



Community relationships proved vital in school district's recovery

By Steve Larson
Public Affairs Office

May 22, 2011, began as a day to celebrate for school superintendent Dr. C.J. Huff. It was graduation day for 465 high school seniors, the largest graduating class in the district's history.

"It was a great ceremony," said Huff, "and we were really excited because we always struggled with graduation rates... like so many school districts." Huff said the ceremony began at 3 p.m. and ended at 5 p.m. "Just like clockwork."

And then, the storm sirens blew. It was 5:17 p.m. and the city was Joplin, Mo. At 5:34 p.m., an EF5, multiple-vortex tornado struck the town and for the next 38 minutes tore a path as much as a mile wide eastward through the southern part of the city.

"We don't talk about the tornado in Joplin," Huff told his audience. "We talk about 'that storm,' we talk about 'the event of 5-22.' It's kind of a weird thing. It's kind of like that evil that remains unnamed in Harry Potter. We just don't talk about it."

Huff was in Topeka Sept. 25 as the keynote speaker for the fifth annual Safe and Prepared Schools Conference. The annual event is an educational forum for teachers, administrators, emergency management, first responders and others interested in fostering a safe learning environment for Kansas students. The conference is sponsored by the Kansas Center for Safe and Prepared Schools, Kansas Homeland Security, Kansas Attorney General's Office, Kansas Department of Education and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

For more than an hour, Huff shared his story of that day in 2011 and the hours, days, weeks and months that followed as the city and the school district came to grips with the lives lost and the massive damages to the city and the school district he oversees.

"Eight thousand homes were damaged or destroyed," said Huff. "Four hundred businesses were damaged or destroyed, 18,000 vehicles damaged or destroyed. One hundred sixty-one people perished."

Although it is a story Huff has shared many times and will continue to share, the memories and the emotions are still fresh and raw. Many times throughout his presentation, his voice broke, his eyes filled with tears.

Huff said initially he was not sure how much damage the school system had sustained. "I was even told our high school was salvageable. Somebody looked at it and said 'I think we can fix it,'" Huff said. "No way."



Dr. C. J. Huff, superintendent of the Joplin, Mo., school district, shares his story of the tornado that struck the town in May 2011 and the vision he had that allowed school to resume on time in the fall. Huff was keynote speaker at the fifth annual Safe and Prepared Schools Conference Sept. 24 and 25 in Topeka. (Photo by Sgt. Jessica Barnett, Public Affairs Office)

"We found ourselves in a place where what we'd had, there was no longer a meaningful way to get back to it," said Huff, "and where we're going from this point forward had yet to be determined." Huff said they were "kind of in a no man's land."

Huff knew action had to begin immediately if the people and the district were ever to recover. During his first post-storm meeting with key leaders, Huff outlined three tasks.

"One: Take stock of our people. Take care of our school family, make sure everybody is okay."

Huff said there is no worse feeling than when a child is lost. "It happens every year once a year that we'll have a kid who will get off at the wrong bus stop or they'll go home with a friend after school, they'll get in a car with the wrong person, an aunt or uncle instead of mom or dad," said Huff. Fortunately, in those cases, the child was always found safe. But that was not the case in May 2011.

"We lost eight members of our school family," said Huff, "one staff member and seven students."

For those who survived, there remained many problems. The tornado affected more than 4,200 students in some way, about 54 percent of the student body. "Three thousand students lived in the path of the

storm," said Huff.

Huff said most of them lost almost everything they owned. He related how on the Tuesday morning after the storm a father and mother came with their two young daughters into one of the distribution sites set up after the disaster. "They had no shoes, no socks, soaked head to toe. All you can do is put your arms around them. 'We're going to take care of you.' So that's what we did."

The second task listed on the whiteboard at that first meeting was "Take stock of our facilities. What did we have to work with?"

They found that nine schools had been damaged or destroyed, making 600,000 feet of educational space unusable. The district's administration building was also heavily damaged.

Task three was to secure all the district's valuables – school records, cash boxes, technology and other assets that now lay open and exposed to the weather and looters.

To address these tasks, Huff said he asked himself two questions: "What is the district's role in this crisis?" and "What resources do we have available?"

Huff said it was decided the district's role was three-fold: To get the kids out of the rubble, to give the adults 'space' to respond to the crisis and to give the community a goal, a focus and a vision. "Something beyond our current reality."

That vision was to begin school on time in the fall. "School starts in 84 days," he told his staff. "Let's get to work."

To engage his staff and the community, Huff commandeered a clock that had been purchased for the district's football coach to count down the time until the first game of the fall season. Huff programmed the clock to count the days, hours and minutes until school would begin.

"We hung the clock in the front entry of the command center where everyone would come," said Huff. "Every volunteer, every contractor, every architect, every staff member, every board member, every administrator, every community member who came into our building saw that clock so that everyone knew where we were at. Everyone worked to hit that deadline." He said they took the clock to every meeting and every community event that summer.

Huff admitted that, as the final days drew near, "That clock became 'that damn clock.'" But school did resume on time in the fall.

The answer to the second question was found in something that Huff said was key for anyone in the audience who might

someday face a similar challenge: "Our people and our relationships."

Huff said that prior to the storm, the district had an initiative in place called Bright Futures to address the causes for school drop-outs and find solutions. Over the course of that campaign, a number of relationships were forged that proved vital in the recovery of the Joplin community and its school district.

"The relationships we have in the community prior to the storm is probably the most important thing you can do to be prepared for a disaster of this magnitude," Huff advised, that such relationships tap into the community's time, talents and treasures in multiple ways.

Huff shared a pre-storm story about visiting "one of the poorest schools in the districts" for a program. As the children sat 'criss-cross applesauce' on the floor of the gym, he noticed all 230 students were wearing stocking caps of all shapes and colors. He asked about it and two older women were pointed out to him.

"They didn't have a lot of resources, but they knew how to knit," said Huff. "They heard about a need for hats and gloves for the kids and so between Thanksgiving and Christmas they had knitted a stocking cap for every kid in that school."

He cited the story as just one example of the more than 269 partnerships that were made prior to the storm, partnerships with businesses, faith-based organizations, human services agencies and members of the Joplin community.

Huff said he had learned several major lessons over the course of the year that followed about what really matters most.

"Vision matters," he said. "Set the vision first, then chart the course."

"Communication is key," he continued. Leaders need to communicate their vision with their staff and local officials, but to the public as well. He urged his audience to join their state School Public Relations Association, adding that members of the Missouri and National associations had provided communication support for weeks following the disaster.

Huff also said the use of social media was instrumental in keeping communication lines open. In the first days after the tornado, when cell phones and land lines were down "Facebook was huge. We found hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of kids and accounted for the status of hundreds and hundreds of staff members through Facebook."

Huff said that social networks in place prior to the storm became channels through which needs were communicated and quickly met.

Huff said he also learned to be bold in making a vision and to celebrate daily.

"It creates a culture of hope, communicates progress towards the vision, anchors the team and, most importantly, generates momentum." Huff said it was difficult at times, but they found something to celebrate every day, even if it was just the fact "the kids were going back to school in 54 days."

Although it is a story Huff has shared many times, it is a story he intends to keep sharing as long as anyone will listen. "To keep people engaged, you have to keep telling your story."

Huff believes that the story of Joplin is a story people want to hear and one they need to hear.

And for Huff, one of the primary things that has been reinforced for him is "Putting people first matters."

"Our mantra became 'Take care of our school family.' I read somewhere 'People don't care how much you know. What they really want to know is how much you care.'"

For those at the Safe and Prepared Schools Conference, it was clear that Huff cared a lot and he always will.



The Joplin, Mo., high school was one of nine schools damaged or destroyed by the EF5 tornado that struck the community May 22, 2011. One hundred sixty-one people died in the tornado, including one member of the Joplin school district staff and seven students. In all, the school district lost 600,000 square feet of educational space. The district's administration building was also heavily damaged. (Courtesy photo)