

Restoring Moore by Storm

An outpouring of support for Moore, Oklahoma's tornado-damaged park system

By Danielle Taylor

By May 20, a huge storm had been brewing over the greater Oklahoma City area for days, spitting out tornadoes and pummeling the entire Midwest with severe thunderstorms and unrelenting heavy rain. Todd Jenson, the director of parks and recreation in the Oklahoma City suburb of Moore, went to work that Monday thinking the worst of it had wrapped up the day before. But by 2 p.m., as the sky darkened, the winds and rain picked up, and the National Weather Service issued increasingly stronger watches and warnings, he decided to play it safe and closed the gym at the community center where the park offices are housed.



Veterans Memorial Park, located near the center of the tornado's path, sustained EF4 damage over much of its 17 acres.

Within an hour, Jenson and his colleagues watched as a mile-wide tornado barreled down on them, forcing them to rush inside and take cover. Moments later, the path of the tornado passed mere blocks from the community center, missing Jenson's group but hitting several of the city's 11 parks dead on. As soon as they emerged, parks staffers immediately got to work opening up the community center as a Red Cross relief shelter and taking stock of the damage to the city.

"I knew with the path it took, at least two parks would have been hit," Jenson reflects. "It hit five. Little River Park was basically destroyed, and about 75 percent of Veterans Memorial Park was heavily damaged. Unfortunately, those were our two prettiest parks. We'll get new playgrounds, and we'll get new pavilions and park benches and all that stuff, but the trees, those were a hundred years in the making."

Within hours of the tornado, however, help started pouring in. The day after the storm, park officials put out a call for volunteers to help clean up Moore Cemetery, which was littered with tree branches and debris. With national attention on the community, social media and word of mouth spread the news like wildfire, and by Wednesday afternoon, approximately 3,000 volunteers had shown up at the cemetery, armed with everything from rakes and chainsaws to front-end loaders.

“It’s unbelievable,” Jenson says. “We didn’t expect this much.”

In November 2012, Moore voters passed two propositions that would provide needed funds to upgrade all of the city’s existing parks and add three new ones, including a large Central Moore Park. Construction had already begun on several of the park upgrades by the time the tornado hit, and although Jenson concedes that there will be some inevitable delays, these projects are continuing to go forward as planned.

Twenty-four people died as a result of the storm, many of whom

were children, so Moore will always have a scar that may never completely heal. But the recovery and improvement of its parks system will help mend the community that survivors are diligently working to restore.

“It’s important for the community to see their parks get back to normal,” says Jenson. “That will give them hope that we’ll get this town rebuilt.” *

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Vote for Moore

Veterans Memorial Park in Moore has taken the lead in the “America Is Your Park” campaign, sponsored by Coca-Cola in partnership with NRPA. This contest, now in its fourth year, awards a \$100,000 recreational grant to the park with the most votes, plus \$50,000 for the second-place winner, \$25,000 for third and \$15,000 to one park randomly drawn from the top 25 contenders.

As of press time, Veterans Memorial Park had received more than 11,000 votes, more than twice the number of the next runner-up. To vote or learn more about the contest, visit www.coke.com/parks.

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