are new, and they’re not familiar with the devastation a tornado causes. So, the debrief is a way for them to unwind and decompress.

“The stories last night were wonderful about how God used them to tell people, and they talked about the children. Many people don’t realize children are devastated just like adults are. So, we had some schoolteachers deployed, and I firmly believe God puts these teams together—the teams he wants on these deployments—and he put schoolteachers on this one to respond to the children.”

TBM teams deploy with a lot of equipment, but the heart of the ministry is delivering help, hope and healing to people in their most difficult days. These certainly qualify as that for Perryton residents.

Among those tools, he said, “are a trailer-load of moving boxes for personal possessions, a shower trailer for hot showers. and a laundry that the public can bring their clothes. We wash them and fold them and give them back the next day. We have cleanout teams for debris removal. We have skid steers. But those are just tools to tell people about Jesus.”



Brian Kinney unloads a shovel full of debris into a wheelbarrow

readied by Joyce Fernandez. The two are college students who responded to the Perryton storm recovery. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday

Among the TBM volunteers responding to the Perryton disaster are college students brought together through Missouri Baptist Convention Disaster Relief. Two of the students said they had their perspectives changed by volunteering.

Brian Kinney, a student at the University of Missouri, said he came at the urging of his “college ministry pastor. He wanted me to sign up because he thought it would be a good fit for me to learn more about my faith and help me spread the gospel, too. That’s why I’m here.”

Working in the mid-90-degree temperatures, Kinney admitted the team has encountered “a lot of labor, helping people pack, moving things, cleaning things up, and moving a lot of debris.”

But he’s also encountered “a lot of emotional strength” and a connection point from survivors.

“From talking to them, I found strength in them. I know what it’s like to lose everything overnight. I was homeless at one time,” he said.



TBM volunteers Anne Neal and Missy Mehringer canvass a destroyed neighborhood for families on need of help. (TBM Photo / Russ Dilday)

One such person is Monica Ramirez. She was on the top floor of her small two-story home altering a wedding dress when the hail started. Setting down her work, she picked up her phone to record video.

Panning the view left out of the window revealed a nightmare: A deadly tornado formed on her screen, and it was only a block from her home.

The rest of the video revealed a moment of terror and destruction as the tornado shook the home. There was the sound “like an explosion” as windows shattered from the pressure.

Then the video went black.

She survived the ordeal. The tornado swept away a greenhouse and her garage. It stripped siding from her home.

A few days later, a TBM crew helped her locate and return her belongings. They did so with care and compassion. It’s an experience Ramirez never will forget.

“They are very, very, special,” Ramirez said of the TBM team. “I feel like I have another family.”