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**Dwight Douglas, guest columnist: Saving lives and saying prayers**

*By Dwight Douglas*

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JOPLIN, Mo. — As I sit down to write this, I am totally exhausted and heavy of heart, but I feel the need to tell the world what I witnessed and became a part of this week.

Shortly after 5 p.m. on May 22, I pulled to the curb at my Freeman Health System office, which is located about 150 feet south of the ambulance bay at Freeman West Hospital.

As I was getting out of my car, the weather sirens began to sound. The air was still and eerie. You could sense that this was different. I went to the tunnel between the Ball Sports Medicine Building and the Freeman Tower. By 5:50 p.m., it was clear that we had a problem.

I began walking through the hospital to see if we were still operational. The two large Cummins diesel generators had kicked on, so we had power. I found that we had significant water coming into the hall leading to Freeman Hearts and that two maintenance people were there dealing with it.

I then walked back to the south entrance of the emergency department and began to see cars coming in. The first ones brought in the injured from the middle of the street. Strangers were bringing in people who could no longer care for themselves. This continued for the next six hours and more. It was not long until pickup trucks began arriving with patients lying on boards, doors and other makeshift items. The parade of vehicles did not stop. Ambulances were arriving at the west ambulance entrance until there was no more room to park.

I stood at the south entrance to work with two nurses who were there to begin the triage process. It was not long until we were overwhelmed. We quickly ran out of wheelchairs, backboards, cots and blankets. The waiting room filled quickly, and we worked to keep a path open to the ER for those who were the most severely injured.

A pickup arrived with two injured patients, one with major scalp injuries and another with steel imbedded in his skull. As volunteers began to arrive, we formed lifting teams to carry the boards with victims on them. Two emergency workers came up to me to volunteer. I told them to go to work and quickly saw their skill and was relieved that we had more help with patients that we were now putting on the driveway.

A vehicle arrived driven by an employee of St. John’s Regional Medical Center with three post surgical patients in need of hospitalization. We held them in the car for several minutes trying to assess what to do with them. All the driver could say was that St. John’s had been destroyed. We then started taking St. John’s patients in the front door and quickly filled the lobby.

I stayed at the south door and looked up to see a loud noise, which was a car engine that could barely run. All of the windows and lights had been blown out of this vehicle. They made it to a stop and when I was able to force the door open there were three injured in the back seat. Blood was everywhere. My first question to them was can you breathe and walk. We emptied the car since it was apparent that we had to keep the driveway open for the hundreds that were to follow.

One man, who told me his name, was lying on a backboard on the driveway with a likely crushed pelvis. I can’t use his name here but I will never forget it or his character. I was lowering his backboard when my hand slipped and the board fell about one inch to the drive. He cried out in pain. I apologized to him and he said “all of us are doing the best we can.” I told him we would get to him as soon as we could, and he said “I know there are others worse off than I am.” It was over an hour before we could move him off the drive into the emergency department but he never once complained except to merely ask if I could loosen his cervical collar and get him a blanket for better comfort.

As I looked up again, a pickup truck was coming with two Joplin firemen in the bed, followed by a Joplin fire engine. The patient was a pregnant female in the back of the truck, on some kind of store rack being used as a backboard, with serious crush injuries. The firemen told me that she had been a 45-minute extrication and that they had moved more weight than they thought possible to get her out.

Since there were no ambulances, they followed the pickup to the hospital so as not to abandon their patient. The firemen lifted her off the store rack to a backboard with great skill. They transferred her to hospital care and remounted to make the next run. As they left, I said “stay safe” and one replied “It will be difficult for any of us to stay safe tonight,” and they left leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind but that they were not only Joplin’s finest but the best of men. I regret not getting the engine number, but it does not matter since similar scenes were repeated over and over that night by those who answer the call to be a part of the “fire service” and JFD. I pray for them daily.
In the course of six hours, six patients arrived holding their dogs and each saying that the pet was all they had left in the world. I had to tell them we need to secure the pets outside since we had so many people in the waiting room and ER. I hope we were able to do that.

I looked over and saw a lady on the driveway not moving. One of the RNs said she might be deceased, and then I saw her move. I yelled for a lifting team and then began clearing the way to the ER doors. As we went through the doors, the RN called a “code blue.” It was difficult to get the crash cart down the hall because the hall was lined with patients on both sides. I am not clinical, so I wanted to get out of the way. As I left, four patients quietly asked me to help them and one asked that I pray for her. I have not stopped.

As I returned to the south entrance, another pickup load of patients arrived in the back of a truck. This pickup was driven by a Joplin physician whom I do not know. It was his third trip to bring in the wounded with compassion.

There are many more stories, some I don’t think I can write about for a long time, and perhaps never. But I can tell you on that night, not one person raised his or her voice unless it was to cry out in pain; not one person complained or said “take me first.” Each volunteer, and there were many, was calm and just wanted to help, and help they did. At some point, we lost count of the number of patients, but we do know this special place in Joplin handled at least 500 traumatic injuries and performed 22 life-saving surgeries in about 10 hours. A total of 124 patients were transferred to other facilities in Springfield; Tulsa, Okla.; Rogers, Ark.; Kansas City; Neosho; Pittsburg, Kan.; Coffeyville, Kan.; Parsons, Kan.; Miami, Okla.; Fayetteville, Ark.; Grove, Okla.; and Wichita, Kan. Within 24 hours, a total of 135 physicians had answered the call, two from as far away as Houston, Mo., and delivered loving care at this place called Freeman.

Fifteen miles away at Freeman Neosho Hospital, Neosho Fire began triaging patients in the parking lot, and seven physicians answered to call for help there.

But for me, I was sustained by a short hug break about every hour just to hug the angel RNs working with me. We have met once since, and our greeting for life will be a hug since we share this special bond. Never miss hugging those you love.

This event makes anyone take pause to try to understand why so much suffering was inflicted on so many innocent people. Yet, I can tell you that it is time to rejoice in the resilience of the human spirit. What a gift from God. I will always know, as will the world, that there is no better place to live than Joplin and there are no more caring professionals than I worked with that night and see every day at Freeman Health System. God bless us all.

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