

SPECIAL ISSUE

Looking back on
70 YEARS
looking forward
with hope

Behind the **HAMMER**

MENNONITE DISASTER SERVICE / SUMMER 2020



Looking back on 70 years, looking forward with hope

Thank you, all of you — donors, volunteers, friends and families — for continuing to walk with MDS during the past six months. Even as we have faced a global pandemic, a struggle with systemic racism, and a hurricane season forecasted to be extra active, we are also celebrating 70 years of MDS.

As we look back on history, we are at a present moment when MDS, in many ways, is undergoing a pivotal change. Although most projects remain temporarily closed, we have, with signature MDS creativity, forged ahead with some responses.

In Willow, Alaska, volunteers will be building several new homes in July for people who lost everything in the devastating McKinley Fire, which destroyed 3,288 acres and 139 buildings in August 2019. With new COVID-19 safety protocols in place, these volunteers will be able to help with a much reduced risk to their health and the health of the community. Praise God!

In June, volunteers in Minneapolis helped small, minority-owned businesses clean up and repair their stores in June, in the wake of unrest. They worked alongside members of the community of many races and faith traditions. Praise God!

What we see among volunteers is great resiliency, a resiliency that continues to strengthen MDS and the communities we serve.

As we try to live through this current “pivotal point” in MDS history, it’s also a good time to look back at some pivotal points over the last 70 years.

A couple months ago I had the honor of hearing from one of our founders, 94-year-old Marcella Diller. She lives at Schowalter Villa in Hesston, Kansas, and she still remembers attending the church picnic at which MDS was founded back in 1950.

Reading her story in this issue of *Behind the Hammer*, you’ll see that the spirit of service has been passed down to her great-grandchildren. The great-grandchildren of that first MDS generation are becoming the next generation of trained leaders.

As we continue to cope with the effects of the coronavirus, I continue to be surprised by the strength, resiliency, and fresh compassion of our volunteers. May it continue for 70 more years and beyond. ■

Kevin King

Kevin King
Executive Director

Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) is a volunteer network of Anabaptist churches that responds in Christian love to those affected by disasters in Canada and the United States. While the main focus is on cleanup, repair and rebuilding homes, this service touches lives and nurtures hope, faith and wholeness.

Our programs, funded by contributions, aim to assist the most vulnerable community members, individuals and families who, without assistance, would not have the means to recover. MDS volunteers — women and men, youth and adults — provide the skills and labor needed to respond, rebuild and restore.



**Mennonite
Disaster
Service**

Behind the Hammer is published quarterly by Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) and is available for free upon request. This magazine shares the stories of MDS work in the U.S. and Canada and of the more than 5,000 annual volunteers who are the core of MDS. The stories are meant to encourage people to continue expressing the love of God through the work of MDS. *Printed on recyclable paper using environmentally-friendly inks.*

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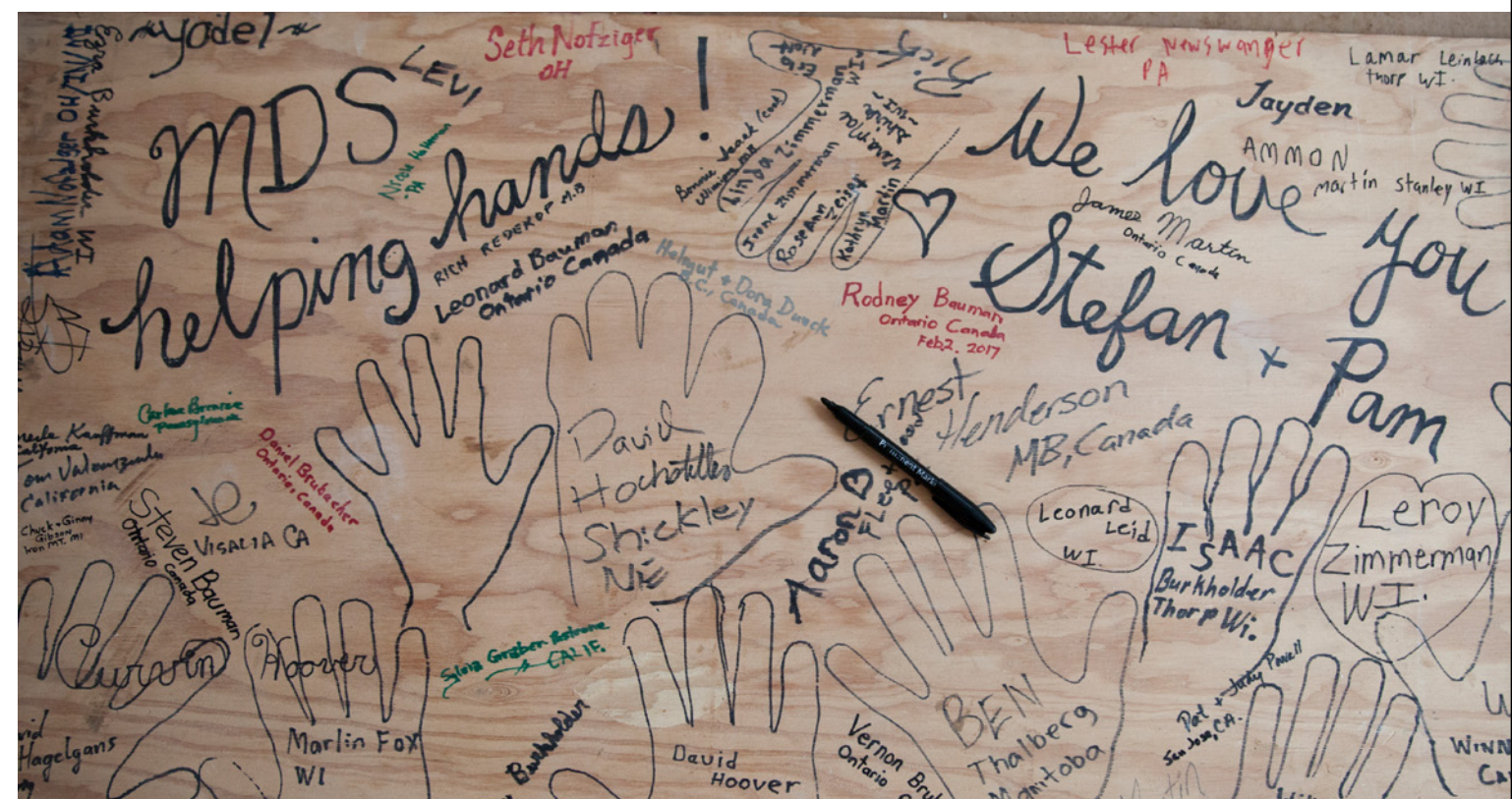
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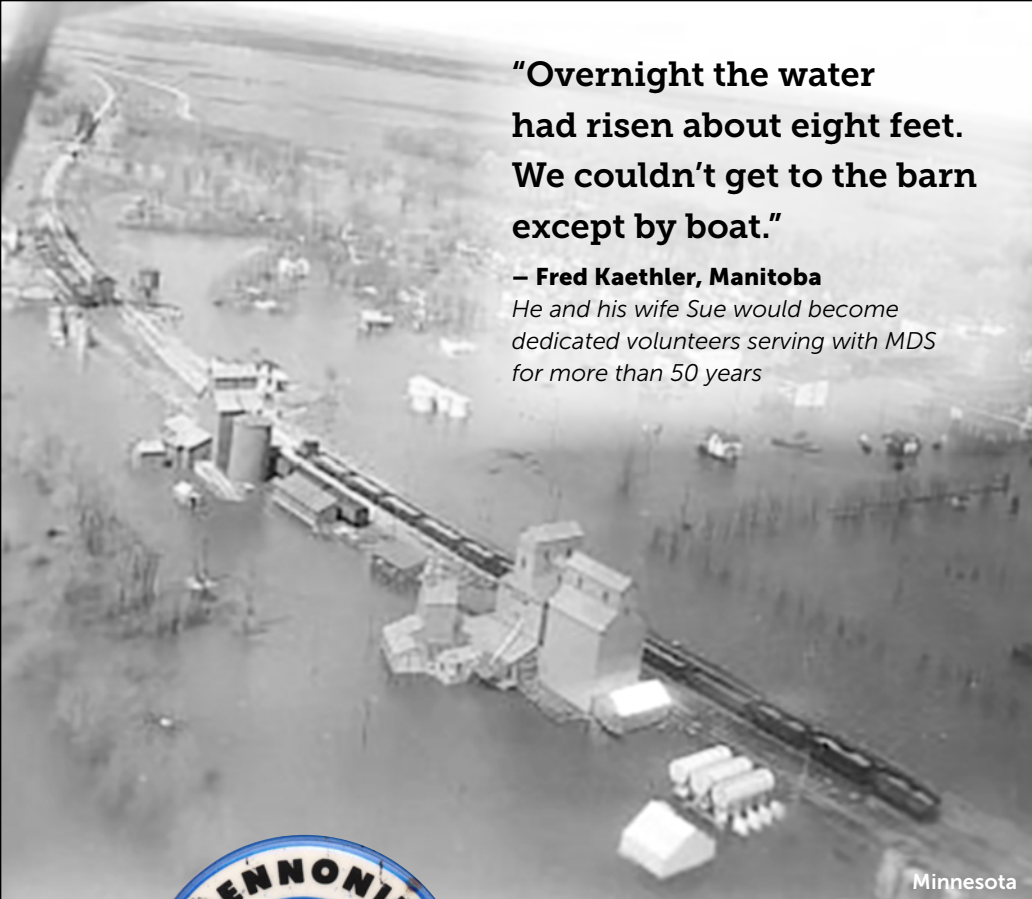
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▶ Watch historical video shorts, including stories from our VHS vault: youtube.com/MDSMennonite





"Overnight the water had risen about eight feet. We couldn't get to the barn except by boat."

– Fred Kaethler, Manitoba
He and his wife Sue would become dedicated volunteers serving with MDS for more than 50 years



Kansas



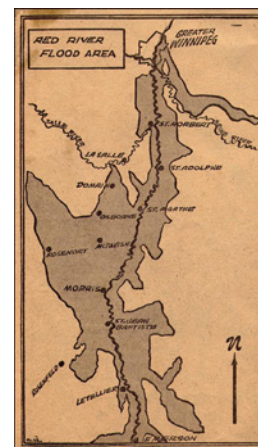
SCOTIA STREET WINNIPEG, MAN.

RED RIVER FLOODS

April 15–June 12, 1950 – C.N. Friesen, an early MDS leader, coordinated lists of volunteers who brought their skills and equipment to respond to major flooding along the Red River in Manitoba and Minnesota. **"I think it broadened our field when we worked together with other groups as well,"** said Friesen.



Manitoba



In the 1950s, MDS units began sprouting up across Canada and the U.S.



Gathering to serve

In late summer 1950, young people from local Mennonite Sunday school classes gathered for a series of picnics in the park in Newton, Kansas, where the idea of forming a disaster service organization was sparked.

1950

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1960

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Early leaders in 1954 developed a "Do's and Don'ts" list for volunteers. Among the "Do's" is the following: **"Take time to visit with those you are helping.** The boost in morale and the spiritual help you can give is worth more than the work you can do. (This doesn't mean you should not work; you came to work.)"



Indiana



Mississippi



Virginia

"It was a real lift to our spirits when I saw those C-130 cargo planes with all those MDS volunteers who came to help."

– Ronnie Geil, MDS leader in Mississippi

PALM SUNDAY TORNADOES

April 11, 1965 – At least 37 tornadoes slammed through six states in the Midwest, killing some 279 people. **"The destruction was awesome. Those tornadoes struck a cruel blow to the lives and hopes of many.... In this hour of need, the Mennonites truly appeared to be heavensent."** – Birch Bayh, U.S. Senator from Indiana

Still a fledgling organization, MDS had little experience in responding to so massive a disaster. As stories of devastation quickly spread through Mennonite and Amish communities, volunteers from all around flocked to Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio to assist in cleanup and rebuilding. It was reported that MDS provided 6,342 volunteer days during the first nine days following the storm.



Mississippi

HURRICANE CAMILLE

August 17, 1969 – At the time the most intense hurricane to strike the U.S., Camille devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In the first six months, some 1,800 MDS volunteers traveled to Mississippi to help in the recovery effort.

During the recovery, the need for cooperation among disaster agencies became apparent. In 1970 National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) was founded with MDS, American Red Cross, and Salvation Army among its charter members. The goal was to improve coordination for the benefit of disaster survivors. Previously, help came haphazardly as various organizations assisted independently with unnecessary duplication of effort or some needs not met.



"We got a lot of youth involved during the 1970s. I saw MDS as being the model for servanthood"
 — Nelson Hostetter, MDS coordinator 1971–86



West Virginia

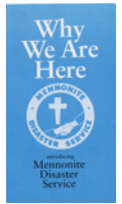
"We took a group in a bus, 50 of us, loading it to the gills."
 — Irvin Harms, volunteering after a super outbreak of tornadoes



Alberta



Ontario



1970 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 1980



South Dakota

The next generation

Young adults become a key staple of volunteer responses along with identifying trained leadership.

BIG THOMPSON RIVER CANYON FLOOD

July 31, 1976 — The Big Thompson flood stands as the worst natural disaster in Colorado's recorded history, claiming the lives of 143 people.

David King, then a student at Hesston College, remembers volunteering to help in the aftermath as his **first hands-on experience with MDS**. "During that experience of cleaning up after the devastation, I became very aware of the destruction and damage," said King. **"It gave me an outlet to use my skills and gifts to serve others in a unique opportunity."** He has since been an MDS donor for decades.



Colorado

RAPID CITY FLOOD

June 9, 1972 — Torrential rains in the Black Hills of western South Dakota sent torrents of water crashing down the slopes. Dams burst sending a devastating wall of water through Rapid City in the dark of night, becoming one of the deadliest floods in U.S. history.

MDS volunteers responded. **Of the 1,500 volunteers who registered, 50 percent were under the age of 25.** On the basis of that experience, MDS Summer Youth Squads were organized in following summers, generating tremendous interest and response through the decade. A traveling version soon evolved, consisting of six to eight young adults with a leadership couple working together for six to 12 months, traveling from place to place, responding to disaster activity.



Clean up in unknown location



South Carolina

The Mennonites "just became part of the family. It took the edge off our hurt to know there are still people willing to give up so much so we could have shelter."

— Ann Matthews, Hurricane Hugo survivor, South Carolina



Matthews family

HURRICANE HUGO

September 21, 1989 — After devastating St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the sprawling Hugo roared into South Carolina spreading havoc over hundreds of square miles. **MDS placed volunteers in over a dozen locations.** The widespread need and overwhelming constituency response pushed the MDS network as never before. Over 7,000 volunteers gave more than 40,000 workdays to help with recovery efforts.

MDS learned many lessons dealing with a disaster the size of Hugo, including the importance of having many trained leaders and that no one organization can do it alone.



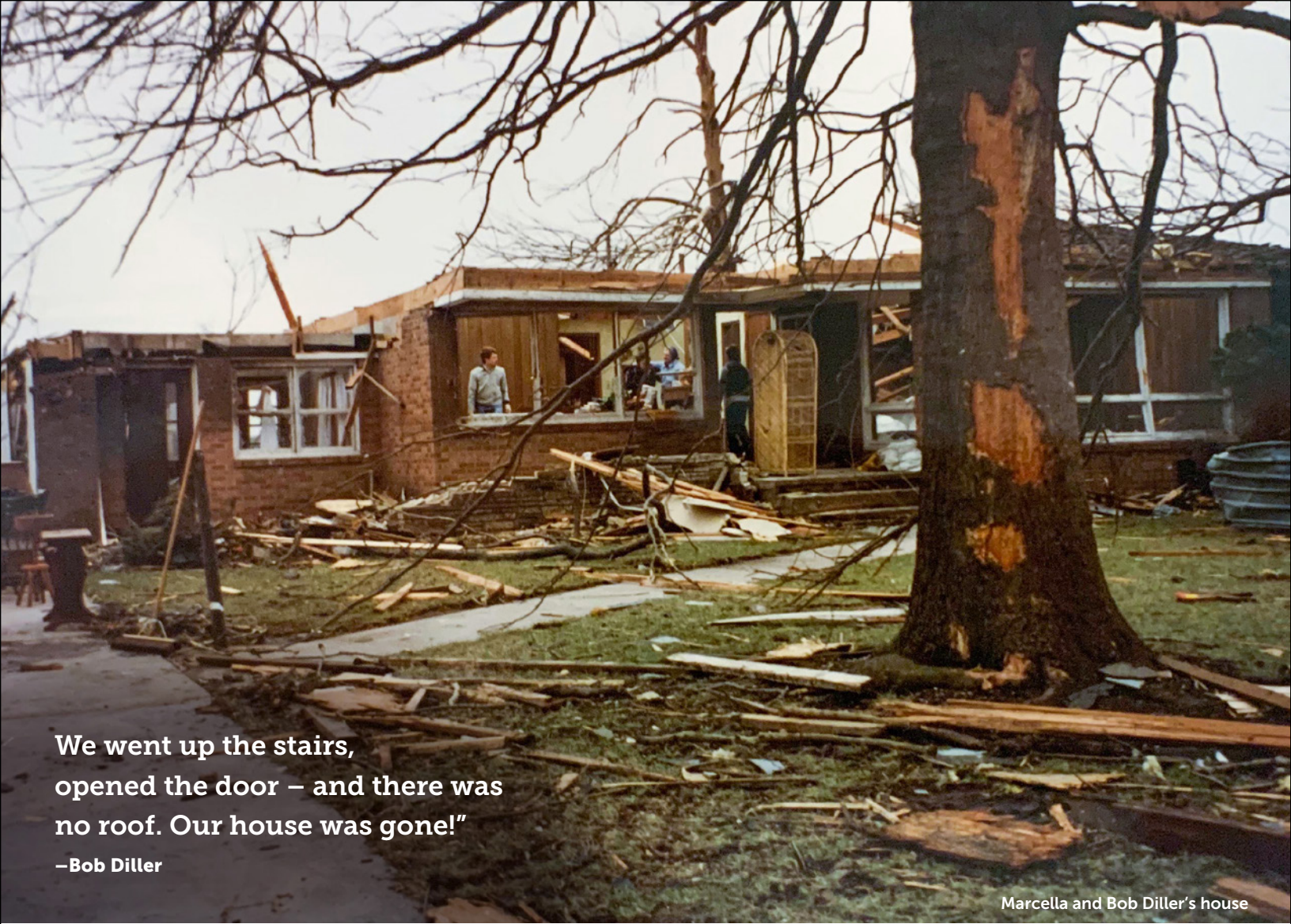
South Carolina



South Carolina



Alabama



**We went up the stairs,
opened the door – and there was
no roof. Our house was gone!”**

–Bob Diller

Marcella and Bob Diller’s house

1990

HESSTON TORNADO

March 13, 1990 – The Hesston tornado, which destroyed or damaged 226 homes, was rated an F5 and cut a 48-mile swath through Kansas. The winds were so severe that checks from a local plumbing supply store were found 85 miles away. At least 10,000 volunteers were involved in the first week of massive cleanup.



MDS founder vividly recalls 1990 tornado

Ninety-four-year-old Marcella Diller vividly remembers when, some 40 years after she helped create MDS, a devastating tornado tore through Hesston, Kansas. The date was March 13, 1990 — the very date this year, 30 years later, when MDS projects were temporarily closed due to COVID-19.

MDS volunteers rebuilt Marcella’s home, where she and her late husband, Bob, had brought up five children. “I remember, after the tornado, we went to my son’s place to stay. When we went back to the house the next day, the MDS people were there already. I couldn’t believe it!” Marcella said.

As Marcella was surprised by the compassion that volunteers showed that day, so was her grandson, Mark Diller, who was 11 years old at the time. As Mark remembers today: “That was a pivotal, developmentally important event in my life. Seeing people come to volunteer really was impressionable for me.”



Replacing roofs to prevent further damage was an immediate priority. Volunteers and contractors were extremely busy during the next weeks.



Marcella Diller, one of the original founders of MDS, celebrates her 94th birthday with her great-grandsons, Kyle and Ryan.

Mark has gone on to volunteer many times with MDS, most recently with his wife and their two boys, ages 16 and 14, in Eureka, Kansas, to help repair a flood-damaged home.

And his grandmother is still regularly delighted by news about MDS. “I follow the newspapers and read about MDS all the time,” she said, “and even what they are doing during this virus—it’s so helpful.”

Marcella still remembers the church picnic she attended back in 1950, at which the very first conversations about MDS began over (of course) delicious food.

“We had fried chicken and potato salad and baked beans, and oh, everybody brought something,” she said, “and every dish was special.”

Diller currently lives at Schowalter Villa in Hesston, Kansas, where her normal visits from family members and friends have been taking place over the phone due to COVID-19.

Marcella said that those early conversations that formed MDS felt like a natural extension of everyday life in Hesston: “Those were the kinds of people who lived around here. They helped each other.” ■

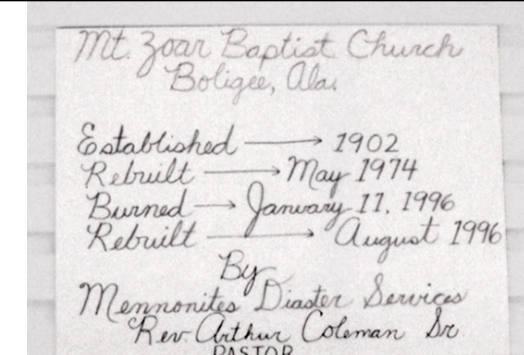


"It's a real blessing to be part of people's lives, particularly as they go through crisis."

— Lowell Detweiler, MDS executive coordinator 1986–98

The long haul

During these years, MDS solidified its role in long-term recovery, often staying until the last disaster survivor was home.



"Throughout our land there is much more work to be done. I say to you Mennonites, keep on doing what you're doing. There will always be disasters. Unfortunately, they won't all come by tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods. Some will continue to come from evil hearts and hands. Be encouraged now, be inspired now; you remember how God has blessed you."

— Pastor Thomas Gilmore, Ensley, Alabama, following the Mt. Zoar Baptist Church burning

1990

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HURRICANE ANDREW

August 24, 1992 – With its devastating winds, the Category 5 hurricane **left more than 250,000 people homeless in south Florida, a scale not experienced before.** In Homestead, more than 99% of all mobile homes were completely demolished. MDS volunteers responded, serving 42,000 work days in Florida and Louisiana.

It was a turning point for MDS, bringing focus to the way it responded. Each disaster agency would carry a different piece of the response and become an expert in it. Salvation Army and Red Cross took on food and clothing. MDS concentrated on cleanup and rebuilding.



St. Thomas

ALABAMA CHURCH FIRES

1995–96 – In the U.S., 145 black churches were burned in a wave of arson attacks. MDS youth volunteers rebuilt a church in Alabama, a project that former MDS executive director Tom Smucker remembers as one of the "most touching" experiences of his career. **"The celebration we had, packing that church with people, and people outside listening through the windows,"** he recalled.



Arkansas

"You couldn't pay me enough to do this job, but I wouldn't take anything in the world for all the friendships we've made."

— Marlin and Nancy Gingerich, longtime MDS project leaders

RED RIVER FLOODS

April–May 1997 – From southern Manitoba to North Dakota and Minnesota, spring flooding of the Red River was the most severe since 1826. It forced nearly 28,000 people from their homes and covered 450,000 acres of farmland. More than 20,000 volunteers from MDS and other organizations responded – building sandbag dikes, preparing food for evacuees, then helping with cleanup after the waters receded.



Manitoba



Manitoba



Florida



Florida

“Disasters and recovery I think are going to be really big issues in the future, especially as the climate changes. We’re going to have more storms, more fires, more droughts. And if we don’t have people prepared and ready, we’re going to be in trouble.”

— Jordan Braun, CMU student of Disaster Recovery and MDS volunteer



Scaling up

As disasters increased in size and strength, so did MDS. Volunteers began learning how to build homes that fared better in “the next disaster,” bringing mitigation into fine focus for MDS.



Louisiana



Carmalita Sylve, Louisiana



HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA

August 29 and September 14, 2005 — With a scope and scale that was unprecedented, hurricanes Katrina and Rita reconfigured disaster response on many levels. **MDS clocked a record 124,000 volunteer days** over 5 years across Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas, helping more than 1,600 disaster survivors.

Even while answering urgent need, MDS gave **renewed attention to mitigation** — raising homes and installing hurricane straps — so that residents would be safer during future storms.

From rebuilding homes for indigenous communities in Grand Bayou, Louisiana — where supplies had to be brought in by boat — to helping Vietnamese communities in Bayou La Batre, Alabama, to partnering with residents of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, MDS brought people formerly on the margins into a renewed sense of hope.

Response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita also sparked at least two “firsts” for MDS. One was **the Partnership Home Program (PHP) that allowed church and community groups to construct a good portion of the house on their own turf**, then deliver and complete it for the disaster survivor. The second was the creation of the RV Program that brought a new way for retired individuals to volunteer, utilizing their recreational vehicles on job sites.

“Our community has been here for 300 years. I’m excited to come back home. We’re finally getting where we’re supposed to be.”

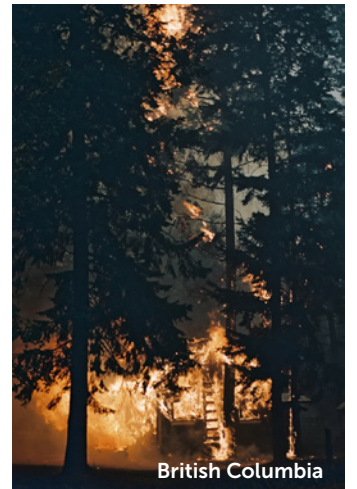
— Carmalita Sylve, Grand Bayou, Louisiana



California

“I myself never had much of a disaster of any kind. My house never was destroyed by water or fire or anything. So I feel we as Christians should help people who are less fortunate.”

— Alta Zimmerman, MDS volunteer serving in California



British Columbia



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TERRORIST ATTACKS

September 11, 2001 — MDS’s response to the terrorist attacks led to an analysis of “best practice” that went on to help form the Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) training program. Understanding the emotional and physical impacts of traumatic events, the STAR program has since helped many responders from MDS and other organizations in incidents of public violence, such as the tragic Nickel Mines school shooting in Pennsylvania in 2006.



New York City



Louisiana



Montana

"I came here because I see people like the Plumleys as my neighbors in need. I plan to build one bridge at a time here."

Peter Thiessen, MDS project director in West Virginia



West Virginia



West Virginia



Hope Village

MDS has taken mitigation to a new level, helping to build entire subdivisions on higher land for homeowners who lost everything to flooding.

In West Virginia, more than 1,800 MDS volunteers helped finish 28 homes in "Hope Village," in the wake of the 2015 floods. Four years later, in Coastal Bend, Texas, a new 40-home subdivision, Hope Meadows, brought a sense of hope and belonging to survivors of Hurricane Harvey.

WEST VIRGINIA FLOODS

Spring 2015 — After severe flooding, many people in southwest West Virginia lost their "driveway bridges," or their only access to the highway from their homes. **Designing and building a bridge was new territory for MDS.** It required innovative thinking and unique collaborations to bring to fruition.

To date, MDS has built more than 100 driveway bridges. Constructed from concrete, steel, and oak planks, the bridges are a signature combination of MDS priorities: **helping those most in need to better cope with the next disaster.**



Florida

2010

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Spanning new territory

In the last decade, some 50,000 volunteers have served close to a half million days to help disaster survivors in the U.S. and Canada. While there is no question that MDS projects will change in the face of COVID-19, there is also no doubt that MDS will continue to bring hope to those in need.



Alberta



Detroit

DETROIT FLOODS

August 11, 2014 — Heavy rains in Detroit, Michigan, caused more than 10 billion gallons of sewage-contaminated water to flood into people's basements, damaging some 200,000 homes. "Even before the flood there were a lot of people struggling. So the flood just made that more difficult," explained Rev. Becky Wilson, coordinator of the local recovery group. **"There's a lot of need here but also a lot of gifts, things you can learn from the wonderful people here."** In a two-and-a-half year response, MDS volunteers came to know and assist more than 400 homeowners in Detroit.



Detroit

RECONCILIATION AND RESTORATION

July 2019 — "It's not a typical MDS disaster response," said Nick Hamm, MDS Ontario unit chair. **"But residential schools were a disaster for Canada's Indigenous people."** Sixty-one participants of the MDS summer youth program were invited to Brantford, Ontario, to help restore Woodland Cultural Centre for the Six Nations community and learn more about becoming reconciled with Indigenous people in Canada. The building, formerly a residential school where thousands of Indigenous children were stripped of their language and culture, had been damaged by a storm. **"It's personal, there are names and faces. It's not just textbook information now,"** said Timothy Khoo, 16, describing what it was like to meet residential school survivors while volunteering with MDS.



Ontario

"MDS is the light at the end of the tunnel. I am really thankful that they came."

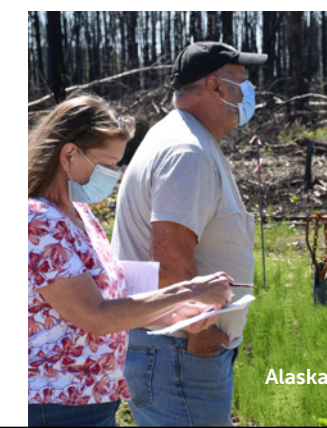
Maretta Champagne, Oglala Lakota member and local recovery leader in Pine Ridge, South Dakota

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

As MDS slowly and carefully reopens projects with new COVID-19 safely rules in place, volunteers are showing resilience with the way their lives of service have changed.

In Minneapolis, where peaceful protests and damaging disturbances took place in June around racial injustice, MDS Minnesota Unit Chair Glenn Geissinger coordinated volunteers to help clean up and restore minority-owned businesses. He reflected, **"I think it's a very different type of opportunity and one that resonates well with MDS."**

In Willow, Alaska, volunteers are already hard at work building five new homes for survivors of a wildfire in 2019. They're racing against the harsh winter, explained Steve Wiest, a regional operations coordinator for MDS. "The window of opportunity is small and winter is coming," he said. "By mid-September the temperature drops and the snow could begin to fall. **If we are going to act, the time is now."**



Alaska

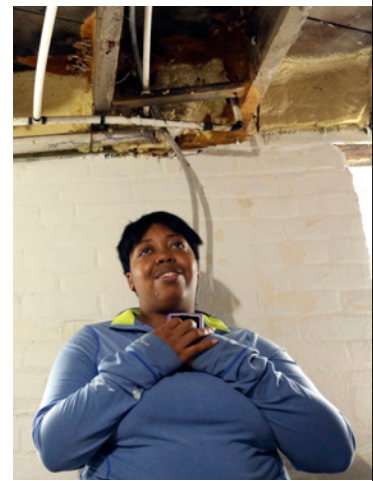


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"It is difficult to overstate the meaning experienced by a storm survivor who sees a group of volunteers rebuilding what was destroyed. After enduring months of difficulties, struggles with financing, and repeated doubts that it would ever happen. 'Maybe I dare to hope after all!'"

– Paul Unruh, MDS board member and mental health professional

