



RUSHFORD
POP 1696

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GET SOME NEW PEOPLE
MEET SOME NEW FRIENDS

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“WE START A WHOLE NEW
CHAPTER OF OUR LIFE ... YOU
HAVE TO LOOK FORWARD.”

Photo courtesy of Patricia Olson, University of Minnesota Extension



AFTER THE FLOOD

RUSHFORD'S NEW CHAPTER

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In mid-August 2007, a persistent storm system hung over the Midwest and heavy rainfall was predicted for southern Minnesota. However, the residents of Rushford never anticipated that they were on the verge of the largest natural disaster of their lifetime. During the night the town was filled with water. Rescue teams worked valiantly to evacuate the townspeople, saving lives through their quick efforts. But when daylight came, the extent of the damage became clear: nearly 300 homes were damaged or lost; almost 80 businesses were affected; and hundreds of business employees were temporarily out of work. State and Federal authorities estimated almost \$60 million dollars in losses and damages to personal property and local businesses. Members of this small, tight-knit community in the hills of southeastern Minnesota experienced staggering damages and subsequently led an amazing collective recovery effort. This report recounts their shared memories of the days immediately following the flood, memories of recovery and their collective wisdom for other communities experiencing natural disasters.

This report is based on interviews conducted by University of Minnesota Extension educators two years following the 2007 flood. Rushford community members representing business owners, city officials, farmers, and diverse demographics (singles, younger families, older families, etc.), were interviewed in June and July of 2009. Additional interviews with staff drawn in by

“IT SEEMS LIKE YESTERDAY,
BUT IT ALSO SEEMS LIKE A
LIFETIME AGO”

disaster response organizations and other helping agencies were included as well. A life-story approach was used to frame the interviews of the 44 people. This approach maximizes story-telling, with few questions asked and participants simply sharing their experiences from their own perspectives. The interviewers were moved by the openness and honesty with which community and agency members discussed their experiences. This report can only provide a glimpse into the richness of the stories discussed. The University of Minnesota Extension team continues to reflect on what participants said and how their insight can enhance the development of new tools for communities in need.

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE FLOOD

Tornado sirens were blaring and residents struggled to understand what was going on in the middle of the night. The flooding took everyone by surprise. “We went from talking about filling sandbags to evacuating people in a two-minute time frame,” said a local authority. The quick decision to start an evacuation and rescue effort proved to be correct. Firemen and emergency personnel left their own families and homes to assist others in this process. In the end, due to the rescue workers’ calm and coordinated efforts, everyone was saved and no lives were

lost in Rushford. The decisive and efficient rescue efforts, which

“THE WATER WAS UNBELIEVABLE; YOU COULDN’T EVEN SEE A TRAILER; YOU COULDN’T SEE TOPS OF BUILDINGS. IT WAS CRAZY, AND THAT WAS AT 5:30 IN THE MORNING.”

several interview participants characterized as “heroic,” were the first of many significant successes. Several community members stated with pride and gratitude that no lives were lost in Rushford. Grieving for the loss of things came later, but not having to deal with the loss of people provided space for them to move toward recovery. As one resident noted, “The whole community said, ‘let’s start cleaning up the mess. You don’t know what’s going to happen, but this is our home.’”

property losses and the devastating condition of their entire town, they simultaneously committed to restoring normalcy and rebuilding their community as quickly as possible. This shared vision was

a unique feature of Rushford’s recovery. School leaders would succeed in starting the school year on time despite what appeared to be insurmountable odds. Business leaders and owners, who knew they were responsible for preserving jobs in Rushford, worked tirelessly to reopen as fast as possible to provide gas, groceries, hardware, health care, and other

The flood propelled local business owners to meet daily immediately following the flood to share information and establish collective advocacy efforts that would benefit everyone. They assessed mutual losses, collected critical data, talked about next steps and provided emotional support to each other. Data was used to apply for assistance programs and to brainstorm what was needed for the business community as a whole. In part, due to the collective action of business owners, a special session of the state legislature approved a financial assistance program,

“EVERYBODY IN THIS TOWN HAS WORKED SO HARD GETTING THINGS BACK IN SHAPE- THE SCHOOL, THE CHURCHES, THE POST OFFICE, THE BANKS, EVERYTHING.”



RECOVERY STORIES

Several critical elements that repaired the community’s physical and emotional infrastructure contributed to the success of Rushford’s recovery and helped heal people’s lives.

Regaining Normalcy- As families grappled with the extent of their

services. One resident commented that having local jobs and functioning businesses gave families a reason to stay in Rushford.

providing a 90 percent forgivable loan with 10 percent to be repaid. Coupled with other loan programs, over 90 percent of businesses reopened.

“THE BUSINESSES GOT TOGETHER EVERY DAY... THAT WAS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT WAS CRITICAL TO HOW FAST RUSHFORD WAS ABLE TO GET GOING.”

“IT WAS SUCH AN INSPIRATION TO GET TOGETHER. WHEN WE HEARD ALL THE POSITIVE THINGS THAT WERE HAPPENING FROM ALL THESE OTHER AGENCIES; WE DIDN’T GET DOWN.”

Inner Strengths- Rushford’s recovery was aided by the power of positive thinking and the deep faith of the community. Residents commented on how they and others looked at the “small miracles” around them. They noticed and appreciated events and details that weren’t as apparent to them before. In addition, their inner strength and personal toughness kept them focused on moving forward in the face of a seemingly endless clean-up and recovery effort. Residents shared how they relied upon God to help them with their troubles. Moreover, surviving the flood and its arduous aftermath further solidified many people’s belief that material possessions are not the most

and thrive fostered new forms of community cooperation that created resilience. The focus on fundraising and controlled fund distribution was an asset in the town’s overall recovery. The community moved quickly to establish a non-profit entity called Rushford Area Disaster Alliance for Recovery (RADAR). RADAR was successful in raising significant funds quickly. While the group initially hoped to raise over \$200,000, it succeeded in collecting over \$1,000,000 for the community.

recovered successfully, in part, from the right combination of skilled social service providers working in harmony to meet the community’s needs. The effects of both of these elements were heightened by a central community meeting space, Montini Hall. This served as the gathering place for residents and volunteers. It provided daily meals for weeks, serving a total of 55,000 donated

“YOU MIGHT HAVE FELT ALONE WHEN YOU WERE HOME CLEANING AND MUCKING OUT YOUR OWN HOUSE. BUT WHEN YOU WENT UP [TO MONTINI HALL]... YOU FELT THIS TREMENDOUS SENSE THAT YOU WEREN’T ALONE.”



Photos courtesy of Peggi Redalan, Rushford Resident

important aspect of life. As one resident stated, “When you have your family, your home and your health, you’ve got everything.”

Community Strengths- Rushford’s collective commitment to succeed

“THEY ALL CAME WITH VOLUNTEERS TO HELP AND ... MORE THAN ANYTHING [THEY] GAVE PEOPLE HERE THE COURAGE TO MOVE FORWARD.”

Rushford benefitted from having the right people with the necessary skills who could move quickly and work as a team. Rushford also

meals. Montini Hall also provided a place where residents could make new friends, deepen existing friendships by sharing successes and struggles, learn

about financial assistance that was available, meet with social service staff, and connect with case managers. It was the place where everyone's small efforts seemed to coalesce to create a large amount of hope.

External Help-

Volunteers came from across the state and country to clean out debris, salvage belongings, disinfect homes and help with major home repairs. Building materials, clothing, furniture, children's car seats, and gift cards were donated.

Case managers from disaster-related organizations came to direct volunteers, broker donations, and link residents to key resources, including mental

health services. Even children from nearby communities donated school supplies, and at every football game that season, "the opponent would come out [...] with a check from

case management, common vision, coordination, determination and will, to not only survive but thrive.

“IT WAS COOL HOW ALL OF THE DIFFERENT CHURCHES WORKED TOGETHER. THE LUTHERANS AND THE CATHOLICS AND THE PRESBYTERIANS AND THE COMMUNITY CHURCH. BEFORE IT ALWAYS SEEMED LIKE THERE WAS DIFFERENCES, BUT IT’S REALLY NOT LIKE THAT ANYMORE.”

their school," one resident said. Rushford's willingness to accept outside support was an important element in accelerating the speed of recovery.

The poignancy of Rushford's story is that it had the near perfect combination of inner resources, external supports, local ability, volunteer talent, community connections, diverse leadership,

COLLECTIVE WISDOM

"I think everybody has changed for the better including myself. You learn to take things for what they are and just respect what you have and who's around you to help you out." This comment from a Rushford resident embodies the collective philosophy of recovery.

Community is Strengthened- The flood, the recovery, and creating a "new normal" in everyday life has changed families and the community. Most interviewees shared a renewed appreciation for everything around them:

family, friends, volunteerism and service, first responders, and the great community in which they live. In the wake of the flood, family members marveled at the strength and resilience they saw in each other. One family shared that, "We've learned we can work together. I guess we learned how to be patient with each other a lot more. I've always thought that we had a pretty good relationship, but I think it got better."

Collective Remorse- Not every aspect of the recovery was successful. In the process, the town and social service providers learned valuable lessons. For example, two years later, there appears to be a





Photo courtesy of Peggi Redalan, Rushford Resident



“THE COMMUNITY IS DEFINITELY CLOSER.”

Photo courtesy of Patricia Olson, University of Minnesota Extension

collective remorse about who has left the community. Everyone from local government agencies, to businesses, farmers, and residents all agree that some residents, especially the poor, renters, elderly, and those who lived in the trailer court received little help, causing many to move away. The study interview participants agreed the community lost something valuable when those individuals and families left. There were several groups in the community that were particularly challenged by financial assistance programs. For example, several rental property owners were surprised that rental properties were not classified as businesses. They did not qualify for assistance, loans or FEMA trailers. Therefore, they could not rebuild. Interview participants also noted that the elderly often did not know how to ask for help or refused assistance. Farmers were greatly challenged in finding flood recovery resources. They had to cope with the magnitude of damage to their land, crops and livestock, but found limited financial supports for their effort. No programs were available to assist farmers with the loss of productivity and the 1-3 feet of infertile sediment that remained.

Desire to Help Others- Rushford residents were tremendously moved by the volunteers who came to help. This has given the community a collective sense of wanting to help others experiencing similar disasters.



Furthermore, people also acquired a new appreciation for how they worked together to build a better community. As one community leader said, "We spar back and forth when things are good and normal, but when something disastrous happens, everybody comes together, and you become one and you're unified as you fight the problem."

While residents talked about the physical and mental toll of the initial disaster itself, they now understand the long-term nature of recovery. Two years after the flood, people continued to experience physical and mental health issues. Some participants noted that most mental health services were provided on a short-term basis and longer comprehensive services may have been needed.

TELL EVERYBODY TO COME TO RUSHFORD. TELL EVERYBODY ABOUT RUSHFORD, THAT THIS IS A HIDDEN PART OF THE STATE ... AND RUSHFORD'S COME BACK AND BETTER THAN EVER. AND RUSHFORD'S WILLING TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE TOO.

Through these shared stories, we have learned more about what helps families and communities recover successfully from disasters. We are developing new tools for other communities around the state and the nation. As we continue to reflect on Rushford's experience, we may find additional ways to help families and communities in need.



PROFILE OF RUSHFORD'S SUCCESSFUL RECOVERY

- Quick and calm evacuation
- Collective commitment to restore normalcy and rebuild the town
- Local business community's efforts to re-open quickly
- Outside volunteers and donations
- People's inner strength and deep faith
- Volunteer command center's effective volunteer coordination
- Strong support of churches, faith-based organizations and social service providers
- Social service providers' coordination and teamwork
- Centralized case management
- Government funding sources quickly available
- Mental health services
- Establishment of RADAR
- Capable fundraising team
- Advocacy for business recovery
- Community gathering place (Montini Hall)



Photos courtesy of Tri-County Record



Photo courtesy of Patricia Olson, University of Minnesota Extension

WHAT INDIVIDUALS/FAMILIES CAN DO WHEN A DISASTER OCCURS

- Keep a journal of actions taken, contacts made, and accomplishments.
- Document everything thrown away.
- Be patient and try to be positive – recovery takes a long time.
- Talk to a counselor even if you think it is not necessary.
- Slow down your financial decision-making process.
- Get advice in understanding the sequence of financial assistance.
- Stay informed and be your own advocate.
- Work with caseworkers, if available.
- Understand that there will be a new or different “normal.”



Photo courtesy of Pe



Photos courtesy of Tri-County Record

WHAT INDIVIDUALS/FAMILIES CAN DO NOW BEFORE A DISASTER

- Take a picture of each room of your house.
- Compile a list of major household items and update annually.
- Keep these documents and other legal and tax documents in a safe deposit box.

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO NOW BEFORE A DISASTER

- Maintain an updated disaster plan.
- Participate in a disaster plan larger than your city.
- Join a regional Volunteers Active in a Disaster (VOAD).
- Establish a Red Cross shelter team.



WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO WHEN A DISASTER HAPPENS

- Connect with Fire Chiefs State Emergency Team (FAST) as soon as possible.
- Communicate what services are available.
- Have language interpreters available, if needed.
- Connect with communities that have experienced a similar disaster.
- Organize a community long-term recovery committee to focus on fund raising and grant writing.
- Centralize social services and use overall case managers.
- Provide financial assistance education.
- Conduct daily meetings between the business community and residents.
- Buy local if possible.
- Attend to your most vulnerable residents (senior citizens, low income families).
- Utilize an existing volunteer management system.
- Create a confidential database of affected families (if case management is not available).
- Organize an advocacy group to work with the state government on funding needs.
- Create as much normalcy as possible for children.
- Access long-term recovery mental health staff resources for the entire community.
- Plan uplifting community events.



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Visit www.extension.umn.edu/toughtimes/ for more information on this and other disaster recovery resources from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development.

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