Emergency room physician Kevin Kikta leans against what is left of his car following the May 22, 2011, tornado. (continues)
ON MAY 22, an EF-5 tornado with wind speeds reaching 250 miles per hour ripped a mile-wide path through Joplin, Mo. The storm killed 160 people, including five patients and one visitor at St. John’s Regional Medical Center, which was nearly destroyed.

More than 300 OSU alumni live in the Joplin area. This is the story of three alumni in the medical profession whose lives are forever changed.

I was 84 degrees with overcast skies in Joplin that Sunday when Dr. Kevin Kikta arrived for his 4 p.m. shift at St. John’s emergency room. The New Jersey physician committed every few weeks to Joplin’s largest hospital. His former classmate Dr. Sean Smith, physician president of the Mercy/St. John’s Clinic in the Joplin and Kansas division, had recruited Kikta during a 2008 conference at the OSU Center for Health Sciences, where both graduated in 1996.

“Attending OSU’s medical school was probably the smartest decision I ever made,” Kikta says. “Had it not been for meeting Dr. Smith in medical school and seeing him again at a conference, I probably never would’ve been in Joplin.”

One mile south of St. John’s is Joplin’s other major hospital, Freeman Health System, where OSU alumnus Seth Newton works as a sales representative for Smith & Nephew Orthopedics.

“When I was in college, I always wanted to coach,” says the 2008 marketing graduate and former Cowboy football wide receiver. “I never knew an industry like this existed until I was a junior in college. I really enjoy it.”

Of the three, Kikta was the only one on duty that Sunday afternoon when St. John’s loudspeaker announced the warning of an approaching tornado.

The staff quickly implemented Code Gray, an emergency procedure to move patients out of their rooms and into windowless corridors.

Minutes later the tornado hit. “I saw Shilo Cook, a pregnant nurse, and I grabbed her and we dove under a desk,” Kikta says.

“It felt like half an hour, but it was probably only 45 seconds to a minute. You could feel the change in pressure on your head, on your chest and in your lungs. We could hear glass and large objects moving every place, and then it was over.”

For about 15 seconds, the hospital was quiet.

“I thought Shilo and I were the only ones left inside the hospital. As soon as we opened the office door into the dark hall, we heard screams.” (continues)
Northeast of town, Smith, his wife and two sons emerged from their storm shelter. "I tried to call the emergency department," Smith says. "No one answered. The phone just rang and rang. Then I called the direct line and it was disconnected."

Smith, who grew up in Muskogee, Okla., had seen tornado damage up close as a paramedic, was concerned about his staff's safety. "I knew there were only two explanations. Either the hospital was so covered up with patients nobody could get to the phone, or they had been hit by the storm," Smith says. "Maybe two minutes later I heard on the radio that St. John's had taken a direct hit."

Newton rode out the tornado at his home east of the hospitals. After the storm, Newton drove to check on the wife and daughter of his then out-of-town business partner. "I had to pass both hospitals to get there, and Freeman hospital looked like it always did," Newton says, adding his partner's family was OK. "But once I got to a big hill and could see St. John's, I saw all the windows were busted out. I was saying, 'Oh my God. Oh my God.' I couldn't believe it."

"I held his hand and told him I was necessary," Kikta says. "He just said, 'Do what you need to do.' He was a trouper."
Physicians made rounds examining each patient. “We treated maybe 150 people the first few hours on the floor of that gymnasium,” Smith says. “Unfortunately, we lost a couple of patients who could not be resuscitated. We were just doing the best we could.”

REALITY SETS IN
Kikta left Memorial Hall about 1 a.m. — eight hours after the tornado hit. The storm had whirled away his rental car and his wallet, including his identification, cash and credit cards. “I had no money for food. I had no transportation. I didn’t even have anything to change into,” says Kikta, whose mother drove from Tulsa to Joplin to get him. Later in the morning, the nation turned on their televisions to see the devastation in Joplin. Smith, a St. John’s employee since 2001, says engineers told him the building shifted about 4 inches on its foundation and the winds twisted the superstructure. “Everything around it for a mile was destroyed, but the hospital did what it was supposed to do.” Smith saw patients until late Monday afternoon, took a two-hour nap and returned at 7 p.m. “When it started quieting down in the middle of the night, you could see the look on the nurses faces — ‘What about us now? Our hospital is really gone. What do we do?’”

“Everything had to be heavy重建 efforts are already underway. It was a tough return.”

Kikta has seen all of his Joplin coworkers except Cook, the pregnant nurse who survived the storm alongside him. But Smith says she hasn’t missed a day of work and her baby is due in mid-September. “I just want to give her a big hug and know she’s OK and her baby is OK,” Kikta says.
Utility poles were already restored by [date] when photographer Phil Shockley took these images of Joplin’s wide-spread damage. (continues)
Cleanup in Joplin continues with the help of dozens of agencies and thousands of volunteers. An estimated $2 billion in damages has been reported and the tornado has been classified as the seventh deadliest in U.S. history.

The wooden homes around St. John’s hospital were no match for the tornado’s ferocious winds. On many blocks, front steps lead to smooth foundations where houses once stood. Trees are missing or mangled, with personal mementos hanging from their bark-free branches.

A bright spot in Joplin’s darkest hour is the response from the community and the region to rebuild the wounded city and comfort its citizens.

“It’s amazing how the tornado brought the community together,” Newton says. “People go to work and afterward help their friends clean up until dark. All you can do is be there for the people who need you and help out any way you can.”

Smith says he’s most impressed with the outpouring of support shown by medical personnel from other communities. “Within a couple of hours of the tornado, I had physicians, nurses and paramedics from hours away showing up — all without being asked.”

Plans continue for rebuilding St. John’s medical facilities. “We have the opportunity to change how health care is delivered in this community,” Smith says. “We get to write the book. The things we do now and for the next 24 months will impact this community for 100 years.”

For Kikta, the Joplin tornado was a life-changing experience filled with lessons about Mother Nature and the nature of people.

He believes the kindness demonstrated by volunteers, medical personnel and others on that terrible day will ultimately prevail in this story of survival, perseverance and hope.

“I woke up that morning and it was a normal morning like every other one. Within 45 seconds, the tornado changed a lot of people’s lives. I learned you can’t take life for granted.”

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