

TRUE LEADERS EMERGE FROM THE STORM

By Marilyn Thiet

On June 16, 2014 two “twin” EF-4 tornadoes ravaged the tiny town of Pilger Nebraska. Their path took them down Main Street, destroying 100% of the businesses and close to 75% of the homes in this rural community. Pilger was my mother’s hometown and I have many great memories of time spent there during my youth. Although my mother passed away and I have no close family still there, upon hearing the news I knew I had to go. After a 9 hour drive and 2 hours of early responder training in a nearby town, a bus transported volunteers like myself, from all over the country, into Pilger. Words cannot describe what awaited us as we descended from the steps of the bus. There was debris everywhere. Piles of wood, shingles and glass where houses once stood. The Farmers Co-op, the largest business within the town was leveled. Trucks and cars haphazardly littered the town, pick up from driveways and the streets where they were when the tornado hit. Orange spray painted letters “OK” on the piles of rubble where buildings stood meant the pile had been searched and cleared for victims. As I slowly walked down the street I couldn’t help but think that no one would ever be “OK” again after this.

As someone who is used to taking action and leading, I stood silent and still, not knowing where to start. The need seemed so overwhelming for our small, gloved hands. How would we ever sort through this debris and get life back to “normal” for the 378 residents of this town? There were people designated as leaders, by virtue of their title and position with organizations such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and multiple church agencies. But as is so often the case, many of the true leaders that day emerged from unexpected places. The quiet young man who worked as a farm hand who took charge at the first house we worked at, sharing his ideas and strategy on how to best attack the yard and rubble pile safely, suggesting assignments based on his initial assessment of what each of us could handle, and then making sure throughout the day that the team was taking care of themselves, staying hydrated in the high heat and humidity and mandating breaks, by calling us to “sit a spell” under what was left of a huge oak tree.

There was the feisty 83 year old woman who survived the storm by running into her neighbor’s storm cellar. When she emerged her home of the past 60 years was mostly gone, with only 2 walls still standing. But instead of going down a path of self pity, which would have been totally understandable, she rose to the occasion by setting the example of positivity, continually saying it is only “things” that were destroyed in her home, that she was still alive and that it would take more than two EF-4 tornadoes to break her! While we tried to salvage what we could from her home she made a point of finding as many neighbors as she could to spread her words of encouragement and support.

While I have written before about leaders not necessarily being the ones who have a title, it has never been more clearly demonstrated to me than it was in the days following the tornadoes. I think of the hundreds of managers and leaders I have worked with over the years. I have seen how some of them respond when times get tough. Some rise to the occasion, others not so much so. What about you? When caught in the storm how will you emerge from the rubble? Who are the unexpected leaders that surround you?

"Leadership's not a title. It is a behavior. Live it."

~ Robin Sharma