



SOUTH COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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SCHOOL TO HELP TORNADO VICTIMS

By Liz Boardman • Thursday, June 9, 2011

SOUTH KINGSTOWN - Goddard School owners Clay and Gina Johnson watched news reports of the May 22 tornado in Joplin, Mo., worrying about old friends and coworkers.

“After I graduated from University of Rhode Island in 1991, I moved 12 times over the next eight years,” Clay Johnson said. “Joplin was one of the longest. It was home to me and Gina for three and a half years - we even bought a house.”

During those years, Johnson worked for ICI Explosives, a dynamite plant in Joplin. The house they lived in survived the storm, they learned. It was in a northern suburb, out of the tornado’s path. But approximately 2,000 buildings were ripped apart as the tornado chewed through the southern part of Joplin. Homes, businesses, a hospital and a high school were severely damaged or destroyed.

“I have two former co-workers on my Facebook, and they said the plant was safe, but they had been given time off to go look for their relatives,” Johnson said. “Nobody could find anybody.”

It took until June 1 for the Missouri Department of Public Safety to account for the city’s entire population of 49,024. In the end, 134 were dead - the deadliest tornado on record.

“It is Main Street, USA,” Johnson said. “When I heard people were given a day off to look for their families, I wanted to help.”

Through a network of preschools, Johnson learned that 14 preschools had been destroyed by the twister and 500 students displaced.

“I called our Goddard sister school in Springfield, Mo., an hour away from Joplin, with teachers from Joplin, and asked what we could do,” he said.

The surviving schools would find places for the displaced students, he was told, but the schools would need emergency supplies.

Until June 30, Johnson is collecting donations of infant formula, diapers, baby wipes, baby bottles, sippy cups, latex gloves, paperware and plastic utensils, along with new or gently used and washed infant, toddler and preschool clothing, blankets and sheets.

Donations can be dropped off at Goddard School, 20 Preservation Way, in South County Commons, Monday through Friday between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. Johnson is willing to pick up donations as well; he can be reached at 789-0300.