
One Moment — A Lifetime

by Deanna Cooner

Twirling cars, animals, and furniture overhead was more than Anthony Ferrell could comprehend. Ferrell grabbed a toy school bus and placed it over his head, while Jimmy Brown screamed as the whirling debris threatened to pull him and his family into the fierce gaping maw. In only a few moments, the fierce storm passed by, forever changing the lives of these Ridgecrest Child Development Center employees, along with every family in the bedroom community of Bridge Creek, just southwest of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Nell Ferrell, a teacher, had come back to the center for safety, seeking refuge in the supply closet. No one knew that nine people were in the building until they came crawling out. The center closed at 6:00 PM and the storm hit Ridgecrest Baptist Church — completely demolishing the large brick structure — at 6:29. In the Bridge Creek area, the storm

took 14 lives, more than 100 homes, and the only large child care facility in the neighborhood.

Two days after the storm, the RCDC staff surveyed the damage. One look at the heap of bricks, drywall, and insulation could have led to despair but the staff started looking for salvage. It seemed the only thing to do. For three days, staff walked over piles of bricks, rummaged through piles of insulation, and crawled under fallen walls. They searched among the ruins for remnants of the lives of the 12 staff and 80 children. They were not even

Left: Ridgecrest Baptist Church, home of Ridgecrest Child Development Center, the day after the storm. The standing walls seen in this picture are the restrooms, office, and supply area of the child care center.

sure which part of the center they were standing in, since all landmarks were either moved or gone. That is all except the fish tank. Three ugly fish kept vigil over the destruction even though their tank water was filled with mud and insulation.

The staff rummaged and collected — a crayon, a book, a chair, a blanket. Each time something reminded them of a certain student, the teacher collected it and placed it gently in a crate to be taken away.

The rest of the community did the same thing, rummaging to find anything salvageable, knowing that life would begin again — or maybe it was a way of hoping. The rummaging produced very little usable material but it gave everyone something to do, besides think.

Parents of RCDC students made other arrangements while the staff was preparing to open again. By Thursday after the May 3 tornado, the staff had made arrangements with the Bridge Creek schools to use a portion of their campus to reopen. They put in 10-16 hours a day, calling, locating, and gathering equipment. Boy Scouts came and washed and sanitized the equipment which had been rescued. The DHS licensing agent offered suggestions and applied for emergency standards to

The devastating tornadoes that swept through mid-Oklahoma on May 3, 1999, destroyed 21 child care centers and family child care homes. The accompanying story tells the tale of one of these facilities. Fortunately, no adults or children were hurt in child care settings that were operating when the storm hit. However, in order for these facilities to get back in the business of caring for children, there is a great need for outdoor play equipment and early childhood curriculum resources. To make a contribution to this effort, please contact Connie Cooper, director of Rainbow Fleet Child Care Resource and Referral, at (405) 521-1426 or cooper@ILinkUSA.net.

help get the center open again. Parents pitched in and gathered equipment from donors or helped clean; some publicized the plight of the center, still others brought food and water.

On May 10, one week after the one and only F5 storm, Ridgecrest Child Development Center reopened one mile from its former location. With everything in place, it was not until 6 AM that morning that the staff realized one small detail had been overlooked. No one had received a key to the building. Children began to arrive on the crisp, damp morning and staff had no where to put them except in the van donated for temporary use by a local car dealer. However, the parents didn't seem to hesitate to leave their small children with the staff because they saw the delight on the faces of both children and staff as the children flung their little arms around the necks of their caregivers. Many children had not seen their teachers since the day of the storm, and for the first time in a week something normal had returned to their lives.

By the end of the first morning, the public school staff had cleared out their classrooms, allowing the center to occupy the classrooms of the kindergarten building. Again, the move was met with hard work, determination, and a sense of relief. But still it was not home.

Staff and children watched as bulldozers pushed bricks, steel, and children's pictures into a heap and large equipment piled it into trucks ready to ship it off to a dump site. The rubble seemed a fitting picture of everyone's emotions and lives. Even those who did not lose everything felt the trauma.

The uniting of friends and caregivers released some of the tension of the storm and brought feelings of elation. But as the days wore on, the

incident reports began to increase, crying seemed to be constant, and naptime became a nightmare. The staff became short tempered and even angry for no apparent reason. Counselors heard of our efforts and began to visit and play with the children. They explained the processes of grief to the community. They visited with parents and handed out literature to help through the recovery process. But it seemed that each day brought a new trial and set the center back rather than moving it forward.

August hangs over the heads of RCDC as an ominous cloud because that is the date the center has to be relocated in order to allow the school to reconvene. Every day, parents, staff, and children wonder in the back of their minds, "Where are we going now?"

Searching for available financing consumes the administrative staff's thoughts and time. Inspection of current available facilities meets with disappointment. Some days the only solution seems to be closing the center.

But a ray of sunshine came through when a neighboring church volunteered their facilities until a temporary location can be erected. The construction of the temporary site has begun. However, it is being built on faith, since the money for construction is not available. Thoughts of closing the center are ever present. Since the center is non profit and an entity under the church, there would be no financial loss to anyone. All staff would be able to find jobs in other centers.

However, the RCDC staff look at the children and realizes that although the center is located in the midst of the destruction and at the heart of the rescue activities, it is still a stronghold of normalcy for the children.

Deanna Cooner is the director of Ridgecrest Child Development Center in Bridge Creek, Oklahoma.

Ridgecrest Child Development Center is still receiving donations through Bartemius Ministries, PO Box 891021, Oklahoma City, OK 73189-1021.