

February 5, 2008 at 7:02 p.m.

- Winds estimated at 200 - 240 MPH
- 86 injuries
- 51 injured victims taken to the hospital
- 9 injured victims admitted
- No fatalities
- 31 campus buildings damaged
- 19 campus buildings with major damage



Stories from the Storm

February 5 had been a day in which common conversation in Jackson had included the mention of severe weather. Unseasonable temperatures in the mid-70s, combined with the impending passage of a cold front, projected the possibility of dangerous conditions.

Classes at local secondary schools, both public and private, had been canceled that day. At Union University, schedules were intact, but there was also a careful watch on weather reports and radar scans.

Just after 6 p.m., word came that the Memphis area had been hit with a system packing hail, damaging winds and imbedded tornadoes. By 6:30, WBBJ-TV in Jackson had interrupted regular programming as two forecasters

tracked the storm live. It seemed to be moving up Interstate 40 directly to Jackson. Prior to 7 p.m., civil defense sirens sounded across Madison County.

At 7:02 p.m., an EF-4 tornado crossed Pleasant Plains Road, striking a glancing blow to White Hall and then hitting Jennings Hall before it focused destructive power on the Hurt and Watters residential complexes and Hammons Hall.

President David S. Dockery saw the funnel cross U.S. 45 Bypass from his office, not yet knowing the extent of the damage it had caused on campus: Seventy percent of the residential housing destroyed or damaged beyond repair; hundreds of vehicles totaled; serious damage to Jennings

and the second floor of Hammons.

Worst of all, 13 students were trapped beneath rubble in the Hurt and Watters complexes. By the time the evening ended, 51 students were taken to hospitals, and nine were admitted.

But when the sun rose the next morning, everyone who had been alive on campus at sunset was still breathing. One of the most powerful forces in nature had taken direct aim at the only area of campus with high concentrations of potential victims—and not one single life was lost.

Suddenly, the ugly remnants of those buildings turned beautiful to many who had feared the worst just hours earlier. Immediately, God's providence was revealed to the

region, the nation and even the world in mighty, life-changing ways.

This special edition of the Unionite will tell only a small part of this complex and remarkable story. It is a story of emergency, recovery and rebuilding. It is a testimony of hope and blessing. It is an opportunity for the world to see what makes Union University a unique place in the world of higher education.

Many of the pictures and accounts that appear on these pages were captured by student journalists, who at a difficult and terrifying moment left behind the comforts of home and family to chronicle this amazing story. You'll also read about faculty members who worked for days to retrieve every possible possession in the wrecked rooms

of their students, often trekking through mounds of debris and glass shards with cold winds blowing in their faces.

Best of all, read the stories of the survivors, who are quiet about their losses but outspoken in their thanksgiving for God's providence: specifically, for the soft drink machine that fell just the right way to create a space for them or the door that wedged against a falling wall and kept the collapsing ceiling from crushing them.

Read the story of February 5 and the days of recovery and rebuilding that follow as some of the most poignant moments in the 185-year history of Union University. Join the campus community in praising God not only for what He has done, but what He will do here in the months to come. ☪



Kevin Furniss:

By Tim Ellsworth

A hand of hope

Stories from the Storm

Under 25 feet of rubble, Kevin Furniss had reason to think he was about to die.

He no longer had feeling in his legs. He questioned whether he'd ever be able to play tennis again. He feared for the safety of his friends who were also buried just a few feet away.

Sometimes he even hoped that death would come swiftly.

"I actually told myself that if they weren't coming quick, I wanted my lungs to lock up," Furniss said.

But God had other plans for the junior from Bartlett, Tenn. Furniss finally began to punch his way out through the sheet rock above him, and managed to stick his hand out into the cold night air.

"A firefighter actually grabbed it," Furniss said. "It was hope, and it was life. It really did feel like he gave me life just by touching my hand."

For Furniss, the feeling brought back memories of another time in his life when he needed to be rescued.

"It felt a lot like when I prayed to receive Christ," he recalled. "He pulled me out of a lot of sin. As deep and hopeless as I was, Christ pulled me out. In the same way, it felt that way when the firefighter grabbed my hand and pulled me out."

The most frightening night of Furniss' life began in the Watters commons, where Kevin was playing ping pong with friends. He raced into the men's bathroom in the commons – the designated shelter area in times of severe weather. Three of his friends were hunkered down in that bathroom, with another three friends taking shelter in the women's room.

"I don't remember anything from there until it was on top of us," Furniss recalled. "I don't remember who was behind me or how we got in the door or anything like that. It all happened and then everything was on top of us."

By "everything," Furniss means the entire commons building, which had collapsed and trapped him and his friends under tons of rubble. They didn't know how deeply buried they were, so their first instinct was to push up in an attempt to escape. Furniss and his friends soon discovered the futility of those efforts.

The first hour passed with much screaming, much chaos and much panic. They

tried desperately to get someone – anyone – to hear their cries for help.

Shortly thereafter, Jordan Thompson, one of Kevin's friends, managed to free himself from the debris and simply sat in a cave-like opening in the darkness. He began talking to Kevin and his friends, encouraging them in their distress.

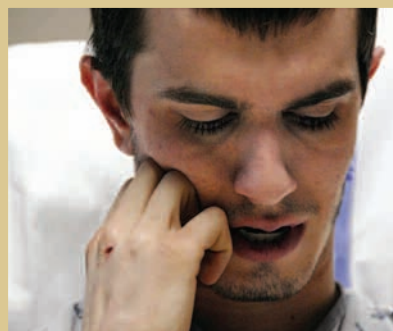
"We started praying and reciting the Scripture," Furniss said. "I sang a little bit. Jordan joined in."

Kevin could feel the emergency workers getting closer with their equipment. It didn't bring the hope that Kevin had expected.

"The sledge hammer and the chainsaw were the worst, because you could feel the sledge hammer jamming everything tighter. And you could hear the chainsaw," Furniss said. "The scariest thing was not the tornado. It wasn't being trapped and thinking I was going to suffocate. It wasn't being afraid I was going to have broken bones. The scariest thing was that the chainsaw was going to go into my back."

But the rescue workers knew what they were doing. Slowly and skillfully, they finally removed enough of the debris – in part guided by Kevin's verbal instructions -- to allow Kevin to punch his hand out.

"When I reached my hand out and started waving it around, I was hoping for someone to touch it, or feel water on it, or



something that wasn't underground," Furniss said. "And then out of nowhere the guy – I couldn't see, I didn't know who he was, but it was another life, and he squeezed my hand and told me that they were there. He actually tried to let it go, probably to help get me out, and I wouldn't let him let go.

"It felt like I was underground and had no hope and no future. I was 25 feet deep, and the moment he touched my hand it was life."

Though hurting, Kevin gladly granted numerous interviews from his hospital room. He spoke to FOX News' Greta Van Susteren, to the CBS Nightly News with Katie Couric, to Memphis' Commercial Appeal and to The Jackson Sun, among others. He took every opportunity to talk to the world about the Lord.

"The reason I kept doing interviews was because those other guys couldn't, and I wanted the gospel out," he said.

He was discouraged at times when producers axed the most potent statements about his faith. The CBS story in particular had been stripped of most faith references. But Kevin quickly points out there were five people on the CBS crew in his room who heard what he had to say.

Upon his discharge from the hospital six days after admission, Furniss and his family drove straight to the Union campus. Kevin wanted to see where he had been trapped. At first, when he approached the pile of rubble that had enveloped him, a policeman reprimanded him.

"Hey, you're too close. Get away from that," the man said.

But then someone explained to the officer who Kevin was, and the man's demeanor changed. He helped Kevin walk onto the top of the pile, where days before Kevin and his friends had been buried alive.

"I sat up there with my dad," Kevin said. "We cried a little bit, and we prayed."

Seeing the extent of the devastation for the first time caused Kevin to wonder at God's mercy in sparing him, and in sparing everyone else on campus.

"I don't know why no one was killed, much less myself," he said. "I don't know why hundreds of girls weren't killed."

The only thing he could think was that God had a reason for him to be alive – that God somehow would glorify Himself through the events of Feb. 5.

Kevin didn't have to wait long to see what he considers to be at least a part of God's purposes in allowing the tornado to happen.

Only a few days after the tragedy, one of his close friends, Chris Lean, became a Christian.

"He realized he didn't have what we had, and he is now a believer," Kevin said. "To hear that news, it really made it all worth it." ♦

Stories from the Storm

(Julie Boyer, a 2001 Union graduate, lives across the street from campus. Her second-floor apartment was not the place to ride out a tornado warning, so she bypassed shelter on the first floor of her building and decided to visit some close friends (including Heather Martin) in the Jelks residence hall on Union's campus. Julie became trapped in the rubble following the tornado.)

The following are excerpts of Julie's first-person account of her ordeal, taken with her permission from a longer email she wrote to friends and loved ones soon after the experience. Note that Heather Martin's first-person account appears on the page 14.)

Kellie Roe, Suzanne Short, and Heather Martin were all home. The TV was on, and the girls were just hanging out. About five minutes after I walked in, the sirens sounded. Suzanne is an RA (resident assistant), so she grabbed her phone and keys, and headed out to clear the top floor of Jelks, the building for which she was responsible. There were three girls who came downstairs to join us.

About two minutes before the tornado hit, Suzanne opened our door and yelled, "Get in the tub, NOW!" We were the last room she told before she sprinted for Hurt Commons to check back in. She almost didn't make it. Without her, though, we would all probably be dead.

The next moments are still a bit of a blur. I jumped into the tub on the end away from the faucet, and grabbed Heather's hand to help her in. As I was sinking down, Heather was trying to find space to fit. Kellie was almost in. After that, the lights went out, there was a pop (we think it was the bathroom door flying open), and the bathroom wall blew into and over us. Not only did the storm sound like a train (or a thousand of them — as Heather said), but it truly seemed as if a train had hit the bathroom wall. The noise was deafening. The power of the storm was absolutely indescribable.

Dirt and debris was pelting us, and we were screaming as the bathtub ripped from

the floor on one side and tilted us at a slight angle. The wind was pushing from both the side and behind. I could feel the rotation. Heather told me later the wind was picking her legs up, and she felt like it was trying to suck her out of the tub. She said I was still gripping her hand. She held on to me and to the side of the tub to keep from flying out. I don't remember this, only that I was thinking, "I can't believe it's actually hitting us!"

We heard crackling, and the second floor suddenly dropped on top of us. We were pressed down further and further into the tub as the weight of the debris settled on us. It felt like the outside concrete wall fell on us after the second floor dropped. I thought the pressure from above was going to kill us.

I don't know quite how to explain my position in the tub. My body will never again be able to twist that way. My mouth and chin were crushed against the right side



of my chest all the way under my breast. My jaw was clenched. My neck was curled up and exposed kind of like a swan when it ducks its head. There was pressure from the back of the tub on my right side. My right lung was so compressed that no air was able to get in or out. At the time, I thought I had a collapsed lung. Heather was on top

of me, and her hip was on my left lung.

The only sounds in the tub for the first few seconds were me trying to breathe. My first thoughts were similar to others', "The dorms are destroyed. All the students are either dead or buried like we are, and they will never find us in time. Even if I can keep breathing, my air pocket is so small, I will suffocate before they get us out. This is the end of my life. I have no regrets." I was calm and accepting of this, but I didn't stop fighting for air. I didn't give up. I was realistic.

It became harder and harder for me to breathe, and the weight of the building increased more and more. My arms and legs started to go numb. I wiggled my fingers and toes to make sure one last time that I didn't have a spinal cord injury. At this same moment, Heather realized I couldn't breathe. She had heard me before but didn't know it was I.

She started talking me through the situation, telling me to breathe, trying to shift her weight to help. It only made it worse. I started to pray in my mind, "Jesus, I need you..."

(Rescue crews removed debris carefully by hand until they reached the trapped women. Julie was in-and-out of consciousness, and Heather says Julie's breathing stopped several times. Shifting in the wreckage created new pressure points on her body. Finally, the crews uncovered her position.)

We were free. The firemen pulled me out and passed me from person to person. The last guy to whom I was passed was instructed to hold me only on my left side, since I was in so much pain on the right. He held me so gently. I knew I was safe, and his body heat started to warm me up. It had been stifling under the building, but the fresh air was freezing. I thought, "This is what the arms of God must feel like: safe, secure, strong, and warm." They tried to sit me down, then lay me down, but I couldn't breathe in either position. So, I stood.

I know my days are numbered, but I will not leave this earth until Jesus says it is time. I will proclaim His glory, His grace, and His strength until then. I had peace about my death that night, and I have peace about my life right now. ✝

Julie Boyer:

'Peace about my life'



Heather Martin:

‘The power of Christ in me’

(Heather Martin, a junior nursing major, lived in Jelks prior to the tornado. She became trapped in the debris following the tornado with Julie Boyer, who also supplied the Unionite with a first-person account. The following excerpts are from an email that was forwarded to scores of people around the world.)

About two minutes before the tornado hit, (roommate Suzanne Short) ran in and said “Get in the tub, now!” (that would be the last time I would see her and know that she was alive until 11:30 or so later that night). A mentor of mine from church, Julie Boyer, decided to come over and ride out the storm with us. We headed to the bathroom -- the three girls from upstairs got into the tub.

Our ears started popping. At that point, (roommate Kellie Roe) was almost into the tub and Julie turned to me and said, “We have to get in, NOW!” We shut the door. Julie jumped in. She was holding my hand. The lights went off. Hail was pounding on our building, and I was almost completely in (the tub) when the tornado hit.

I still have not come up with adequate words to describe the tornado. I’ll do my best. Everyone asks, “Did it sound like a train?” It sounded like a thousand trains. The noise was incredible. It was a roar.

Julie was still holding me at this point and I felt my legs being pulled up by the force. And then, everything collapsed. There was a tremendous amount of pressure and it just kept pressing us and pressing us. Some of us were screaming - it was pushing the breath out of me, so I couldn’t scream.

All of what I have just described occurred in about five or six seconds. As things were falling and the wind was swirling around us, I remember thinking, “This is NOT happening to me.”

As quickly as it came, it left. And then there was an eerie silence and darkness. I couldn’t see anyone in the tub with me. It was so hard to breathe. There was a wall pressing down across my back, and my legs hadn’t made it into the tub. One of the girls was able to call 911. She had her cell phone and thankfully could move enough to make the call. We found out later we were the first call from Union.

My initial thoughts were: “Every student on this campus is either dead or trapped like

Stories from the Storm

we are. This is where I am going to die. No one will ever find us. We will be here for days and we won’t last that long.” We all accounted for each other and tried to calm each other down.

I began to think about what my death would be like. I only had a small pocket of air and my whole body was compressed. I realized I was going to pass out, and then I would be with Jesus. To some of you, that may sound very morbid, but it actually allowed me to move on and not panic in fear about the process of my death.

I began to pray out loud - telling Julie to breathe, not to talk, just to breathe - I was positioned on top of her in such a way that if I moved, she either couldn’t breathe or it caused her excruciating pain.



Heather Martin and other rescued students went to the Jackson Fire Department to thank the workers.

I realize now, Christ was guiding my thoughts from the very beginning – after coming to grips with the fact that this would most likely be the night of my death, I was able to move on and focus on simply breathing.

I continued to pray aloud, and then at one point I had to tell Julie that I was out of breath and couldn’t pray out loud anymore, but that I was still praying in my heart and mind. Please do not see this as my being “strong” or “brave” or “courageous” - this was the power of Christ in me.

At one point, Kellie very calmly said, “Heather, it’s going to be okay.” Kellie now has no recollection of this. God used her

and spoke through her directly to me in that moment. It was at that point that I had an overwhelming sense of peace.

The tornado struck at 7:02 - the firemen arrived around 7:15. We were told later that when they arrived, the chief got out and was overwhelmed with the destruction. He sent off the team in twos to listen for voices. Students began to crawl out of their bath tubs. He heard muffled sounds near the pile of debris that used to be my dorm room. Rubble on top of us had to be removed by hand.

When the rescuers got close to us, it got really scary. Julie’s breathing was terrible at this point and she was in and out of consciousness. As the rescuers neared our tub, it was terrifying because the rubble and debris would shift and the pressure would increase.

The firemen were telling us not to scream and panic, because they thought we were in pain each time we did. At this point, I could see one of the fireman’s faces. I screamed out, “I am not panicking. You have to listen to me. There is someone stuck under me and if I move she can’t breathe. Her neck is exposed, so you can’t slide the debris. You have to lift it.” Then, they lifted off the main piece, and for the first time in 45 minutes, we could breathe in fresh air!

They got the other girls out, with just Julie and I left. They tried to get me next, but my legs were still pinned. So, they got Julie out. Then, a fireman came and held me. He held my torso and my head. He kept telling me, “We’re gonna get you out of here.”

I noticed there was a 2x4 right next to my right knee, between the edge of the tub and the mass of debris. That 2x4 had kept just enough of the pressure off of my legs so that I didn’t completely lose blood flow to my lower extremities. It saved my legs.

As you have read my story, you’ve read a lot about God. It may sound a bit odd if you don’t know Him personally. But here’s the truth: I cannot explain ANY of the events of Tuesday without acknowledging that God was there - He sustained and covered us all with His protection. I should not be alive today -- but I am because He still has plans for my life here on earth. He is good. If you don’t know Him, you need to. He loves you. He wants a relationship with you. I pray that through my story you have caught a glimpse of who He is - His love – His sovereignty - His strength - and His grace - and ultimately, His salvation. ✝

Stories from the Storm

Jasmine Huang is a 19-year-old senior engineering major from Heifei, China. She was raised an atheist, but became a Christian during four years as an exchange student and college student in Jackson.

Jasmine is praying that the fallout from the Feb. 5 tornado will cause her parents and other family members to be more receptive to the gospel. Like everyone else on campus that night, Huang has her own “Where were you?” story.

She was crammed in the bathroom with 14 – yes, 14 – other girls. They heard the walls shaking and the glass breaking, but they didn’t realize the storm’s severity until they saw a guy coming in with blood on his face.

“That’s when we got nervous and smelled gas,” Jasmine said. “We sang hymns and prayed. I was smiling the whole time. I was scared in my heart, but it was just really, really encouraging to me – just shocking – to see how peaceful and calm everyone was. I can see they were scared, but they definitely were not terrified. I can see that hope and peace in people, and that really impressed me.”

What also impressed Huang was the reaction she saw from so many different people after the tornado – students, faculty, staff, community volunteers – all working together selflessly in a united effort to help those in need. She told her parents about the way everyone pulled together in a time of crisis, unified because of their shared bond in Christ.

“When I was talking with them about the help I got from the community and just what everyone did for me, they just did not understand,” Jasmine said.

Her mom, especially, thought maybe people were

doing it out of pity or because they would want something in return down the road. But

Jasmine told her that was not the case – that people were helping only because they wanted to spread the love of Christ. Such a response made an impact upon her parents.

“I think they are getting to see how Christians act because of Christ,” Huang said. “So, I think that this is definitely an eye opener for them.”

Prior to the tornado, Jasmine was frustrated with what she called a “gap of communication” with her parents. They were on different wavelengths when it came to priorities and purposes in their lives. But then she told them about the tornado, about how she could have died, and about how her life was spared. And the previous barriers she had been experiencing melted away, as she sensed anew her parents’ concern for her wellbeing.

“That brings warmth to my heart because we are still connected,” Jasmine said.

It also brought her a renewed sense of urgency in communicating the gospel to the two people she loves the most. She relayed to them the accounts of how people responded to the tornado. She told them about the peace and comfort that God had provided her during a time of disaster and calamity. She told her mom how important it is to have a God upon whom to depend in such times.

“I think that showed her more of what I really believe, and showed her more that Christianity is not just an activity or interest, but really what my life depends on,” Jasmine said.

“It’s who I am.” ✠



Jasmine Huang:
Scared but not terrified



Rachel Daniel & Laura Coggin:

A last-minute decision

*Laura Coggin holds the remains
of her bedroom door*

Stories from the Storm

There had been talk of bad weather in Jackson all day, but on the evening of Feb. 5, sophomores Rachel Daniel and Laura Coggin weren't too concerned.

"In the past year, we've had quite a few different tornado warnings go off and nothing happened," Rachel said. "So I honestly wasn't that worried about it and I don't think a lot of us were."

After eating with some friends at a nearby restaurant, the two faced what seemed like a routine decision: go back to their Wingo rooms in Hurt Complex, or attend a missions class at Englewood Baptist Church. Laura was leaning in the direction of going back to her second-floor room and taking a nap, but she decided to go to Englewood instead.

Says Laura: "It was a totally last-minute decision not to be (in Wingo)."

After arriving at the church, they heard tornado sirens. Calls were made to their roommates to be certain they were aware of the warning.

survival inside a bathtub in Wingo.

"Cheryl said that the wall fell completely on her," remembers Rachel. "Somehow she got out of the rubble. She was able to get herself out."

"She said, 'Rachel, I thought I was going to die. I didn't expect to live.'"

Rachel and Laura are especially struck by the fact that Cheryl began trying to help other victims once she was free, not thinking about her own injuries.

"She went to help one of the girls that was in there and picked her up and everything," Rachel said. "But once she picked her up, she realized (the extent of her own injuries) and she was like 'I think I broke my ribs, I can't breathe' and she just laid down."

Cheryl Propst remained in Jackson-Madison County General Hospital for several days with multiple injuries. Her roommates are likely to remember that initial hospital visit with Cheryl for a long time.

"She was awake and everything when we were



But shortly after 7 p.m., both girls went from making phone calls to answering them.

"We started getting calls from family and friends to see if we were okay," Rachel said. "And they were saying 'we just watched the news, Union just got hit' and it was just a nightmare."

"Moment after moment, the news just kept on getting worse and worse."

Eventually, they heard the news that Union students were trapped in the rubble, some had been rescued and many were headed to the hospital. One of those who suffered serious injuries was their roommate Cheryl Propst, the daughter of Kenyan missionaries.

Hours later, they went to the hospital to find Cheryl, and began hearing the harrowing tale of her

there," remembers Rachel. "She was so sweet, such an amazing godly girl with such a sweet spirit and everything and holding her hand and talking to her, it was so amazing just to see her alive."

Equally amazing to Rachel and Laura is the fact that they were spared the dangers of collapsing Wingo Hall by a friendly invitation and a last-minute decision.

"I just praise the Lord that I have roommates that got me to go to a class about missions," Laura said.

Adds Rachel: "Even though we've lost everything material-wise, it just taught us what's important is that we have Christ and we have each other. And we're just so thankful."

"Looking around this campus, there is no way anyone should have survived." ❖

Stories from the Storm

Rebecca Cobo lost her wedding band and her wedding ring during the tornado. The ring is a family heirloom that is more than 100 years old.

"I actually got the wedding band," says her husband Mario, who served as a residence director in the Watters complex and holds the same position at The Jett, Union's new residence hall in the former Old English Inn.

"I found it and I was so happy, I knew she'd be happy," Cobo said. "Then one of the soccer players found the wedding ring."

Mario, Rebecca and their two young children lost a lot of possessions in the Watters wreckage. Others, such as photo albums and those rings, were recovered because students pitched in to find them among the debris.

Only a few nights earlier, on the evening of Feb. 5, Mario had helped pull some of those very students out of the wreckage. In fact, his actions before the tornado hit probably saved dozens of lives.

"They are 18 and 20 year olds, and they always think, 'you are immortal,' nothing is going to happen to you," said Cobo. "We had a very well-prepared and

sion. After that I didn't really know what happened."

Cobo said it would have been understandable if the uninjured students had run away in confusion and fear. He says it amazes him that they started searching for members of his family and other student survivors.

"We were just thinking 'how many people died here?' Then they started the search."

Rescue crews were asking Cobo to identify rooms and buildings where students might be trapped.

"I looked and saw the circle, and could see part of the building, so I said 'it's somewhere around here.' They started excavating. After a little while they could hear voices."

Cobo slept very little that night. Days later, when he did get sleep, he'd awaken with a familiar feeling of uncertainty.

"I relive it all the time. The first couple of nights, I'd be dreaming, then I'd wake up and think 'did that really happen?'"

A native of Ecuador, Mario came to Union University in 1997 on a tennis scholarship. He says his relationship with God changed as a result of his



trained staff, and everyone knew what to do."

Some of the students experienced curiosity about the storm rather than fear, failing to realize how serious the situation had become until it was almost too late to take cover.

"I have a security radio, and the security people were yelling, 'This is not a joke! Tell everyone to get in, it's coming, it's going to hit.'"

The normally easy-going Cobo had to take on a different persona in those final seconds.

"I had some of my (resident assistants) trying to push these students inside," Cobo said. "We actually had to get pretty firm to get some of these people in. And I think God actually helped us to get people in right on time.

"Before I knew, it just hit and it was like a big explo-

time at the university as a student.

"I just noticed that everybody around here was different. They reached out and showed me Christ through their lives, not just how they talked. I just fell in love with the people here. "

He also fell in love with Rebecca, whom he met at Union. The two were married and lived for a short time in Indiana. When an offer came for Mario work as a resident director at Union, the decision to accept it and move his family back to Jackson was a fairly easy one.

"I just love Union. It's like a family."

And like that priceless wedding ring found in the debris, Mario sees a valuable recovery underway as students finish the spring semester.

"After something like this, you see again how people were just truly like a family." ❖

Mario & Rebecca Cobo:

Grateful for what is priceless



The Wilsons & the Kaspars:

Our sons are trapped

Debbie Kaspar arrived at Union to find her son was trapped in storm debris

Stories from the Storm

They came from opposite directions to find their sons on the evening of Feb. 5. Debbie Kaspar drove through heavy rain and around tornado damage between her Lakeland home and Jackson. Mark and Annie Wilson talked their way through roadblocks between Chattanooga and Jackson. Both families arrived to find difficult circumstances.

"We heard about the boys being trapped in a building," said Debbie Kaspar, mother of freshman transfer Jason Kaspar. "Of course we envisioned a building with debris up against a door and they'd move the debris and our children would walk out."

But Kaspar says she had no idea her son was in any trouble. Although she had not been able to complete a cell phone call, heavy calling prevented a lot of connections that night. She arrived on campus with the thought of taking him home. But after entering the campus, she was met by a family friend and escorted to a spot about 50 feet from where rescue crews were working in the Watters complex wreckage.

"It was at that point that they told us there's still one student who's trapped in there, and we found out that one student was ours."

The Wilson's son David, a freshman soccer player, was among the most seriously injured Union students. He too was trapped, and his legs were crushed under the debris. A long road of rehabilitation awaits.

But his life was spared, and David's parents say he wants to share his thankfulness.

While still in intensive care, David asked his mother to find him a wheelchair.

"He said 'I gotta go to (my old high school) and go to chapel,'" said Annie Wilson. "I've got to tell them what happened. I've got to share what God has done."

Debbie Kaspar has similar feelings of thankfulness. Her family watched as rescue crews

worked quickly to free Jason, working around a second major storm threat a few hours after the tornado struck campus.

"We watched them with the backhoe lift up the heavy cement pieces, we watched the chainsaws come out," said Debbie Kaspar.

"And then we watched a gentleman with a pickaxe, and he just feverishly slammed it down, and at that point we thought maybe that Jason had lost consciousness and they were desperately trying to get to him. We just kept praying and the people around us just kept calling out to the Lord."

When rescue crews received word that a second storm was about to hit Jackson, they refused to run for cover. The relentless effort paid off. Jason was freed from the rubble that imprisoned him for more than four hours. There were serious injuries, but miraculously, no broken bones, no head trauma and no internal injuries.

"At midnight they were finally able to get him out and they said 'we're going to be making a mad dash to the ambulance and take him to the hospital,'" said Debbie Kaspar. "We were maybe six feet away and we just said 'Jason, we love you' and he said 'Mom' and raised a hand and waved."

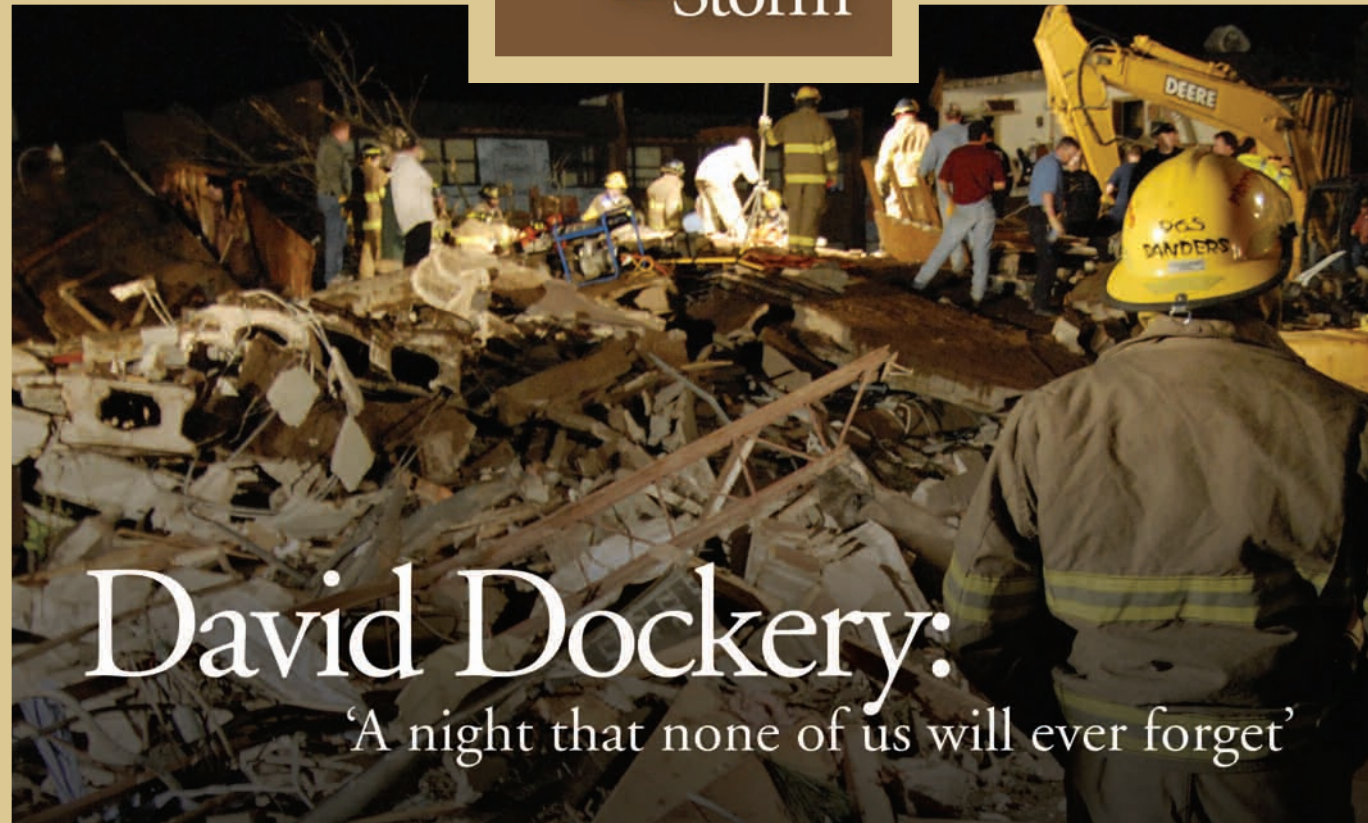
When Mark Wilson visited campus the next day, he had Jason and David on his mind, along with five other young men who were trapped.

"I stood outside the building (where David had been trapped) and I just thought there is no way one person could live under that," he said.

"And yet, there are seven boys that God said 'you're mine, and I'm not going to let you go.'" ✝



Mark and Annie Wilson talked their way through police road blocks to get to Jackson



David Dockery:

‘A night that none of us will ever forget’

This is informal dinner at a local restaurant with two Union deans had been cut short by a tornado threat, so President David S. Dockery went back to his office on the southeastern part of the Jackson campus.

Sirens began to blare. Within a few minutes, he would become one of the very few people to see the funnel cloud exit the campus property.

“I looked out my window to see the tornado jumping over the 45 bypass,” Dockery said.

“My initial thoughts were ‘thank God, I think we have escaped,’ only to hear someone say ‘come quickly! I think it’s hit the residence life area!’”

The next few hours were the most challenging in his 12-year presidency.

“My eyes saw what I could not believe. The devastation was massive, the destruction was beyond comprehension.”

“Everywhere I turned in the residence life area, walls were coming down, students were coming out, some of them cut and bleeding, and then I heard these words: ‘we’re trapped!’ and over here we had four women students trapped and on the other side, a number of guys were trapped under the fallen walls.”

Instinctively, Dockery called for emergency help. He was told it was already on the way. The debris was so deep and so treacherous that it took skilled rescue crews nearly five hours to free all the trapped students. Dockery watched the nightmarish scenario



unfold before his eyes, but he also saw inspiring feats of compassion.

“Courageously, many Union students gathered around, began talking to trapped students, making sure they were okay, staying in touch with them.”

It wasn’t the first time in his tenure that tornado destruction had been seen on campus. A storm in 2002 did about \$2.5 million in damage.

This time, he says it wasn’t until sunrise on Feb. 6 that he completely understood the full extent of Union’s losses.

“We looked across the campus. The devastation was far worse than anything we even imagined at the time -- fifteen, twenty times worse than 2002.

Again, that horrific scene was tempered by other things Dockery saw on that memorable day-after.

“Wednesday morning, the Union University community was at its best. People came together, cared for each other, saying ‘we’re going to move through this.’

Dockery says that attitude should not be interpreted as false bravado or stoicism.

“It’s because we have a hope in a providential God who had protected us the night before.” ♦



Kimberly Thornbury:

‘This was something serious’

Kimberly Thornbury wasn’t thrilled with the report from her husband Greg prior to the Feb. 5 tornado.

She was at home with their two daughters. Tornado warnings abounded. Sirens blared ominously. Greg called to update her on his whereabouts.

“Don’t worry,” Greg said, “I’m safe in the president’s office.”

Kimberly’s response: “Standing next to the plate glass window in his office?”

It was Kimberly pretending to be upset – because anybody acquainted with her knows that getting her upset is no easy task. She seems to have a smile permanently tattooed on her face.

But Kimberly, Union’s dean of students, would soon receive another phone call from Union President David S. Dockery that was certainly no pretending matter. She had heard on the news that a tornado had hit Union, but she had no idea how bad it was.

“I remember Dr. Dockery calling me and saying that the situation looked dire and tragic, that there could be deaths,” she said. “I remember the sound of his voice. He’s not prone to hyperbole. He’s not dramatic. He’s not prone to emotion. But I could tell this was something

different. This was something serious.”

This “something serious” was the rallying cry for Kimberly, a master of preparation, who quickly made her way to campus to do what she does best – caring for the students of Union University in a selfless, sacrificing way.

“This is her calling,” Greg said. “She is called to serve the students of this university.”

When she arrived on campus, Kimberly began the process of finding temporary housing for Union’s 1,100 residential students in the homes of faculty and staff members. She told herself that in two hours, she wanted every single student in a bed in a home.

That process kept her occupied at first – so occupied that she hadn’t been able to see in detail the extent of the destruction to Union’s campus housing. But as she was walking the road with some students, she remembers what she saw when she turned to her right.

“It was the first time I turned right, and I saw the buildings, and I just lost it,” she said. “I had no idea. I could never in my wildest dreams imagine that devastation.”

One of the most pressing needs Thornbury had to address was contacting parents. But without power on campus, she didn’t have access to the university’s data

management software, and the students’ emergency contact cards were in the commons buildings under tons of rubble.

So she quickly drafted students to help her send messages through Facebook and locate phone numbers for all the parents of residential students. All the while, the rain kept pouring down.

“The ink on my paper is getting wet,” Thornbury said. “And I’m like, ‘Lord, it cannot get wet. I have to know what that number is.’”

She finally took refuge in an ambulance to have a dry space to work and write.

Thornbury quickly discovered that she had to trust God to provide people to help her with the monumental job before her – responsibilities that allowed to her sleep only six hours every third night for more than two weeks.

“You found a willing face, you looked them in the eye, if they looked credible and competent, then you would give them assignments,” Kimberly said. “You could not wait for someone to say, ‘Can I help you?’ You just had to assume that the Lord was going to put people in your path who had the skills.” ♦



More voices in the storm

Stories from the Storm

Elizabeth Walker,
junior, digital media studies, Louisville, Ky.

“We could see the actual funnel coming. Lightning struck and we could see the tornado and then we got blown back.”

Evangeline Webb,
freshman, nursing, Wappingers, N.Y.

“I was in a room in the Dodd dorm. There were about 15 of us in the room. Since I was the last one in the bathroom, I had a lot of sticks and dirt thrown into my face. Three days later, I am still finding residue in my hair.”

Matt Carter,
freshman, business administration, Steele, Mo.

“I ran to the Adams dorm and held on to the first door I saw. Once the glass shattered in the window, I jumped in the room to take cover. Amazingly, I came out of the storm without a scratch on my body.”

Luke Burleson,
sophomore, biology, Jackson, Tenn.

“The tornado was west of us. We were able to see the shingles flying off of Jennings, and we knew we had to get inside... Suddenly, the noise of bursting and shattering glass filled our ears and we were thrown against the wall.”

Katy Pope,
sophomore, digital media studies, Sylacauga, Ala.

“There were six people in the bathroom already, and six of us were sitting in a bedroom, looking out the window, keeping an eye on the storm. We jumped up and ran toward the bathroom, but we did not make it there in time. As the storm hit, one of my friends was thrown in the direction of the couch and was knocked out. We were all crying and screaming, not sure of how we were going to get out. None of us was wearing shoes, but luckily, we found some before the firefighters helped us out of our room.”

Nathan Tilly,
political science, senior, Dyersburg, Tenn.

“I was in night class in the Penick Academic Complex when a woman came in our class room and told us we were under a tornado warning. All of the sudden, we felt the walls begin to shake and seven of my classmates and I took shelter under a table. Soon after, students from all over campus began flooding in (to the academic building). Women were crying and lots of people were bloody.”

Chris Reinke,
vocal performance, sophomore, Louisville, Ky.

“I told my roommates, ‘let’s get in the commons’ and right as I shut the door and got my roommates in the common area, it hit. The windows exploded and it was real noisy for about five seconds, and then it was over. It was just windy outside after that.

A lot of students will say ‘we’re not going to get a tornado.’ When the alarms go off, a lot of students might not go downstairs. But I’m glad they did -- that they did the precautions necessary.”

Aaron Gilbert,
Christian studies, junior, Brighton, Tenn.
(Aaron was a resident advisor in the Waters Complex)

“It was very crazy, it was very loud. It did not sound like a freight train, it just kind of came out of nowhere. It was very spontaneous.

I can’t say I was afraid for my life, I just kept saying to myself, ‘I can’t believe this is happening’ and I just asked the Lord to have mercy on us.

My life didn’t flash before my eyes or anything...my ears popped, the windows busted out, it was very loud and then all of a sudden it was over.

“**G**od in the Whirlwind: Stories of Grace from the Tornado at Union University,” written by Tim Ellsworth, Union’s director of news and media relations, is set for a June 1 publication date. The book is being published by B&H Publishing Group of Nashville, Tenn.

It consists of 20 chapters, each a different story about a Union student, family member or employee. Interspersed throughout the book are brief first-person testimonies from students about their experiences during the tornado. Also included is a 16-page insert of color photographs, all taken by Union photographer Morris Abernathy.



The door into the Residence Director’s office had come down and wedged against the wall behind us, which was very good. By the grace of God, it stopped the ceiling from falling on us.

I remember seeing people walk out of nowhere, walking on the rubble with cuts all over, bleeding everywhere. I would ask them if they were okay and they were like ‘I’m fine, let’s get this stuff off of these guys.’”

Mikias Mohammed,
freshman, computer science, Ethiopia

“All of a sudden the lights got crazy and then the big one. Lights went off, came back on and went off again. Then came this noise. I thought it was a train. After that I couldn’t hear anything -- the windows shattered and the wind smashed me against the wall. Everything just started to fall down. It was not a good experience, but thank God we are all alive.”

Kate Johnson,
marketing, sophomore, Elizabethtown, Ky.

“I can see into my room because all the walls are gone. My TV is in the parking lot; the door to my room is on the stairs; my room is pretty much destroyed.”

Claire Hamilton,
senior, learning foundations, Dyersburg, Tenn.
(From Fox News television interview)

“At the time, I was just so calm. God just really calmed my nerves. We were so thankful to be alive afterwards.”

Sarah Logan,
sophomore, intercultural studies, Franklin, Tenn.
(From NBC’s Today Show)

“We just felt God’s hand of protection over us. When you look at the desolation and destruction on our campus and realize there were 1,200 students here and not one single fatality, you can’t help but say that is a miracle and God was here protecting us.”

Drew Head,
sophomore, journalism, Leesburg, Fla.
(From the Memphis Commercial Appeal)

“With collapsing buildings, it is a shock that no one was killed. That was God, and if you can’t recognize it, then you need to put on some glasses and open your eyes.”

Student journalists Elizabeth Wood (’10), Claire Yates (’09) and Alison Ball (’08) gathered interviews for this story.



The Rescue:

Teamwork that saved lives

Marty Clements is the director of Jackson-Madison county's emergency management agency. Throughout the day on Feb. 5, he and his crews had planned for a possible rapid response somewhere in the mid-south region because severe weather was expected.

But when he arrived on the Union University campus shortly after 7 p.m., he encountered the unexpected.

"My very first thought was 'I don't have enough body bags,'" Clements said. "You could hear some people screaming."

Clements turned on some initial lights and set up a triage area. He called for the Tennessee Task Force, a search and rescue team that brought 31 professionals and search dogs to campus. But he says some of the best initial help was already on campus.

"Fortunately for us, there were quite a few nursing students there and other EMTs who gave us help immediately," Clements said. "The people I was really happy to see there were the nurses, who jumped in and helped. They started bandaging people up and then we could help relocate them."

Clements says the nurses identified a victim that needed immediate transport to the

hospital, but no ambulances had yet arrived. So crews commandeered a radio station van, clearing equipment to make room for the first patient to be transported. A few other transports followed in pick-up trucks and private cars until ambulances arrived.

Union students also helped free a few temporarily trapped students by lifting away debris. But the more difficult rescues – in particular the final seven – required expert precision.

Moving the wrong thing at the wrong time could have created a second tragedy.

"We used a lot of the Union students," says Clements. "A lot of them wanted to help. I asked for volunteers and a bunch of the guys ran up and said, 'What do we need to do?'"

The Jackson Fire Department incorporated students on the perimeter of the search and rescue area.

Union President David S. Dockery witnessed that same effort.

"Students followed each other, they embraced each other throughout the process," said Dockery, who also said he watched a number of students simply talk to those who were trapped in an attempt to keep spirits up.

"Teamwork was evident."

As if the challenge of rescuing students from

under at least 20 feet of debris wasn't great enough, a second strong line of storms moved through before all the students had been freed. It too brought the threat of tornadoes, but Clements says no one chose to seek shelter.

"I can't make anybody endanger their own life," said Clements. "That has to be a choice. I heard the sirens for the second wave of storms. Everyone chose to stay. Nobody left and ran for cover."

The dedication of the crews was described repeatedly by rescued students like Kevin Furniss.

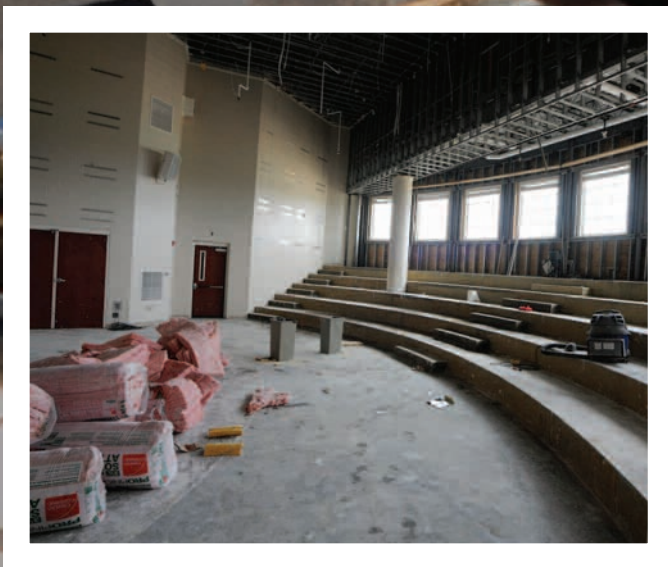
"I met the guy who said he actually climbed into the hole and put an IV into me," Furniss said from his hospital bed several days later. Furniss says his memory of that moment is fuzzy, but that the dedication of the rescuer is very much in focus.

"That next morning, he came to see me."

By the time the final student, Jason Kaspar, had been freed from the rubble, nearly five hours had passed. Clements had a few moments to reflect on an effort that, at its peak, involved as many as 150 rescue workers.

"It really gets to be stressful when it's such a large thing, especially at night," Clements said.

"The training that these folks have is excellent." ✦



Jennings Hall:

Andrea Turner ('08) contributed to this story.

Extensive Damage

Beyond the residence life areas, the worst damage on Union's campus occurred at Jennings Hall, a building on the west campus that houses the departments of music and communication arts as well as the School of Christian Studies.

Half of the Jennings roof was ripped from the building and scattered across a parking lot to the immediate north. Heavy rains that quickly followed the Feb. 5 tornado created extensive water damage throughout the building, especially on the third floor.

The R.C. Ryan Center for Biblical Studies lost approximately 10 percent of its library holdings. The Ryan Center is immediately below where the roof damage occurred. Water, mold and mildew caused the largest problems.

A 400-year-old Geneva Bible, the oldest book in the library's possession, was undamaged. It is kept in a glass case along with three other rare books.

"I was really surprised that (the damage) wasn't any worse than it was," said Ray Van Neste, director of the Ryan Center and associate professor of Christian studies. "When I saw the stuff laying on where the Geneva Bible was, I was excited that it was still under the glass case and was not damaged."

Van Neste and students boxed the books and moved the entire library to its temporary home at Cornerstone Community Church. The future location of the Ryan Center is uncertain, but Van Neste and others are continuing work to prevent further water damage to the other books.

"What we have to do now is get (the books) out (of the boxes) and let them air," Van Neste said. "The moisture could continue to cause trouble.

"The books, though, were on shelves. In some places the shelves were shielded; in other places the shelf itself was water-logged so that (moisture) came out into the books.

Some books were just a loss, some looked like they were fine."

Three other rare books were kept safe in the case alongside the Geneva Bible. An English Hexapla, a Beza New Testament and a copy of the Wycliffe New Testament are all undamaged. The library also contains a page from a Luther Bible which received water damage, but is currently being restored.

Some classes that met in Jennings Hall and other damaged buildings moved to the Penick and Blasingame academic complexes. But other classes had to move off campus entirely. Music, for example, conducted some classes at West Jackson Baptist Church; Continuing studies classes that met in Hammons Hall moved to Trinity Christian Academy.

Drywall has been ripped from much of the building, and a timetable for getting Jennings Hall fully operational again is expected by the end of spring semester. ☩



WBBJ coverage emphasized seriousness of storm

Viewers of WBBJ-TV who tuned in for news at six o'clock or "Wheel of Fortune" Feb. 5 found weather coverage in its place.

WBBJ News Director Brad Grantham says at that point, there was never any question the station was going to stay with the storm coverage and forego regularly scheduled programming.

"The models were pretty consistent," Grantham said. "A good portion of West Tennessee, Arkansas and Northern Mississippi would be hit with some form of severe weather, including tornadoes."

Grantham says the National Weather Service boosted its alert status for the region from "moderate" to "high" at about noon. From that point forward, the station

did live updates at the top of each hour.

By the start of the station's 5 p.m. newscast, weather anchors Gary Pickens and Mike McEvoy were tracking the progress of a threatening storm cell. By 5:15 a tornado touchdown was reported in Cordova, near Memphis.

Radar images provided what McEvoy called "textbook" signs of a dangerous situation.

Both Pickens and McEvoy made reference to a hook pattern in the image that usually indicates tornado formation. They watched the storm move to the northeast -- on a path that sometimes seemed to follow Interstate 40.

At 7 p.m., a tornado warning was issued in Madison County.

"Gary and Mike specifically mentioned on the air that Union was in the path," said Grantham, who just moments later sent the first news crews to campus.

Among those first responders was Keli McAlister, a Union graduate who recently returned to the Jackson market as a news anchor after working in Oklahoma City and Seattle as a reporter.

"They initially pulled up to the 45 Bypass and Channing Way and all they saw was darkness," Grantham said. "They then saw injured people all around them. The crew was trying to take in what people were telling them about Union being hit so hard."

"They were all amazed at the response from EMA, nursing students and volunteers that had gotten there so quickly."



Media Coverage: Union story spans the globe

The day after the tornado hit Union's campus, Senior Vice President for University Relations Charles Fowler was in the Bangkok airport, trying to return home as quickly as possible from a trip to Thailand.

"Some of the television monitors in the gate area were tuned to Sky News," said Fowler. "They had picked up news feeds from American news programs. So I was standing there in Bangkok getting my first look at Hurt and Watters after the tornado."

News coverage of the disaster spread across the world, but started at home with teams of reporters and photographers from The Jackson Sun.

The newspaper fed content to wire services and helped spread the word globally. They provided poignant accounts of survival, and later helped would-be volunteers understand the damage was so pervasive that private citizens would have to wait a while to aid in the recovery.

Among broadcast journalists, a media monitoring service reports Union was

mentioned in more than 1,700 news reports. Union students provided interviews for at least 14 local television markets outside of Tennessee; CNN and FOX News were on campus following the tornado, as were Good Morning America, The Today Show, The Early Show, MSNBC, The Weather Channel and network affiliates from Memphis, Nashville, Atlanta, Boston and St. Louis.

Union University representatives did live or taped radio interviews with a dozen programs.

Typical of the many live interviews conducted with Union students was this exchange Feb. 6 between Claire Hamilton, a senior learning foundations major from Dyersburg, Tenn. and Fox News anchor E. D. Hill:

Hamilton: "They just told us to evacuate our rooms, and they took us to a very safe place right afterwards. All the Union faculty were there to help us and it was not chaotic at all. Everyone was just there to take care of us. It was wonderful."

Hill: "Well, you know, one of my former interns knows a lot of the students who are there now and she says, you

know, this is a unique place, because it is very close-knit..."

Hamilton: "It really is..."

A Google News search on Feb. 14 showed 3,979 media stories in which Union University is mentioned. In some of those stories, Union is mentioned only in passing. Others are major feature stories about the university.

Most major American newspapers carried the story, including New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune and Detroit Free Press, among many others.

But the list extends to the world's leading publications as well. Reuters, an international news service, sent the story to newspapers throughout Europe and Africa. Stories appeared in China View and New Zealand Herald.

At least fifteen college newspapers assigned reporters to the story. The Kentucky Colonel (University of Kentucky) sent a crew to Jackson to get first-person accounts. Other campus newspapers prepared stories about Union's successful residence life emergency plan.

President Dockery meets with Tenn. Governor, Phil Bredesen, State Senator Lowe Finney, FEMA Director, Paul Paulson (center), and Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff (right).



Visiting Dignitaries say **Union** is ‘an inspiration’

Brittany Howerton, a public relations major, and Andrea Turner, an English major, contributed to this story.

Union University became a frequent entry on the itineraries of state, national and denominational leaders inspecting Tennessee tornado damage.

One reason was the collection of media outlets in place along Walker Drive, set up for live broadcasts. Another was the devastation so obvious in Union’s residence life complex.

“We’re going to be here, to stand shoulder to shoulder with the governor and help you get cleaned up and get back to school,” said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, the highest-ranking Bush administration representative to come to campus.

Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen praised the preparedness exhibited in the residence life area, calling it an example for other universities.

“The fact that no one died on this campus is a real testimony of the preparedness this campus and administration had here,” Bredesen said. “Without it or without the ‘training run’ in 2002 with the tornado that came through, it is inconceivable to me there would not have been extensive loss of life when you see the extent of the devastation.”

On a separate visit, U.S. Senator Bob Corker made similar comments.

“The nation focused on this outstanding university,” Corker said, “and I have to tell you the way the students handled themselves here has inspired a nation. I know that Union’s leaders can be awfully proud of these students.”

Tennessee’s other U.S. Senator, Lamar Alexander, visited the campus on Feb. 18.

“Americans love a good comeback story,” Alexander said. “Union’s story will inspire the nation.”

Morris H. Chapman, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee, and Frank Page, SBC president, called on Southern Baptists to step up and help the Union family rebuild their campus and lives.

“The costs of repair will be steep and the adjustments many,” Chapman told Baptist Press. “I ask Southern Baptists everywhere to lift up this sister institution in prayerful concern and support.” ♦



President Dockery shows U.S. Senator Bob Corker the tornado damage, accompanied by Jackson Mayor Jerry Gist and Madison County Mayor Jimmy Harris.

President Dockery praises local emergency response

The Jackson community rallied around Union University from the first moments of the emergency.

“There was incredible support everywhere we turned,” Dockery said. “Jackson Mayor Jerry Gist and County Mayor Jimmy Harris were wonderful to us, and so were Sheriff David Woolfork, City Police Chief Rick Staples and their departments, Chief James Pearson and the Jackson Fire Department and the Jackson-Madison Emergency Management Agency.”

Dockery also praised the Jackson-Madison General Hospital staff, and the Jackson Energy Authority, as well as volunteers who showed up from day one forward. ♦