

A NARROW ESCAPE IN NEW ORLEANS

I've read that the power of a tornado can scatter objects for miles. If this is true, I'm convinced my favorite pair of running shoes landed somewhere in Alabama.

On Feb. 7, I was on a mission trip to New Orleans when a tornado ripped through the city. Weather experts used words like "F-3," "most powerful" and "worst ever" to describe the storm. My term is "terrifying." Terrifying for what was left behind and terrified by what could have been.

Days before, I'd arrived in the city with five Medtronic colleagues — **Debbie Jaye, Mike Reinert, Betsy Evans, Lucy Nichols, and Gus Devereaux**, plus a couple of friends of the group — to spend the week fixing up homes ravaged by Hurricane Katrina as part of Project Homecoming. Leaders of Medtronic's Christian Employee Resource Group have organized this volunteer effort for the past three years.



The Project Homecoming team: (from left) Mike Reinart, Debbie Jaye, Victor Rocha, Lori Gieselman, Betsy Evans, Lucy Nichols, Read Collins with Project Homecoming, Gus Devereaux and Wendy Helmey.

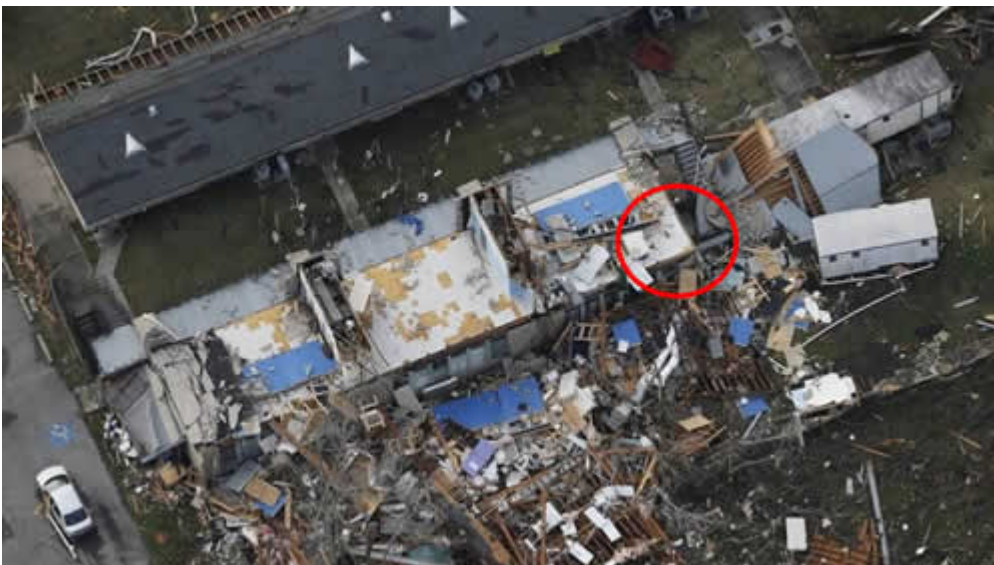
Fortunately, none of us were working near the area hit by the tornado; we were a good 20 minutes away. The storm did, however, severely damage the Project Homecoming Volunteer Center, where only hours we were sleeping.

We'd had plenty of warning about the oncoming storm; our televisions and radios were drummed a steady cadence of warnings. But, it was expected to pass further north so after breakfast, we headed down to our assigned home in the center of New Orleans.

It started rained hard and the winds picked up. Still, the radio alerts assured us we were out of the storm's path so we continued our work, me framing a window while wielding an air compressor nail gun.

Shortly before noon, we stopped for lunch. This is when the storm changed course for the most eastern part of the city. Debbie, a scientist with our Cardiovascular Group, came in and told us a tornado struck the volunteer center. I waited for her to smile in jest. She didn't. I said "Are you kidding?" She replied "No."

We all got quiet; not a word was spoken. We couldn't even make eye contact and our appetite for lunch was gone. Read Collins, the Project Homecoming foreman, broke the silence and suggested we go back to see what we could recover. Erica, a Project Homecoming staff member, was at the center and escaped harm by diving into a closet moments before the twister ripped through the facility. She called Read and said the men's dorm was gone but the women's was still standing.



The Project Homecoming Volunteer Center/Dorms. The circle marks where Victor had been sleeping the night before the storm.

I immediately called my wife to tell her we were OK. Naturally, she was really upset. I told her I loved her and she signed off to call the rest of the family to assure them I was OK. My next calls were to my manager **Sara Thatcher** and our RTG Public Relations/Communications Senior Director **Eric Epperson**. I then hit all our Medtronic social media channels to let everyone know that the Medtronic team was safe and sound.

We mobilized to get to the site; it took about an hour, as traffic was heavy and police barricades stopped us about two miles from our destination. I dropped off the rest of the team, found a place to park and hoofed it to catch up with them.

During my years in broadcast news, I covered many tornados and other natural disasters so I'd seen the images in front of me before. I could make out the tornado's path; some homes were leveled while others were untouched. Amazingly, there was no sense of panic and people were gathering up what they could to leave, some with shopping carts. Parents were warning their kids to stay away from all the fallen live wires.



Scenes from the neighborhood near the Project Homecoming Volunteer Center.

To get to the volunteer center, I had to push against the steady tide of residents heading the other way. By then, my phone reception was back on and my phone buzzed endlessly. Medtronic Global Security was emailing and calling to confirm my whereabouts and safety. I snapped a selfie among the devastation and confirmed I was OK.

I finally made it to the center, where the rest of the team was assessing the damage. The women's dorm was intact, so we removed what we needed and headed over to the men's. Fallen bricks, broken lumber and twisted metal blocked us from getting a closer look at it. I managed to work my way around some burst water pipes to the back of the building.

I found my clothes and personal items strewn across a field of splintered wood, glass shards, twisted and jagged metal, and wisps of fiberglass insulation, which covered everything. I had a hard hat, gloves and work boots, as well as a neckerchief to cover my mouth and nose, so at least I was protected.



It may seem silly to try and recover replaceable items, but that became my mission. You often hear in news reports those lines of people "escaping with the clothes on their backs" and that "things are replaceable but people are not."

Yeah, I get that. But when a storm carelessly scatters **your** stuff around, you change your tune.

Mike and Gus joined me; Gus found a few of his possessions but Mike couldn't find a thing. I recovered my backpack and some clothes. What was wet and covered in fiberglass I tossed, but figured at least I was disposing of them on my own terms. I

suppose this was simply my way of regaining some control over the situation.

I still couldn't get over seeing the place where I'd slept just hours before. A fallen brick wall now laid across my bed. I snapped some pictures, shot a video or two and left.

As we were preparing to leave, Debbie fielded a call from Phil Law with Global Security, who wanted to speak with me since I'd responded to their email. I put the whole team on speakerphone; we all assured him we were OK and that Project Homecoming was taking care of our housing needs/ We really appreciated that Phil and his team were on top of things.

We couldn't carry everything out, so we stashed some items in a secured closet in the main building. We would come back later to retrieve them. The next challenge was to carry what we could back to our cars. We saw neighbors helping neighbors, taking care of each other. Walking through the neighborhood, we talked with the residents and discovered that many of these people were displaced by Katrina in 2005, which we found heartbreaking. At least we had homes to go back to.

When we regrouped the next day, there was no talk of leaving. We still had a mission to accomplish.

We thought we might be reassigned to help out with tornado recovery, but were told that the project homeowners were expecting a certain amount of work to be done on their home. So that was the task at hand.



The next day, I let the Medtronic Foundation know what happened and asked if there was anything further that could be done to help Project Homecoming. A week after our return, they approved a \$10,000 donation for the organization. That meant so much to Project Homecoming and all of us who were in the trenches that week. Thank you, Medtronic Foundation!

On Feb. 26, another Medtronic CERG volunteer team returned to New Orleans for the week. And no doubt there will be another mission in FY18. Because of these and the other horrific storms that have hit New Orleans and the surrounding areas, there will always be a need for reconstruction along the Gulf Coast.

And I'll be back...with some new running shoes.

*Contributed by Public Relations/Communications Consultant and Mission in Motion Site Lead **Victor Rocha***

*Do you know about the **Medtronic Disaster Relief Paid Time-Off Volunteer Program**? It gives employees up to five days of paid time off to volunteer time to disaster relief efforts through a nonprofit organization/non-government organization. [Learn more about it today.](#)*

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