

JULIETTE KAYYEM

The ‘Joplin effect’



ASSOCIATED PRESS

A handwritten note to rescue workers was written on a Joplin house last year.

The best of democracy and the best of community helped heal the town

JOPLIN, Mo.

On the first anniversary of the devastating tornado that touched ground here, the nation focused on this small city of 50,000 and its stories of resiliency and resourcefulness. Joplin is a folk tale of middle American community values and strong religious sentiment. It’s “Little House on the Prairie,” in the eyes of cable news. But there is something condescending about that portrayal, as if Joplin’s comeback were an inevitable consequence of good people just being good.

Much has been said about how well Joplin has recovered, but less about how that recovery occurred. Joplin isn’t just a story of hope winning over pessimism. What makes Joplin a truly American story is that its transformation is a triumph of local ingenuity, starting with that most democratic of events: a public meeting.

The city was reeling. Just a few weeks earlier, two tornadoes converged on the outskirts of the city, forming a gigantic force of destruction. A tragedy can always be told by the numbers. In Joplin’s case they were overwhelming. Winds of 200 miles per hour; 161 people killed; 1,000 people injured; 7,500 homes destroyed; 530 businesses closed; 3 million cubic yards of debris. Tornadoes have no method; walking the path of destruction, one feels that the tornado’s only aim was to strike where it would hurt the most — the high school, Mercy Hospital, Cunningham Park. Luckily, since it struck on a Sunday, schools were empty, and nearly 200,000 commuters were home in the suburbs.

There is another number, almost as relevant: over 1,000 little yellow sticky notes. At the public meeting, over 300 citizens representing a cross-section of this old mining town began to list the things that had to get done. Basic priorities, like removing debris and laying down new pavement, combined with visions of what Joplin could become as it rebuilt. All the ideas, even the silly ones, were recorded on those little notes.

This effort was eventually led by Jane Cage. She is the middle-aged owner of a local business called Heartland Technology. She moved here with her husband and couldn’t bring herself to leave after his death in 1985. She is a celebrity now, Joplin’s Citizen of the Year. She is unassuming and kind, and believes the tornado was an opportunity to think differently about city planning in a place that needs more diversified and affordable housing, more business sectors, and better public spaces. She loves Joplin, but isn’t nostalgic either. “This is an opportunity that we never asked for, but can’t afford to waste,” she told me.

Cage formed the Citizens Advisory Recovery Team, an organization that is best described as a makeshift development group without the developers. The idea was to take all the enthusiasm, all the random ideas, all the visions of a new Joplin, and make them a part of the city's future. The sticky notes formed the backbone of the team's proposals in housing, education, and business development. Team leaders begged for input, standing outside the local college, bookstores, and community events to persuade more people to get involved. They had only one goal: No one would feel left out.

The process was like an election campaign without politics or smoke-filled rooms. Everyone was welcome, so much so that when the city voted to approve the recovery plan, not a single resident quibbled over the details. And it may help explain why, on Tuesday's anniversary, when Joplin's residents converged for a Walk of Unity, the march was celebratory — almost like a block party.

The S-shaped path of the tornado made the walk complicated: 17th Street to Texas Avenue, then left to 20th Street and Connecticut, then south on Wisconsin Street, past Pearl and Bird, to Cunningham Park. There is nothing especially prominent about 20th Street — it was chosen by the wind, just an unlucky address. The wind largely spared 19th Street, where most houses still stand, next to a block where many do not — either abandoned, or vanished, or covered in blue and green construction materials.

People here use euphemisms to describe their plight: A doctor tells me of his “upstairs project,” as if losing his entire second floor was a purposeful expansion of his master bedroom. In this Republican county — “I think I know the two people who voted for the president here,” a lawyer remarks — people are grateful that Obama came on Monday night to speak at the high school graduation. The original high school does not really exist; it is now a grotesquely contorted structure surrounded by debris and construction trucks. Students shifted to a temporary facility after Superintendent C.J. Huff made good on his promise to get the kids back to school by summer's end. Classes are now in a mall flanked by two of the greatest distractions to any teenager: a cineplex and a massive food court.

The walk was filled with a festive attitude, with games, balloons, and even face-paint. Residents stopped to have their pictures taken with stars of the Weather Channel's “Tornado Chasers” show. They cheered the FEMA workers in yellow vests who, by all accounts, delivered on their promise of support, logistics, and money to the 10,746 individuals and businesses that registered for disaster assistance. There were tears and prayers, but also beers.

The beers continued at Cage's home later that night. Her neighbors, including an appellate judge and a local lawyer, were joined by FEMA leaders. David Wallace arrived late. He had just been chosen to serve as the master developer to help guide Joplin through its sticky-notes-inspired plan.

The former mayor of Sugar Land, Texas, Wallace believes in what people here call the “Joplin effect,” the sense that Joplin has benefitted from so much good will because people like to help those who help themselves. He, too, is putting skin in this game; his compensation will be based on his ability to lure private investment into public works here.

Wallace's success will be judged on the second, third, and fourth anniversary. For Cage, though, the solidarity she felt during the day was the culmination of a year when democracy, in the form of little sticky notes, took hold. Despite everything, she believes she just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Just like those living on 19th Street when the tornado passed.

Juliette Kayyem is a Globe columnist. She served as assistant secretary of homeland security under President Obama. Follow her on Twitter @juliettekayyem.