



## WHERE are Oklahoma United Methodists

in response to needs of the survivors of disasters?

*The Oklahoma UMC Disaster Ministry hears this question many times in the early Response Phase after a disaster, but seldom do we get asked this question in the Recovery Phase. So WHY do Oklahoma United Methodists focus on the needs of the survivors of disaster during long term Recovery? The best way for us to answer this question is through sharing the stories of a couple of the more than 600 Oklahoma families whose lives were severely impacted by the 2012 Wildfire Storms. You won't hear our story on the 6 o'clock news, but it is a story that needs to be shared. These stories are provided by Pam Rowley, a member of Mannford United Methodist Church serving as a United Methodist Disaster Case Manager for the Creek County Recovery Committee (CCRC).*

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The wildfires of August 2012 burned in Creek and Payne counties, Oklahoma, destroying everything in their path. I can give you statistics like 58,000 acres burned, 600 families affected, most having lost everything and of which 85% were uninsured, but those are just cold, impersonal facts. Here are the real stories of loss, healing and recovery.....

Bill is a single father with two children, ages 10 and 8. On the day of the wildfires, he was at work and heard that his property and home may be burning. He told his supervisor that he was leaving to go check on his family and property and was informed that, if he left, he would lose his job. He felt he had no choice but to leave and, consequently, lost his job. When he arrived home, he found that he had lost his home for the second time in two years. He had just finished rebuilding his home from the first fire that happened 1 ½ years ago and was about to move his family back into it when the August wildfire happened. For the second time, he lost his home and everything else he owned to a wildfire. Since he was not yet living in his home, he did not receive the maximum FEMA grant that would have helped him buy the supplies needed to rebuild. Bill and his family are relying on the help of volunteers to help him rebuild, but these volunteers have not yet come. As a result, he and his children have converted the garage of his parent's home as a living space. Bill has been unable to find a job to help him pay for the building supplies needed.

Despite this devastating loss, he and his brother helped a firefighter's family evacuate their home and then stayed on the roof of that house all night with nothing more than a couple of water hoses, putting out any fires that came close, and saved the firefighter's home.

Bill's family was "adopted" for help at Christmas by New Haven United Methodist Church in Tulsa, who provided clothes and toys for his children. At Christmas, they were provided with a food basket by Restore Hope Ministries which consisted of a turkey and stuffing with all the trimmings.

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Betty was fortunate in that her home was not destroyed in the wildfire. When Betty was evacuated, her son returned to fight the fire with nothing more than a water hose, trying to save his mother's home. As the fire came within a few feet and he was about to give up hope, a tanker helicopter flew over the trees and dropped a load of water on her home not once, but twice. Betty's home was saved by this water drop, but the roof was severely damaged.

Betty is 77 years old and has been widowed twice. She has mobility problems due to two knee replacements, one of which has accumulated scar tissue and causes her problems. Even though she has a monthly income of only \$1,019, she has saved money, sold some of her possessions and made and sold crafts so that she was able to contribute \$1,000 to her roof repair, which has been completed with the help of the Creek County Recovery Committee.

Betty's daughter and granddaughter live with her. She has three grandsons who are serving in the military. One grandson just returned from Afghanistan, one is still deployed there and one was killed there last year. All three were Blackhawk helicopter pilots.

Despite all this, Betty still looks at life with a positive attitude. She feels blessed that her home was only damaged and not destroyed. Betty is a new friend at the CCRC and comes by to check on us often.

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*Oklahoma United Methodists will continue to serve as Disaster Case Managers, through the Creek County Recovery Committee, and they will continue to work in partnership with survivors, like Bill and Betty, to reach a "new normal" for their lives. It will not be easy, but we must not give the survivors "hope" only during Response to a disaster and then walk away when they have so many unmet needs and such a long road to Recovery. We must be there for them through their Recovery! We are called to serve our neighbors in need! UMCOR believes strongly in the Oklahoma United Methodists involvement in Recovery, so much so they funded a \$100,000 Grant for our Oklahoma Disaster Case Management Ministry to the Wildfire survivors recovery.*

*Over the next few months Pam and other Oklahoma United Methodist / Creek County Recovery Committee Disaster Case Managers will share more stories of those whose lives have been impacted by the Oklahoma United Methodist presences in the Long Term Recovery Phase of the 2012 Wildfires. These will be stories of survivors. We will also tell the stories of people serving survivors. We hope these stories will help you and others see a glimpse of WHERE Oklahoma United Methodists are in response to the needs of the survivors after a disaster.*