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Life Bible Church in north Norman Tuesday morning, where a homemade sign let folks know this was now a "Tornado Shelter."

May. 22, 2013

Fourteen-year-old Lizzy Jasper sat smiling in a chair just inside the front door to New Life Bible Church in north Norman Tuesday morning, where a homemade sign let folks know this was now a "Tornado Shelter."

There was breakfast here, a shower and bathrooms. Desperately-needed comfort, mostly.

Not five miles up the road, residents of Moore sifted through the wreckage from Monday's deadly F5 tornado, struggling to come to grips with a second unimaginable catastrophe.

"I got to thinking it would be nice to come over and help people," Lizzy said. "Because my parents could have been gone. They were at the Moore hospital when it was taken."

Lizzy's cancer-stricken father was at the Moore Medical Center for his MRI mid Monday afternoon, joined by his wife and their 5-year-old son, Jackson.

"They were in the dining area," said Jackie Lindley, a family friend also volunteering at the church. "The doors flew open. The roof came off. She was holding on to her son and her husband's only arm. He had had his other arm amputated due to his cancer."

"My mom saw a man being thrown across the room," Lizzy continued. "She said it's a miracle that they're still here."

“They survived and came straight here last night,” Lindley said. “After everything

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Sports Animal radio station and assured Moore, Westmoore and Southmoore graduates would be provided caps and gowns at commencement this week.

To the south, where the University of Oklahoma's Walker Center residence hall was now “Emergency Housing,” a woman walked by the check-in table and asked if she could stay another night.

“You can stay as long as you need,” she was assured.

Down the hall, children of displaced families knocked down plastic bowling pins and rolled Play-Doh. A volunteer came in carrying Yahtzee, Scrabble and Life board games.

“We have put up a little over 100 people,” OU associate dean of students Susan Sasso said. “We had 225 calls, so we're now following up with the people that didn't come to make sure they know we can take them. We are housing some of the Red Cross workers, some of their disaster assistance people. We're trying to put families in apartments. The first family to check in was a family of six. The next had eight.”

OU offered meals, medical attention, basketball at the nearby rec center, pizza and movies, even a surprise greeting from Bob Stoops. Anything to ease minds from the day before.

“Just trying to give them some sense of normalcy at an awful time in their lives,” Sasso said. Back on the north side of Norman, they turned Journey Church into a command center.

CLOTHES over here, TOILETERIES there. TARPS, SIGNS, LIGHTS and SANITIZER against a wall, BLANKETS and PILLOWS stacked seven feet high against a window.

As Gov. Mary Fallin updated the dire conditions just up I-35 on TV, volunteers kept

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“We have people sending things from Tuscaloosa, Ala. We've heard from Minnesota, from Wisconsin, from New Mexico and Arizona. A church in Joplin is sending help. They're all responding and asking how they can help and what they can give and how they can donate.”

Journey took in some tornado victims and referred many others to OU. It's a tag-team effort to complement one from the previous night.

“When we shut down to place people last night, I took all our supplies over to Journey,” said Chad Williams, pastor at Harvest Church, a half-mile to the northwest, “so they weren't sitting here overnight not doing anything. We sent 13 or 14 of our people there to help.”

By lunchtime Tuesday, Harvest was up and running again. The front desk had become a peanut butter and jelly sandwich assembly line, volunteers spreading and sacking so that drivers could make deliveries before a line of thunderstorms hit. “We have an elder in our church, he and his wife, his daughter and her husband all live in a home behind the Warren Theatre,” Williams said, referencing Moore's tornado-ravaged landmark “Their house was completely destroyed except for one bedroom. I sent some people over with supplies. They weren't going to leave. They set up a tent in their front yard. They didn't want their stuff to walk off.

“So we'll go over there and sit while they come in and shower and eat and get a little bit of rest.”

Just down 36th Avenue from Harvest, the sign in front of NorthHaven Baptist read “Donations Accepted Here.” On Tuesday, that meant stacks of Gatorade, water and snack food. The previous night, it was whatever pastor Mitch Randall could provide.

“People lacked cell phone service, so we had several people come in to use our cell phones to contact loved ones and let them know they were OK,” Randall said. “We

had one young lady come by just distraught. She was trying to get to Midwest City.

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Lorenzo Beard sat at a table with his three sons Tuesday morning at New Life Bible. Their house was in the Plaza Towers Elementary neighborhood. The three boys used to walk to the school now synonymous with Moore's hardship.

"They told us we had to leave, but we were about out of gas," Beard said. "So we drove to this gas station near here, just sitting in the parking lot. We didn't know what we were going to do. We were just sitting there trying to decide, and this fella from the church came over and asked us if we were from Moore. He asked what we were gonna do. "We said, 'We have no idea.' He told us his church was open and that we were welcome to come. We came and stayed the night. Otherwise..."

Outside the church was a pickup truck caked in mud and with shattered windows, the back latch missing and a sad, black dog seated next to it like he was waiting for somebody to return.

Inside there was Lizzie Jasper. And Jackie Lindley. And Sarah Williams, still going strong after an all-night shift at the greeting table.

"Mister Rogers' quote always makes me so happy," Williams said. "'Always look for the helpers.' In the bad times? There are always helpers. Find the helpers. That's what we are. The whole state."

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