Grant Allen, MD – Summary of Presentation at the 2012 ALF Session

On April 27, 2011, hundreds of tornadoes swept a path of destruction 100 miles wide across the central and northern parts of Alabama. 248 people died. Over a dozen children. Many small communities lost everything, schools, churches, homes and businesses –right down to the trees. The town of Hackelburg – where some of my patients live was nestled in a forest at the top of a hill. The forest so thick, driving over the bridge into town, you can't see Bear Creek. After the storm, nothing, not even any significant debris, all the trees that normally catch the debris in a storm are gone too, where there was a town, now there is a barren hill top. Larger towns like Tuscaloosa and Birmingham lost entire neighborhoods. Throughout Alabama numerous schools were left unsafe or destroyed.

As this was all going on, Marion Burton, Errol Alden, and Judy Dolins were calling our chapter to find out how the AAP could help. And they continued to call and offer assistance! We knew that whatever the need, the AAP was ready and willing to provide resources to help continue to care for children. 

On April 27, Jayden’s mom is 21 weeks pregnant. Jayden’s parents and grandmother held onto each other and the couch in their trailer during the storm. His grandmother died. His parents had their clothes completely blown off, his dad lost an eye and broke both arms. His mother had broken legs and severe trauma. On arrival to the ED the OB thought that there would be no way to save the pregnancy. Jayden was born at term, his mom not yet able to walk. At Jayden’s last check up, his father is gaining the use of his arms; mom is walking and so is Jayden.

Dr Ric Simpson, our pediatric dentistry liaison to our chapter, practices in Tuscaloosa – he was there in the ED for lacerations and trauma care. Dr Elizabeth Cockrum, our chapter board representative for the Tuscaloosa Region, was also there and there for the weeks following, caring for patients with injuries seen and unseen. In the ED she saw a sad 4 year old boy. Trying to comfort and help, Dr Cockrum asked what was wrong – “my momma’s dead,” he replied. “Well, we don’t know yet” she began trying to comfort the little boy. “Yes, I saw a tree go through her.” Like many children who arrived at the ED, he was unable to give accurate information about his name, his family.

Noah is an 8 year old from Phil Campbell. He has cerebral palsy. He and his family weathered the storm at his grandmother’s home, while his home was blown off its foundation. He also lost his orthotics, walker and wheelchair in the storm. So one of the first things we learned after caring for lacerations and broken bones, is contacting our special healthcare needs patients to get started on replacing equipment. (This is where a registry can really come in handy!)

Then there is cleanup, trying to salvage what is left before the next rain. Communities came together with amazing speed and generosity. A lot of cleanup was done before local and state governments were able to mobilize. One of the cleanup volunteers is Taylor – she’s 16yo and has been living with chemo for osteosarcoma for 4 years. She wanted to give back to the community that has held numerous fish fries and coin collections for her years of treatment, so even though her oncologist would have a stroke knowing she was cleaning up debris miles from appropriate healthcare – she was a volunteer. The largest source of patients for mobile clinics and open offices were volunteers. There were surprisingly few healthcare needs in the direct aftermath. Volunteers unprepared for the kind of work and protection needed were the greater source of injuries. Initially there was some concern that the impromptu clinics set up in parking lots would need supplies, but the Alabama Department of Public Health was very well supplied and did an excellent job providing staff and supplies wherever needed. So as Dr Burton asked us what we needed, we really didn’t need anything. As power was restored, physicians left the mobile clinics and returned to their offices.

Hannah is a 9year old who is terrified of storms. She cries a lot, her grades dropped, but so did everyone’s – her school is gone, her entire school is meeting in the church – the only building left in town. She’s fixated on death, afraid to let her parents out of sight, talks about funerals. This is the
patient we knew we would need to help when we told Dr Burton, that we needed help with recovery. Children throughout Alabama suffered a major trauma – they lost their communities, sometimes family, teachers, friends. We knew after the cleanup work, starting back to school in the fall, the caregivers for these children were going to need help. Our grant from the Tomorrow’s Children Fund provided a training webinar for providers on disaster recovery. This is still archived on the ADPH website and is an excellent resource. Over 700 providers have participated. The chapter also developed a mini-grant process where providers could partner with schools to provide awareness and education about post traumatic stress in children. Over 400 children went through this recovery process.

What have we learned? We have a chapter board emergency contact list, but email and cell phones don’t work when the towers are all down. Our area public health officers now have satellite phones, and through enhanced cooperation with ADPH, pediatricians are now encouraged to make contact with their local EMA headquarters for getting word out about medical supply and manpower needs as well as offers of assistance. Our disaster plans worked. In NW Alabama – all the orthopedic surgeons worked a lot of overtime. In Tuscaloosa, it was laceration care. Our Children’s Hospital made room for many severely injured children and had the staff to help the ones who lost their families. We are very lucky to have a pediatrician as the Disaster Response Officer for ADPH. We encourage pediatricians to get involved with community emergency preparation, and ADPH offers Advance HAZMAT Life Support classes for free across the state.

Collin is a 14 year old with controlled asthma. No problems since before the storm. In the office a year after the storms, during spring allergy season, he needs his albuterol spacer. “I guess I haven’t used it since before the storm, I think it got blown away.” So we are still seeing effects of the storm. But many of our patients are back in their own homes, sleeping in their own beds, not as afraid of storms as before.