



Recovery to Resilience



## 10 Years After Disaster: Defying the Tornado That Changed Everything

### Parkersburg, Iowa

In June 2018, Parkersburg, Iowa is a city on the move. Still.

It's still building. It's still growing. And at times, it's still recovering from the darkest day in its history.

That day is May 25, 2008. A late Sunday afternoon.

"The sky would not be quiet," recalled Chris Luhring, Parkersburg city administrator/clerk. "You knew a thunderstorm was going to hit for sure. You knew hail was coming. But no one in their right mind could have predicted an EF-5 tornado. That level of destruction is beyond anyone's understanding."

The tornado took less than three minutes to claim seven lives, injure more than 71 people and destroy more than one-third of the community of about 1,900, according to Luhring.

"It just rolled on through, killing people and destroying everything in sight," largely along the Iowa Highway 57 corridor, a major thoroughfare of residences and businesses, he explained.

In the tornado's wake, 288 of the city's 830 houses were destroyed. Another 100 houses were moderately-to-heavily damaged. About 1,000 people were left homeless. Twenty-two businesses were destroyed. The city hall was essentially gone. So was the high school. So was Swimming Pool Park. The fire station was damaged. So was the elementary school. And St. Patrick's and Oak Hill cemeteries.

From start to finish, the EF-5 tornado and some eight to 12 satellite tornadoes marked a 43-mile path, impacting Parkersburg and the nearby communities of New Hartford and rural Dunkerton, as well as area farmsteads. Two persons died in rural New Hartford.

Mother Nature had done the unthinkable.

Parkersburg was about to show itself – and the nation – that the city wasn't going to be beat. No matter what.

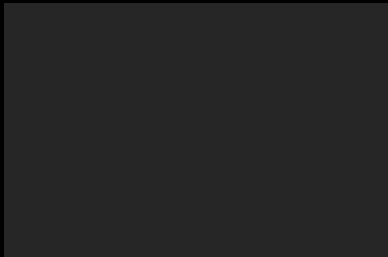
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"I told the FEMA gentleman who initially showed up, 'You give me five bucks. I'll make it look like five hundred and I'll give you back the five bucks,'" Luhring said. "Help me do what we need to do. Our goal is to recover better than anybody ever has in American history and to be a model and an example for anyone else in the U.S. that has a disaster."

Luhring, 39, who was the Parkersburg police chief at the time of the tornado, said one of the city's first steps was to re-establish emergency services to ensure community safety and lay the groundwork for rebuilding.

So officials evacuated the city for the first four days until firefighting, law enforcement and emergency medical capabilities could be restored.

Fellow Iowans and others from surrounding states immediately responded. More than 1,000 firefighters, emergency managers, emergency medical technicians and paramedics streamed in to help in just the first two weeks, he said.

Once public safety was back online, the community's recovery began in earnest. And it hasn't stopped since, according to Luhring.

"The personal losses were motivating for everyone," he added. "We value being the best. We value doing it better. We value working harder than everyone else."

Early goal-setting was crucial to help guide the community's recovery and to give shocked and grieving residents a common focus and purpose, according to Luhring.

"We just had goals and goals and goals," Luhring said. "We were overjoyed when they were accomplished."

"One of Parkersburg's primary goals was to recover our people," he added. "We are working for the people, not places. Our goal was to have two thousand people (population) after the tornado. If you have recovery but it's in the form of places or things and not people, that's not right. It's worthless without people."

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Confidence in government also was critical. So officials quickly re-established a working city hall in an alternate location by the fourth day after the tornado. Luhring and Sheriff Jason Johnson formed a command group to help make key decisions. Their management philosophy was simple: Divide an endless list of needs and tasks. Then conquer.

One early task was especially important to Luhring. He wanted a visible public safety presence every day throughout the community to send a message of stability to residents and business owners.

“At least once a day, they saw a Parkersburg police car, a Parkersburg fire truck, a Parkersburg ambulance,” Luhring said. “It was symbolic that we weren’t going anywhere. We were there for the long haul. We are picking up our pieces. We are suffering. But we are there.”

For the majority of Parkersburg residents who lost homes, the idea of moving away after the tornado just wasn’t an option, according to Luhring and other residents. Parkersburg is a tight-knit community of faith, generationally inclined and fed by an agricultural industry, they say.

“Family trees in Parkersburg don’t cross but they are side-by-side,” Luhring said, noting that his ancestors, as well as his wife’s, both settled in the area in the late 1800s.

Tapping into that strong sense of family and community, the city worked hard to convey its own recovery message: Parkersburg will always be your home.

“Your house may be gone but your home will never change,” Luhring explained. “You can move somewhere else if you want to, but your address will always be here. It was purposeful. It was very systematic.”

### **Amy’s Story**

Amy Truax is one of those ‘home’ people. Born and reared in a small northeast Iowa town, Truax and her husband Kevin, originally from Parkersburg, had lived in Des Moines for seven years where she worked as a computer programmer. In 2002, the couple moved to Parkersburg so he could run a family insurance business.

Initially, Truax says, she wasn’t keen on moving back to a small town.

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But the tornado – and the very being of what Parkersburg is as a community – has changed that. She wouldn't consider leaving now. Even given the pain wrought by that fateful day in May 2008. Sometimes, tornado recovery means fighting the rough times to get to the good ones.

"My main objective every day was to cry less today than the day before," Truax recalled. "It was so hard to watch. You had people that died. They were people that you knew. Dealing with it all and the change and uncertainty of everything. Eventually, you stop crying about it and start making progress."

The house that Amy, 46, and Kevin, 47, share with their two children was heavily damaged. Her children were with her in-laws seven miles away that Sunday afternoon. She didn't know that bad weather was approaching until her young daughter called and warned them.

"I finally looked out the west window and just saw this wall of darkness. I knew it wasn't good."

The couple moved their cars into the garage, then ran into the basement and covered themselves with blankets. He covered her with his body. Then, the tornado hit. When they emerged, the walls were gone. Broken glass and other debris were everywhere. The basement survived. So did they.

Eventually, the house was demolished and rebuilt in the same spot a year later. Part of their tornado-damaged grand piano still sits in the front yard today, Truax admitted. It's a reminder of what was lost – and found – in their recovery journey.

"It (the tornado experience) makes you a stronger person," she added. "I wouldn't wish it on anybody but I don't know that I would take it back from my own personal experience either. I used to have a flight radar. After that experience, I have more of a fight mentality."

### **The Cross a Tornado Bent**

Atop the Parkersburg United Methodist Church stands a montage of three, connected crosses. The cross on the right is bent. To the right. The tornado did that. And the congregation decided it should stay that way – even 10 years later, says church member and tornado survivor Kate Humphrey, now 89.

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“It was bent by the tornado and we decided to leave it as a reminder,” Mrs. Humphrey said. “We felt protected.”

Of the nine churches in Parkersburg, the Methodist church was the only one damaged and moderately at that, she recalled. The homes all around it were gone. The high school, across the street, was destroyed. Miraculously, the church still stood, sustaining just some roof and window damage. Congregation members considered that moderate damage as a sign of protection, she said.

Humphrey and her husband, Miles, now 93, fled the tornado in their car. At one point, the winds shook the vehicle and sent debris flying around them as they tried to get out of harm’s way. As they drove by a nearby grain elevator, valves on the anhydrous tanks stored there were popping off to relieve pressure inside the tanks.

The couple managed to stay far enough away from the tornado that they escaped injury. They drove back into Parkersburg a short time later to see what had happened. First, they checked on the church, and then its pastor, whose house was destroyed. The pastor survived the tornado.

Later, when the Humphreys checked on their own house, they found it was relatively intact. That wasn’t the case for other family members. Kate’s sister, now 85, was injured when she was ‘moved’ from one side of her house to the other. The house was destroyed. Rather than rebuild, she moved to an assisted living facility.

A son living in town, one of Kate and Miles’ nine children, wasn’t fortunate either. His house was destroyed and his wife was injured. Humphrey’s daughter-in-law recovered. The couple rebuilt their house. In Parkersburg. Just like before.

The senior Humphreys repaired the minor damage to their then-40-year-old house, except for one thing – a sliding screen door that was torn when the tornado drove a piece of wood through it and abraded the glass door behind.

Miles Humphrey told his wife that he did not want to fix the tear, or change the scuffed sliding glass door. He wanted to remember just how close the tornado came.

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“It’s just a reminder that God was there protecting us,” Kate Humphrey explained. “We just want a reminder that He’s always with us.”

### **Building a New Parkersburg**

To help with the larger recovery picture, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) brought in a team of agency specialists skilled in long-term community recovery to help residents envision ways to rebuild damaged areas and boost the community overall.

“It (the process) was absolutely vital,” Luhring said. “More heads are better than one. It was amazing to combine people from different walks of life, ages and philosophies and think about things outside the box.”

The group facilitated discussions to help identify the most critical recovery needs and then prepared a written plan to help the community keep things on track.

“It almost became hazard mitigation,” Luhring said. “It became goal setting. It became debriefing.”

Quickly, two key goals emerged: Rebuild the destroyed high school as soon as possible, and bring back damaged playgrounds within one year. Parkersburg managed to do both. And more.

### **School’s Out – But Not for Long**

Aplington-Parkersburg High School is the heart of the community. Its sports teams, the Falcons, are revered. Though the buildings were in shambles, local sentiment was fervent to get a new school built. Quickly.

Beloved football coach Ed Thomas helped lead that charge, according to Luhring. Thomas had been coaching in Parkersburg for 35 years and had gained national prominence. In 2005, the National Football League (NFL) named him High School Coach of the Year. At least four of his former players went on to play for NFL teams. He was a community influencer in the most positive sense.

“Our community grounded its recovery efforts on leadership on many fronts but none greater than coach and teacher Ed Thomas,” Luhring said. “Everything to do with the school and the team, he was instrumental in all of that.”

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Tragically, Thomas was killed in June 2009. Another blow to an already-reeling community.

But Thomas' legacy seems to be not letting tragedy get in the way of always striving to be better. To win at life. To move forward in the face of adversity. No matter what. So Parkersburg residents let his compass be their guide.

In August 2009, a new \$19+ million campus for grades 9-12 opened for the school year. The new school hosts many state-of-the-art learning features, was built with one essential element – a tornado safe room – and boasts an outdoor athletic complex with a prominent 'Ed Thomas Field' for football.

### **Miracle Park**

It stood for at least four decades. A city park. A place to play. A place to gather with friends and families. It was simply called 'Swimming Pool Park.' Afterall, it had a pool.

The tornado devastated the park. Luhring and the local Rotary president wanted to bring back the park, and playgrounds in particular. Fast.

Within two weeks of the tornado, a grass-roots focus became rebuilding the park and creating playgrounds throughout the city, according to Truax, who was part of a playground rebuilding committee. It was important, she said at the time, to help push the community's recovery forward and to give children a safe place to play and heal after losing so much.

"The playgrounds have a very strong impact on the community," Truax said in 2009. "What it says is, 'We want young families to rebuild here. We value our children. We want our children to feel that we haven't forgotten them in the whole disaster.'"

Donations for the effort poured in from Iowa and throughout the country – individuals, schools, churches, businesses and non-profit organizations like Rotary International. Many Iowa businesses contributed much-needed money and labor. A local bank helped manage the funds.

FEMA and the State of Iowa helped fund the park recovery efforts as well through FEMA's Public Assistance program, which pays a cost-share for certain disaster-related repairs or to replace eligible public infrastructure that's been damaged by a presidentially declared disaster.

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The Miracle Recreation Equipment Company of Monett, Missouri offered to match local fund-raising efforts dollar-for-dollar, Truax said. That promise turned into a \$250,000 donation.

Then, volunteers of all ages helped turn it into a miracle.

Exactly one year after the tornado, the park was reopened and rededicated. In addition to the pool and picnic shelters, the park featured two new playgrounds, one for younger children and one for older children. It had a new name too. Miracle Park.

“There are three reasons for that name, Truax explained back in 2009. “One is the huge contribution that Miracle Recreation Equipment Company made to make this a reality. The other reason is, we’re just amazed that there were no children killed with this tornado so to us, that is also a miracle and the third is that it is a miracle we have made so much progress since the tornado on May twenty-fifth.”

Luhring’s vision for the playground and the park was to be fun, and healing.

“I want as many tornado slides as we can get,” Luhring recalled telling the equipment manufacturer. “I want people to come to the park and say ‘tornado’ as many times as they can. I want them to be desensitized to the word ‘tornado.’ You actually make the word a fun one, not a bad one.”

The city also made sure to build a new playground in the part of town that was not damaged by the tornado – a recovery theme that Luhring says has been critical to maintain a sense of community by recognizing that citizens who didn’t lose their homes were affected as well.

“Individualistic efforts became community-wide efforts,” Luhring explained. “Any time we could have a recovery goal become a goal that also encompassed the other side of town, that became very important.”

### **Back to Business**

Early rebuilding wasn’t limited to just housing. Businesses were just as committed to coming back. Since the tornado, all but one of 22 impacted businesses rebuilt in town. Ten years later, the Highway 57 corridor is booming.

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Luhring thinks the reason for the private-sector growth is that the businesses want to be a part of the community's progressive synergy.

"In so many ways, the tornado created an atmosphere of, 'You know what? We're taking the gloves off and we're not going to stop,'" Luhring said.

### **Parkersburg Today – 10 Years Later**

For 10 years, the push to recover, to be better and to grow hasn't stopped, say Luhring and others.

Today, the city's population is estimated to be approaching 2,100, the highest in its history.

Though a few grassy lots still dot tornado-impacted neighborhoods, 265 houses have been rebuilt, Luhring said. Of those, more than 90 percent now have a tornado safe room in them.

School enrollment has steadily grown. The consolidated district, which includes the high school and a K-2 elementary school in Parkersburg, as well as a combined school for grades 3-8 in nearby Aplington, Iowa, grew from about 774 students then, to 824 now.

The fire station, long since repaired, has an added training room that is frequently used to host a multitude of area trainings and meetings.

Financial reinvestment is in the tens of millions. Insurance, government aid, including low-interest disaster loans, donations, personal savings and private-sector investments have helped many residents and business owners rebuild.

FEMA provided more than \$1 million to help individuals with short-term housing and disaster-related emergency needs, and to help governmental entities pay for repairing or replacing eligible, disaster-damaged infrastructure, as well as to better protect key facilities from future disaster damage. The State of Iowa added a 10 percent cost-share to the infrastructure funding.

The city secured a \$3.5 million federal transportation grant to create a streetscape to enhance its residential and business areas along Iowa Highway 57, both in the tornado-damaged area and at the city's northern gateway, which was not damaged.

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Construction of a new outdoor sports recreation area is underway.

Parkersburg's assessed property valuation of \$84 million in 2009, is \$123 million today.

And above all, faith and family, still provide the ties that bind it all together, say Luhring, Truax and Humphrey.

"The tornado for me was about winning," reflected Luhring, a father of seven. "My aunt was killed by the tornado. My motivation also became making Parkersburg a place in which she would be proud. I thought about her all the time" during the recovery. "If she would have survived this thing, I think she would have been proud."

The city's success is about more than determination. It's also about gratitude.

"If it wasn't for Iowa and the best on earth coming to our aid, I'm not sure where we would be right now," he added. "All of Iowa came to our aid. "It took the best of everybody. We had the dream team show up in Parkersburg, so for that, I can't say 'thank you' enough."

When asked what year the city's tornado recovery could be considered complete, Luhring says there simply isn't one.

"That will never happen," he emphasized. "Ever. We always are going someplace. Our train is on a destination. I'll never be satisfied. We've suffered, we've bled, we've sweated, we've cried, and I'll be darned, we're not quitting."

And what's the one thing Luhring hopes that Parkersburg residents won't ever forget?

"Your address will always be here."

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For insight into Parkersburg's recovery lessons learned, see separate story: "10 Years After Disaster: Reflections of the Lessons Learned" at [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov). A video about the rebuilding of Miracle Park, and additional photos of Parkersburg then and now can be found at [www.fema.gov/media-library](http://www.fema.gov/media-library).

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