



FIVE YEARS AFTER DEVASTATION



Hunter Edwards  Designer
Claire Ward  Photographer



Memories from Members of DHS

Five years after the Dexter Tornado, two students, a teacher, and an administrator reflect on the how the day has changed their lives

Julia Bell  Writer
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“Half our house was gone”

Having formerly lived in Florida, sophomore Kara Young and her family are used to ominous weather conditions.

“We had hurricane after hurricane near our house,” she said.

So, when a storm started rolling into Dexter on March 15, she didn’t think much of it. The family was actually getting ready to go to church for weekly “Thursday night dinners.”

However, as the weather worsened, they chose to stay in their Huron Farms home. Receiving dangerous alerts, they headed to the basement without much thought. As they huddled in the corner of their basement, they began to understand the severity of the situation. “The first time we realized something was happening was when the window right next to us blew out and glass shattered everywhere, Young said. “There was water pouring down into the basement through the upstairs floor.”

As the storm settled, policemen, firefighters, and neighbors came to check on the family. “A fireman came down and told us that he would come get us when it was safe to come out of the house,” Young said.

When he returned, the family was taken upstairs to face the damage of the tornado for the first time. “Finally they were bringing us up,” Young said, “and then we realized that half of our house was gone.”

Kara’s brother, Kieran, is a senior at DHS. “I remember going upstairs and finding most of my stuff in the bathroom,” he said. “The fridge was open and the laundry I had been doing was shoved inside.”

“The first time we realized something was happening was when the window right next to us blew out and glass shattered everywhere.”

- Kara Young

The following hours, days, and weeks, were chaotic for the Young family. “I remember walking out of my house and seeing CNN, Fox News, Channel 7, and people everywhere,” Young said.

Missing an exterior wall, the family was unable to

live in their house until it was fixed. “We went to our neighbors house to figure out where we were going that night,” Young said. They lived with their grandparent for several months before moving back to Huron Farms.

“Should we cover this?”

For Dexter High School teacher and yearbook advisor, Barry Mergler, the events of the Dexter tornado left a lasting impression. Five years later, he still remembers the night vividly. At the time, Mergler played guitar in the DHS faculty band, Uncommon Assessment, which also included former teachers Matt Martello and Rodney Satterthwaite. They were rehearsing the evening the tornado struck.

“I remember we were rehearsing down in the video lab,” Mergler said. “When we walked outside, you could smell rain like I’ve never smelled it before. I remember Martello saying, “Well, somebody’s gonna get some nasty weather.”

Mergler, who lives in Pinckney, was driving his then four-year-old son home from daycare when he received a troubling text from his wife; “She was down in the basement and she was like, ‘Where are you? There’s tornado warnings for the Dexter-Pinckney area.”

At this point in the storm, the rain made it too difficult for Mergler to see, and he ended up pulling over in the open parking lot near St. Mary’s Church. “I thought, I’m gonna get away from any trees... and just wait it out,” he said.

The storm eventually passed, and Mergler returned home. He didn’t know what had happened until he got a text message from student Elle Presley, the yearbook editor in 2012.

“[The text read] ‘Should we cover this?’” Mergler said. “I said, ‘Cover what?’”

Mergler was stunned to learn that an EF-3 tornado had hit Dexter and damaged over 100 homes and businesses. Still, he was grateful to learn that everyone was safe: “It is a miracle that nobody got hurt or worse,” he said.

Mergler credits the following Saturday, March 17th, 2012, as being a “very memorable day” for him personally.

“I was at home, there wasn’t any school, and I was following [the tornado] on MLive and social media,” he

said. "The way the whole community was coming together...they had pictures of kids walking around, helping people pick up stuff. I remember sitting there thinking, I've never been this close to this solid of a community. In my life. Ever."

Mergler felt inspired to write a song, which he titled "Welcome Friends." The song was then recorded with Martello and Satterthwaite, and an accompanying music video was made.

The trio decided to hold a fundraiser at Foggy Bottom. All the money raised went directly to an account for Dexter families who were affected by the tornado. At the event, the song was performed live for the first time.

"[Writing the song] was one of those moments where I didn't have to think about it," Mergler said. "It came from watching something unfold that I've never experienced before."



A then-and-now photo of the Wright's home after the tornado, sending a tree into the kitchen and living room, and today.

"Oh my God; the sky's green!"

Junior Maddie Wright was in sixth grade when the tornado uprooted her life. Literally. She lives in Horseshoe Bend, one of the neighborhoods most affected by the storm.

"It happened so fast," Wright said. "Ten minutes earlier, my little brother was outside playing and then he ran inside and said, 'Oh my God; the sky's green!'"

Wright and her family rushed downstairs to the basement, where they hid under clothes and their pool table.

"My dad usually stays upstairs when we go down-

stairs [for a storm]," Wright said. "I remember him coming downstairs because it was starting to come toward us. It sounded like a freight train coming by because it was so loud."

The Wright family could only wait in fear as the tornado, which had winds of over 120 mph by that point, wreaked havoc above. Their only way of knowing what was going on outside was through the tiny windows in their basement. Wright remembers seeing plants flying in all different directions.

"My dad went upstairs, and the whole backside of our living room was collapsed."

-Maddie Wright

After the storm passed, they stayed in their basement while police officers came through the neighborhood to assess the damage.

"My dad went upstairs, and the whole backside of our living room was collapsed," Wright said. "Insulation was blown out through the house. When we went up, [there had been] a transformation outside. We had forty foot pine trees on either side of our house that were down over our driveway and in the road. There was a trailer full of snowmobiles that was completely flipped upside down."

According to Wright, she and her family stayed at a friend's house a few weeks until they found new housing. Meanwhile, cleanup of Horseshoe Bend and other affected neighborhoods was well underway.

"I remember my dad said he came back to our house one day and there were like 50 people in our yard with chainsaws cleaning up," Wright said. "It was like the whole community came to pitch in. It was pretty amazing how it ended up."



A photograph of a post-tornado home in 2012 is shown over where the current, refurbished home is today.



“Our radios weren’t working”

Five years ago, DHS principal Kit Moran sat in his office on a Thursday afternoon and watched as the sky turned from blue to gray to green. “We were having weird weather,” Moran said. “It was unusually warm.”

The school day had ended and most students had returned to their homes for the evening. “It was scary dark north of here, and we were just watching the weather” Moran said. “As it got windy we were expecting bad thunderstorms and there was this little area in the back of my head that was thinking about a tornado.”

He was not entirely unfamiliar with severe weather. Before moving to Dexter, Moran was an English teacher at Lincoln High School. “One spring, I was teaching my kids and I looked out my window and I saw a tornado.”

As memories of this experience flooded to mind on March 15, 2012, he took action to ensure the safety of the students and staff in the community. “We started getting alerts,” he said. “It was after school, so we had sports going on. We made a few announcements and were trying to get the word out.”

The students who were still in the building were moved to the locker rooms. “As the storm came, I was still trying to get everyone in a safe place,” Moran said. “I was in the commons and the roof sounded like it was starting to come off, so I ran to a tiny storage room off of the cafeteria.”

As the hail stopped and the wind settled, Moran thought the worst had passed, but was waiting for clearance from the National Weather Service. “The cell service had crashed,” he said. “Texts were working but would take forever to send one word, and we were trying to communicate with other buildings in the district, but our radios weren’t working.”

As the weather cleared, emergency vehicles began to show up at the high school. “The parking lot filled up with cop cars and ambulances and firetrucks from Fowlerville and all these other places” Moran said. “At that time we didn’t really

know there had been a tornado. This was the first we were learning of it.”

That night there was conversation about whether school should be cancelled the next day. “Originally we were like ‘Yeah, we have to cancel school,’” Moran said. “But then there was the importance of maintaining normalcy for kids to make the situation less traumatic.” Eventually, the administration decided that there would be no classes on Friday, but the buildings would remain open to the community.

Moran believes that one of the biggest impacts of the tornado on the school district was in regards to safety procedures: “After the tornado we completely changed our drills,” he said. “It was no longer a drill that we did just because we had to; we were preparing for something that could really happen.”

“I was in the commons and the roof sounded like it was starting to come off, so I ran to a tiny storage room off of the cafeteria.”

-Kit Moran

Originally, students were instructed to move to the halls during a tornado drill and sit against the lockers with their heads between their legs. “We experimented that fall after the tornado,” Moran said. “We ran the numbers and decided that we could get everyone into locker rooms or the dark rooms on the first floor.”

Moran has never taken lightly to severe weather, but the tornado heightened his sense of awareness. “After going through that and seeing the devastation it’s something that I take very seriously. I’m nervous now that it’s been five years, and people are starting to take it less seriously again.”



The 120-year-old Cider Mill before and after the tornado.



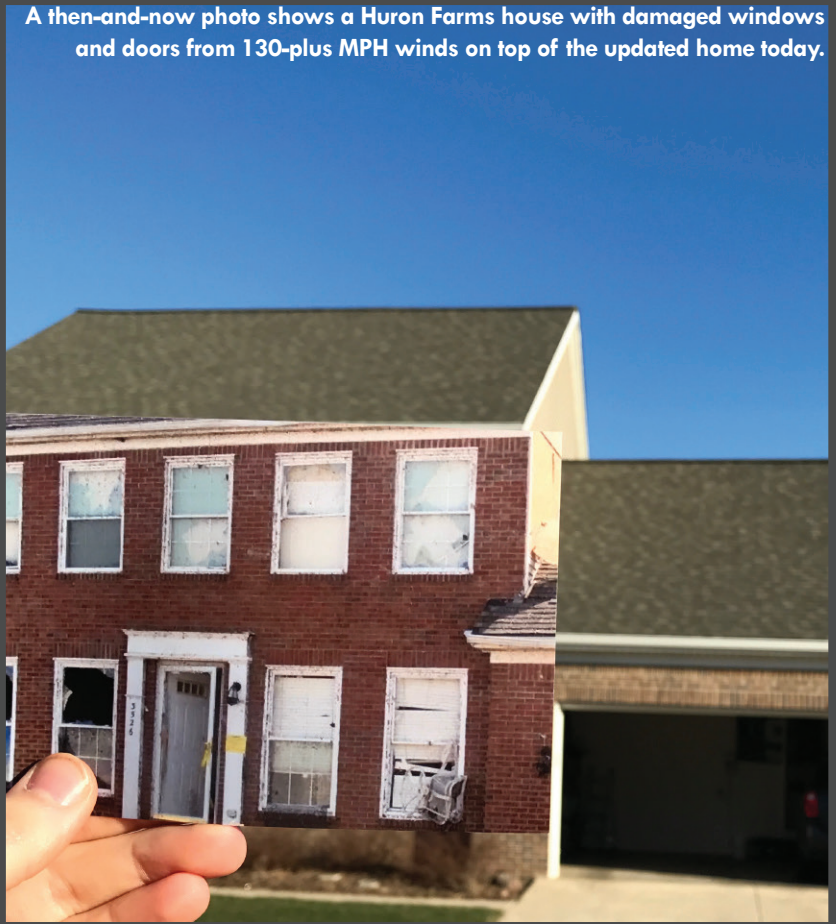
A 2012 photo from inside the Wright's home shows the tornado's damage.



A 2012 photo shows an uprooted tree in front of the Dexter Cider Mill.



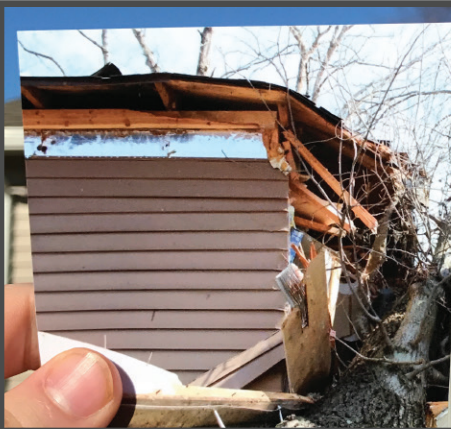
A photo shows the Huron Farms subdivision during the day after recovery.



A then-and-now photo shows a Huron Farms house with damaged windows and doors from 130-plus MPH winds on top of the updated home today.



A photo from 2012 shows how the tornado ripped the roof and sides of a Huron Farms house.



A then-and-now photo of where a tree crushed part of the Wright's home.



A photo from 2012 shows part of the clean up in the Huron Farms subdivision.




Pizza, Nosebleeds, Chaos

Then seventh graders, two editors remember how a 5:15 greenish sky disrupted the calm, forever impacting their lives

Caden Koenig  Writer

Nick LeBlanc  Writer

Tyler Woelfel  Photographer

Hunter Edwards  Designer



Remembering back, as a seventh grader all the days seem like a blur. As a seventh grader the experiences of the whole year feel like one memory. This is with the exception of March 15th and the few days that followed it.

The day started as an average Michigan day: 70 degrees and sunny... in March. All morning, the weather was celebrated with T-shirts and shorts. It was a fantastic surprise considering the prior days were 40 degrees at the most.

Now, like I said, most of my memories blur as just being an average day and so was the beginning of this day. In fact, I even remember walking home with friends.

It was about 3:30 pm and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The day slowly progressed with my friends, and I was likely playing basketball or football outside.

Around 4:30 the clouds quickly started to roll in and the sky got darker and darker. My parents had ordered Jets pizza for dinner.

“The sky was a green tint, the thunder was loud, the lightning lit up the sky with every strike, and my dad and I were eating Jet’s on the porch.”

We planned to eat on our patio in our backyard. By the time my dad went to get the pizza, 10 minutes later, the Severe Weather Warning Alert blared through the television. Immediately following, the tornado siren from the village started echoing.

At about 5:15, the sky was a green tint, the thunder was loud, the lightning lit up the sky with every strike, and my dad and I were eating Jet's on the porch. However, this did not last long due to a mix of the uncomfortably high wind speeds, and my mom freaking out about us being outside. So, we rushed to the basement with our candles, flash lights, and pizza due to the power outage.

By 6:00, it was over. The shock set in almost instantly. The roads were flooded. Trees were uprooted. Clothes, rugs, and furniture lay throughout the neighborhood. My family and I sat on our porch for hours unsure what to do.

I had always looked up to my parents when I didn't know what to do, but at this moment it seemed like nobody knew how to act. It seemed surreal, not only that night but the days that followed as well.

Calm. The sky, the temperature, the people. All was calm. The birds chirped welcomingly till it became a normality to the ear. The pleasantly curious warm air tiptoed through the trees and reached as the breeze caressed human skin. Kids walked and played as the seductive nature lured kids to embrace the day.

I took my time on the walk home that day. Fully indulging in the surprising beauty of the day. Even the sight of my colleague, Caden Koenig, leaking blood from his nasal cavity wasn't enough to take away from the grace of the day. Besides the spontaneous nose bleed and the warm winter day (yes, March 15th is still considered winter), the day was normal.

After my arrival home, things settled down as I waited for my father to return home to take me to baseball practice. That's when the peace of the day began to change. Seemingly out of nowhere, an overcast of distasteful clouds took to the sky. The welcomingly chirp of the birds was halted. Kids went back inside as a brigade of dark clouds approached from the distance.

Being a curious kid, I was constantly checking the sky behind my deck. As per usual, when a storm was in sight, I made constant, annoying suggestions claiming there was a tornado. As cliché as it sounds, I was actually right for once.



The wall of wind was in the distance, but since I knew the approximate travel of the storm, I felt the urgency to tell my brother and father. While my brother and I decided the best idea was to run into the basement, my father thought the best idea was to inspect the tornado from up close. After realizing that the cone of wind was indeed a tornado and in our neighborhood, he finally came to the conclusion that maybe he should be in the basement.

We looked out the windows in the basement and all we saw was the gray of the storm. We heard the wind rushing against the house and the hail bombarding the siding. Eventually a tree fell and blocked our view of everything, even the ominous gray color.

The sun came out. It seemed calm again, but after the shock dissipated, it was clear that nothing was calm. My friends and I decided to walk the neighborhood. Police, people, and the remnants of destroyed houses were a common sight around every block.

The calm scene that was set earlier was gone. The new scene had rolled in: chaos.



Writer  Truman Stovall
 Designer  Hunter Edwards

How Businesses Helped Out

Shortly after the tornado struck Dexter, local businesses stepped up as the community tried to recover from the devastation

In the aftermath of the tornado five years ago, businesses in Dexter and surrounding cities assisted in the relief effort. When affected families were in need, they took it upon themselves to generate money, food, and shelter.

A minute's walk away from the path of destruction through the Huron Farms subdivision stands the local Busch's Fresh Food Market. The Dexter branch of the southeast Michigan chain set up tables of food with artificially low prices to make basic necessities more affordable. The grocery store also asked regular customers to round up their purchases to the nearest dollar so that the remainder could be donated.

Equally close to where the tornado hit, the Dexter LaFontaine automotive dealership became a big player in the recovery.

Despite having nearly all of its cars sustain hail damage, Tony Duncan of LaFontaine insisted that the dealership got "very lucky. When [the two initial tornadoes] combined, that's when it hit hard. We were up on a higher plane; it followed the valley."

LaFontaine, like other businesses in the community and across the country, believed it had an obligation to use its relative fortune to assist however it could.

"We were doing relief work for a good two-week period. Our biggest thing was helping people who didn't have a place to go or to eat," Duncan said.

LaFontaine also helped a family that lost both of its cars find short-term replacements before coming to a permanent agreement later, and the dealership gave discounts on automobile purchases to customers who donated to relief funds.

The Ace Hardware in downtown Dexter, a place where many supplies were bought to rebuild damaged buildings, offered a variety of discounts and gave away many supplies for free.

Wings n' Things, Chelsea State Bank, the radio station 102.9 W4 Country, and countless others all found ways to help make Dexter's quick recovery a reality. Despite the tragedy of the tornado, it was a great demonstration of the selflessness of the Dexter community.



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The Day After

On March 16, 2012, the Dexter community quickly came together to overcome a natural disaster that affected many

Caden Koenig  Writer

Nick LeBlanc  Writer

Hunter Edwards  Designer

The peace that preceded the tornado was followed by shock. Dexter's bubble finally popped. A community that once stood in silence came together. Adversity was a rare thing for the 4,127 citizens of Dexter to face, as nothing serious has ever happened in the small, peaceful town.

Before the sun rose that day, the streets of each neighborhood were packed with insurance companies, disaster relief companies, and newscasters getting prepared to deliver a story about a village in southeast Michigan. News about the tornado reached all over the nation reaching even to Hawaii.

Dexter exemplified a close knit community. Local businesses and restaurants donated food and other goods to the devastated areas. Busch's played a key role in helping families by donating cases of water and having a cook-out that night. To add to this, Mill Creek Middle School and Creekside Intermediate both combined with The Red Cross, and opened up their doors for people who needed a place to stay that night

Gloves, long pants, boots, protective eyewear, tools. All were used to collectively gear up the people of Dexter. Adults and kids alike came from all over the district to

help the unfortunate families in Huron Farms, Horseshoe Bend, and numerous other businesses and households. Kids ventured out into the neighborhood to help clean up the possessions of others like drywall, insulation, siding, furniture, roofing shingles, and, sadly, more. Despite the chaos of the tornado, citizens of Dexter were at their friendliest. People walked around with food and water for the affected and for the workers. Businesses, like Busch's by Huron Farms, opened their pantry to help feed families that lost their ability to fulfill the task of preparing something as basic as food.

The winds that the tornado produced equated to those consistent with an EF3 tornado; easily ripping through the seemingly insignificant village. Over one hundred houses were hit and thirteen were completely totaled. In total, the damage took a

In all, while the people may have had different opinions, goals, and lifestyles, in the end the community came together and put aside their differences. This is because we're all human and deserve love during times of grief. By coming together during the tornado the people of Dexter shows why we live by one phrase: Dreadstong.

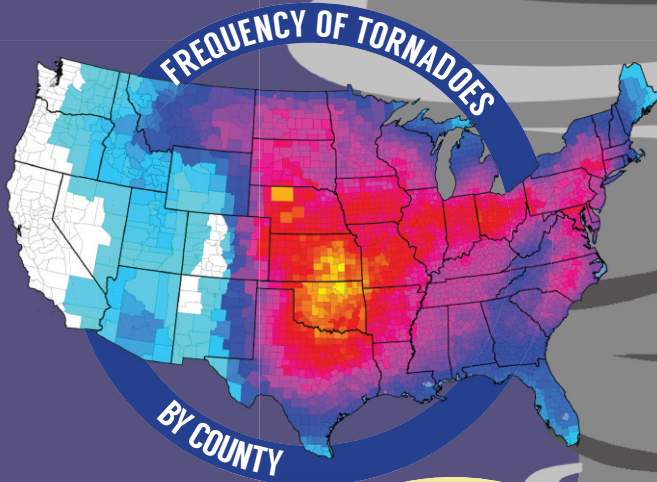


A photo of the Dexter laundromat the day after the tornado.

Photo from The Squall archives

TORNADO!

Designer  Nick Greca



5 DEADLIEST US TORNADOES


DEATHS

- 1** TRI-STATE (MO, IL, IN) **695**
- 2** NATCHEZ, LA **317**
- 3** ST. LOUIS, MO **255**
- 4** TUPELO, MS **216**
- 5** GAINESVILLE, GA **203**



FUJITA SCALE

DAMAGE

F0	65-85 MPH WINDS	LIGHT
F1	86-110 MPH WINDS	MODERATE
F2	111-135 MPH WINDS	CONSIDERABLE
F3	136-165 MPH WINDS	SEVERE 
F4	166-200 MPH WINDS	DEVASTATING
F5	200+ MPH WINDS	INCREDIBLE

DEXTER TORNADO AT A GLANCE

