

PATRICIA WILLIAMS, MD '78

The Aftermath of Disaster

On December 10, 2021, a devastating tornado hit Mayfield, Kentucky, killing 130 people and flattening much of the town, including the Mayfield Consumer Products Candle Factory, where nine workers died. Debris from the town could be found hundreds of miles away in Indiana and eastern Kentucky. Victims continue to be found as rubble is cleared.

The tornado was not a surprise. Patricia Williams, MD '78, and her husband Wayne, were at home, out in the country. "The local television station in Paducah was accurately able to predict when it would hit the area so many people were able to take cover," she says. While the tornado came within a half mile, their home was spared.

Others were not so lucky. "We've had tornado warnings enough that people don't always heed the warning," says Williams. Many homes did not have basements and trailers were swept away with families inside them.

Williams and her husband are family physicians with a practice in downtown Mayfield, which provided a medical home for much of the community. Almost immediately after the storm passed, they were able to get images of downtown via the Internet. "That was when we realized that our office had been destroyed," she says.

The next morning, they needed a chainsaw to get down their driveway because of all the downed trees in order to make rounds at the hospital. "As we drove close to town the destruction was unbelievable," Williams recalls. "There was nothing standing for miles. The silence was deafening."

Because the water treatment plant and a water tower were destroyed, there was no electricity or water in town for weeks. The hospital ran on a generator and trucked in water to keep operational. Many patients could not be discharged because their homes had been destroyed, some losing loved ones.

The Williams were able to salvage enough equipment from the wreckage to move to a temporary location within a few days. However, because they lost their computer system, medical records were unavailable.

"Every patient we saw had heartbreaking stories," says Williams. "We did what we could but felt so helpless with the enormity of their needs."

The first step was to help patients get needed medications, an issue compounded by the loss of several pharmacies in town. "We worked it out with neighboring pharmacies—as long as someone could produce a current prescription bottle, they could get a month's refill," she says.

Although she'd never witnessed anything of this scale, Williams is no stranger to small town emergency medicine. As a resident at St. Joseph's Hospital, Williams helped start an ER group to cover weekends at the Geneva Hospital. After residency, she joined a practice in Waterloo, New York, where her late husband, Leland Elliott, MD '78 was an OB/GYN. They were recruited to a multi-practice group in Mayfield in the 1980s. She joined practices with her current husband in 2009.

The practice cared for patients from newborn to elderly. The Williams' rounded on their own patients in the hospital and served as medical directors of two nursing homes (one destroyed in the tornado). They had already endured a difficult two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a vaccine-resistant population.

"Our initial outbreak occurred in one of the local nursing homes, where 60 of the 80 patients were infected over a three-month period," she says.

They closed their office waiting room and people waited in their cars for nurses to come take vitals and conduct assessments. Well patients were allowed in for necessary exams and bloodwork while sick patients were exam-



Patricia Williams, MD '78, with her husband, Dr. Wayne Williams

ined by gowned-up docs in the parking lot. "We had numbered spaces in the parking lot like we numbered our exam rooms," Williams says.

That same parking lot was the first thing that was cleared after the storm. "News media gathered there for their various operations," she says.

At 70 and close to retirement, the Williams' aren't looking to rebuild new office facilities. They have a younger doctor working for them, so his interest will influence the future of the practice.

Fortunately, Williams says, they were well insured and at the end of their careers. Many business owners are not in the same position. "There are people who have lost everything and have to start from scratch," she says. "It will take years for the area to recover."