

views

A New “Normal” in the Wake of Disaster

BY DELLA CASTILLO



The evening of Sunday, May 22, 2011, began quietly, but ended in a disaster that forever changed my home, Joplin, Missouri. An EF-5 tornado touched down at 5:41 pm and spent 32 minutes grinding its way from one side of town to the other. It devastated more than 30 percent of the city, including a large portion of the medical community and one of the two hospitals. A total of 161 people died as a result of the storm, which has been designated as the seventh deadliest single tornado in U.S. history.

My employer, Freeman Health System, immediately initiated a disaster plan we had practiced, but hoped to never use. Hundreds of patients streamed into

Freeman Hospital West that night. They arrived in ambulances, helicopters, cars, and pickup trucks. Some even traveled on foot. In the hours immediately following the tornado, we treated more than 500 patients at Freeman Hospital West and 39 at Freeman Neosho Hospital, our critical access facility 20 miles south of Joplin. Sadly, some of our own Freeman staff members were among those patients seeking medical care.

The storm's impact on cancer patients within our community became evident the first week after the storm. Freeman Cancer Institute started receiving calls and walk-ins from other cancer treatment offices in the community. After the initial shock of the disaster, reality set in for

these patients and concern for their future treatments became the priority. Freeman Cancer Institute, with a staff of five board-certified medical oncologists and hematologists, reached out to the other five medical oncologists in Joplin for information that could help their patients.

Soon thereafter, Freeman Cancer Institute agreed to take the patients of two medical oncologists whose office was destroyed by the tornado. When we learned this practice would not reopen, we immediately offered our services. Our leadership team met to determine how Freeman Cancer Institute would absorb another practice and get patients back into treatment quickly.

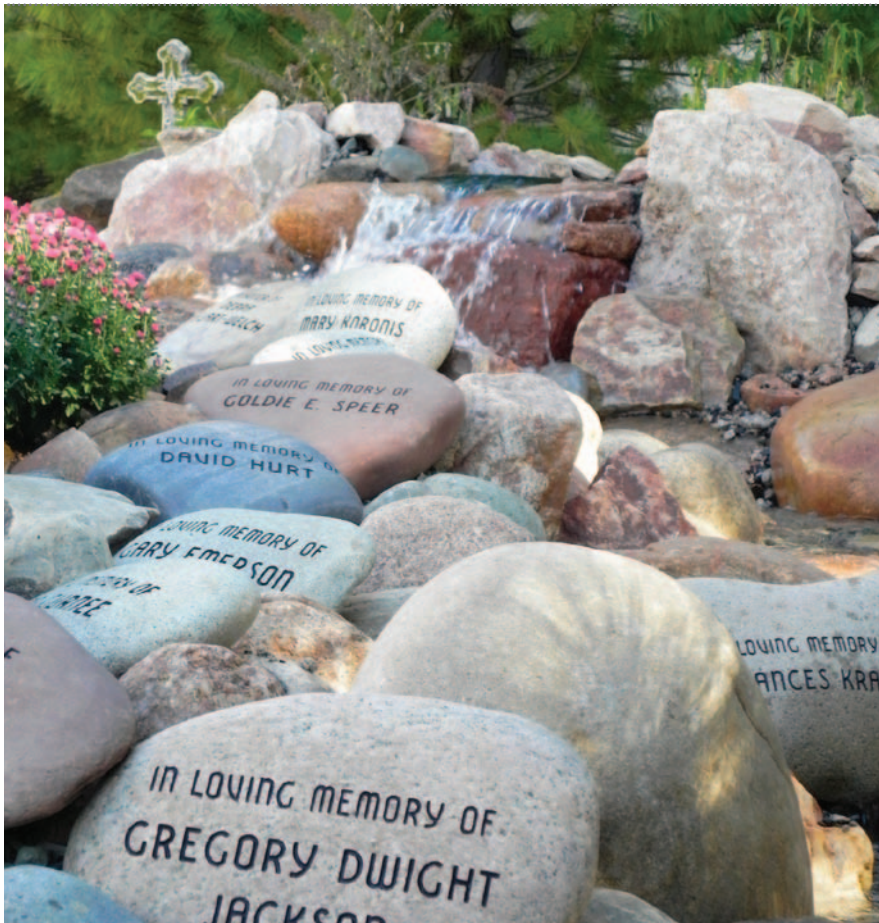
Questions we immediately identified included:

- How do we act quickly enough to take care of these patients?
- How many patients will we receive?
- Will we get records or have all records been destroyed?
- How will we notify patients?
- How will we determine priority for patient scheduling?
- How many additional patient appointments can our doctors' schedules accommodate?
- Do we need to expand our clinic hours?
- Do we have enough staff?
- Do we have enough infusion chairs?

Our team immediately started putting together a plan of action, establishing a very good line of communication with

Freeman Cancer Institute, Joplin, Missouri. ACCC Member Program since 2002.





The Reflection Garden at Freeman Cancer Institute.



MORE ONLINE!


ACCC Member Program St. John's Regional Medical Center (now Mercy Hospital Joplin) was destroyed by the EF-5 tornado. One year out, read about their rebuilding efforts at: www.accc-cancer.org/MJ2012.



from the closed practice. All remaining patient appointments were scheduled before December 2011, adding more than 170 patients to our program.

This effort truly took a team to carry out, and every staff member at Freeman Cancer Institute played an important role in this plan. I'm very proud and thankful to have the best staff that gives compassionate, quality care to the patients of our community.

The one year anniversary of the tornado disaster is quickly approaching. A "Day of Unity" is planned by the city of Joplin, honoring survivors and in memory of the 161 people who lost their lives due to the tornado.

Just as spring is a time of renewal and rebirth, we are in full rebuilding mode. Residents and businesses alike are resilient and with the help of countless volunteers, Joplin is coming back stronger than ever. Freeman Cancer Institute continues to grow, and we are adding two new physicians to our staff in July. 

—Della Castillo, director of Freeman Cancer Institute, has worked in health-care since high school, working her way up from secretary to management. She has been with Freeman Cancer Institute for more than nine years, her true calling after losing her daughter to cancer. In May 2011, she spent her birthday riding out the Joplin tornado in her bathroom—her house was completely destroyed by the storm.

the closing practice. An initial assessment revealed Freeman Cancer Institute would take on approximately 150 patient transfers from this practice. We implemented the following plan:

- The closing practice would contact patients regarding its decision to close.
- They would get permission to send records to our clinic. In some cases this step would not be easy because several patients had lost homes in the tornado.
- They would copy the paper medical records they were able to salvage. (They did not have electronic medical records.)
- They would prioritize and start with records of patients in active chemotherapy treatment.
- They would bring records to our clinic daily.
- We would triage patients according to their medical records to prioritize

how soon to schedule appointments. (All cancer patients are important, but we had to prioritize for scheduling purposes.)

- Our physicians increased appointment availability on their daily schedules.
- We divided patient appointments among our five doctors and also allowed for new patient referrals.
- We called priority patients with their appointment date and time.
- We mailed a welcome letter to all non-priority patients with their appointment date and time.
- We hired an additional chemo nurse and a receptionist.
- We added two chairs to our infusion suite.

With this plan, we started our new normal and continued to provide quality patient care. Within the first six weeks after the tornado, we cared for 80 patients