

Author reveals healing power of volunteering

By Gale Rose

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Matt Deighton, a Greensburg tornado survivor, reveals healing power of volunteering.

It was another world when Greensburg resident Matt Deighton came up out of his neighbor's basement on May 4, 2007 and saw what was left after an EF 5 tornado destroyed 95 percent of the town.

There were 25,000 volunteers from dozens of states and 14 countries who spent months on end helping bring Greensburg back to life

The healing process for Deighton, that continues today, began when he got busy and helped his neighbors and community members collect the pieces of their lives and start over. He became the volunteer coordinator for the next three years. Had it not been for a concrete slab over his head in his neighbor's house, Deighton's story might have ended that night almost 11 years ago.

Besides Greensburg, Deighton had to deal with the death of a 3-year-old great nephew, his dad being diagnosed with cancer just three days after the baby's funeral and his mother's dementia and all in just 14 months.

During the months that followed the disaster, Deighton met some amazing people who volunteered to help in a variety of ways whether it was cleaning up property, providing a place to stay or donating art work to hang on new walls. And none of them asked anything in return for their efforts.

His experience prompted him to record the stories in a book "Volunteer: The Path to Healing" that he wrote with some assistance from Pratt author Katherine Pritchett.

Deighton said there were so many people that went unrecognized. He wanted to tell their story, hoping it might inspire others to go and help someone else. Their stories have certainly inspired him. Since Greensburg, he shares his story and the story of the healing power of volunteerism wherever he can. He has been to Japan after the tsunami and Manchester, England after the bombing to help others find their road to recovery.

He said he has to keep giving to help himself heal.

"The pain never goes away. It's always there," Deighton said.

Deighton has three questions he asks of volunteers. How many have had first aid class and almost all hands go up. How many have had advanced first aid and just a few hands go up. How many have had mental health first aid and no hands go up.

There have been five suicides associated with Greensburg and the population is 500. There is much healing still to be done.

Deighton said he carries his experiences from volunteering with him. He learned it takes getting to work to get things done. Thoughts and prayers are one thing but Jesus was a carpenter, he picked up tools and fixed things and that's what volunteers do.

If someone can't do the work, they can donate money. And people don't have to wait for a disaster to help. They can help at the humane society or work with relay for life or numerous other options.

Volunteering describes what the people are doing. When disaster strikes, it's not over, it's just beginning.

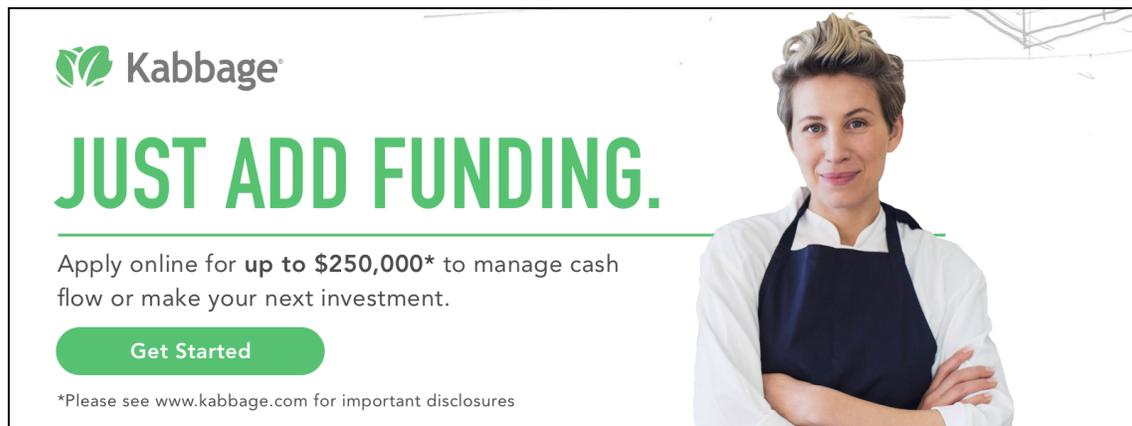
Helping Deighton with the book is local author Kathy Pritchett. She also learned a lot about the character of volunteers.

A common theme among all the volunteers was they felt enriched. The people they were helping kept saying thank you.

“They (volunteers) felt like they were getting far more than they were giving,” Pritchett said.

After the Greensburg tornado, Pritchett and Linda Lanterman of Pratt decided to go help Bunny Giles clean up and salvage as much as they could on the Giles Farm. The Giles home was shredded by a tornado that formed after the Greensburg tornado and cut a swath across the northwest corner of Pratt County. The Giles home took a direct hit. The storm was so violent it splintered the house, pulled the floor away and exposed the basement where Bunny and her husband Alexander were seeking shelter in the basement. A basement wall collapsed on Alexander and he was killed. Bunny survived but was covered with debris.

Bunny passed away April 14, 2018.



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The volunteer's stories had a powerful impact on Pritchett as she helped with the book. Leonard and Pauline Schwarm who took in over 200 volunteers, Gary Bartlett, a Vietnam veteran who lost both legs to a land mine and still team ropes. “That just floors me,” Pritchett said.

After listening to all the volunteers, a common thread ran through every story.

“Volunteers feel enriched. The people (victims) kept saying thank you,” Pritchett said. “They (volunteers) felt like they were getting far more than they were giving.”

One thing about the volunteers that struck Pritchett was they all said they didn't do much. They were very humble. They don't keep score cards on how many they helped. They just did what they could. They are incredibly open people, they are generous and think of other people first.

These are the volunteers from the book. There is much more to their individual stories than is listed here:

– Lawrence and Pauline Schwarm, both in their 90s and married 73 years, she dealing with knee and hip replacement, he with a stroke and hip replacement, hosted over 200 volunteers during the months after the tornado.

“No one was better than the other, they were all equal, they all hugged, and they were all ready to volunteer, Lawrence said.

“I never knew how much volunteers were needed but I know now,” Pauline said.

– Terry Harbert who helped serve untold meals, stayed in his trailer for nine months and helped rebuild houses.

- Dr. Craig Strammel, a chiropractor who helped at Greensburg and at other locations including New Orleans and even in the Ukraine.
- Dr. Gary Morsch, the president of Docs Who Care, worked at the M.A.S.H unit in town.
- Matt Pateidl of Lockton Companies of Kansas City that built the Volunteer Village main building.
- Sophia Litchfield, a photographer who turned into a story teller about the survivors.
- Duane West, the prosecuting attorney in the Clutter family murder, gathered and donated over 100 oil paintings and nails to hang them on their new walls.
- Gary Bartlett, a Vietnam veteran who lost both legs when he stepped on a land mine but could still ride a horse. He didn't talk about his PTSD but talked with other guys for hours.
- Josh Garcia, director of operations for the company that operates Pulse Orlando Nightclub where 49 were killed and 53 injured. He volunteered there and at other mass shootings in England.
- The 9/11 flag coming to Greensburg and the volunteers that made it happen.

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