



# DNR AmeriCorps DISASTER

## READY

**In the summer of 2008, AmeriCorps members were deployed to help prepare their fellow Iowans for historic floods and to clean up after one of the worst tornadoes in Iowa's history.**

For some, the events served as unwelcome reminders of the floods of 1993, scenes from the film "Twister", or personal tragedies. For others, the disasters of 2008 presented a new and exciting opportunity to help the greater Iowa community. For many AmeriCorps members, it was both.

On June 10, approximately 40 members from the Department of Natural Resources Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps Program were deployed to the Des Moines and Cedar Falls areas for disaster relief. Many received short notice of deployment but still arrived in time to help prepare for the inevitable floods or to clean up after the Parkersburg tornado.

Members from around the state filled, tied and placed thousands—more likely tens of thousands—of sandbags at different locations in central and eastern Iowa. In addition, the United Way of Central Iowa and the Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service appointed several AmeriCorps members to manage volunteers at four large-scale sandbagging operations in the Des Moines area. Over the course of four or five days, these project leaders coordinated hundreds of volunteers by signing them in, instructing them on sandbag construction and making the effort more efficient overall.

Hank Vogel, 23, who normally serves as an ecosystems manager with Polk County Conservation, acted as a volunteer coordinator at the Union Park sandbag operation on the east side of Des Moines.

"We tried to keep them in the know, so they understood why their efforts were important," said Vogel. "There were a lot of volunteers, so it was essential to keep a positive attitude."



Kate Lydon

Members look over the rising Des Moines River on June 11, 2008

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Kate Lydon

Members Tim Paulsen, Jacob Schuler, Andrea Blong, Matt O'Hearn, Ann Cannon and Shelly Codner take a break at Union Park. More than 170,000 sandbags were made at the site, and were used to protect the Birdland community.

Tony Grimm, a wildlife habitat specialist for Lake MacBride, was one of many members who helped in the disaster response in the Cedar Rapids area. Grimm and other members sandbagged an electrical transformer in Palo and helped residents load sandbags into their vehicles to offer protection to individual homes. When Palo was eventually evacuated, the team then spent time sandbagging homes and business in Amana and Cedar Rapids.



Kate Lydon

Adam Lounsbury (far left), executive director of the Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service, directs members at the Polk City sandbagging operation. Members from left to right are Nichole Nagl, Hank Vogel and Jessica Furlong.

“The one good thing that came out of it was seeing all those people come together to help out their communities,” said Grimm. “Everybody was working so hard together.”

There was more to do than just sandbag, though. Emily Haase, who served over the summer as a nature interpreter at Ledges State Park, found another way to help. She and other members answered calls at the State Emergency Assistance Phone Center and helped the United Way check in new volunteers.

“Over the phone, I was able to help people who needed a place to stay, or couldn’t get to their medications,” said Haase. “There was a lot of hard work and dedication that went on behind the scenes and made everything run more smoothly.”

The same could be said for the recovery efforts at Parkersburg, Iowa. After a devastating F5 tornado struck the town in May, several members traveled to northeast Iowa to help clean up the damage and manage volunteers. Christy Madsen, a nature interpreter at Springbrook State Park, stayed for six days assisting the clean up efforts.

“It was simply exhilarating knowing I was going to be helping so many people,” said Madsen. “I couldn’t wait to get there.”

When the members weren’t physically working to move debris and clear properties, they served as volunteer coordinators. They helped local officials field calls, analyze sites, and check in and direct hundreds of dedicated volunteers.

The twister’s devastation hit closer to home for one DNR AmeriCorps member than for others. Shelly Codner, who serves at the DNR’s central office, grew up in Parkersburg and arrived to help shortly after the tornado struck.

“After my experience cleaning up at Parkersburg, I was deeply humbled by the outpouring of assistance and support from all of our neighbors,” said Codner. “My appreciation for volunteerism, and my definition of what a neighbor is, has grown.”

Members noted that being enrolled in AmeriCorps prepared them for the emergency and helped them be more effective volunteers. Each is trained in CPR and first aid in addition to volunteer management and leadership through AmeriCorps.

“Since I work outside every day I was physically ready to sandbag in the hot weather,” said Hank Vogel. “I think my experience and training as an AmeriCorps member brought more structure and leadership to the whole response effort.”

Tricia Rummer, director of the Iowa DNR AmeriCorps program, oversaw the Des Moines group and worked with United Way and the Emergency Operation Center to place the members where they were needed.

“This was the first time in the four years I’ve been with the AmeriCorps program that a situation like this has occurred in Iowa on this scale,” said Rummer. “All of the members did an exceptional job of taking on leadership roles in their respective areas. They were flexible as the high priority needs to control the rising waters changed day to day, and sometimes hour by hour. I’m proud of each and every one of them.”

The severe storms of 2008 left many members with clean up projects at their own parks and work sites. Even though DNR members have completed their official disaster-related deployment, some continue to assist with recovery efforts around the state through volunteering their personal time and organizing volunteer generating activities. (See page 4 for more.)

Disaster victims across Iowa will also receive help from branches of AmeriCorps. For example, The National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), out of Vinton, Iowa, has dedicated half of their newly established AmeriCorps positions and resources to flood and tornado recovery assistance.

“AmeriCorps members have stood beside Iowans as they have endured this enormous disaster, helped them wade through the wreckage and joined them on the road to recovery,” said Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) in a press statement in July. “We have come to rely on these AmeriCorps teams and have made them part of our communities.”

# A “MONUMENTAL” IMPACT AT PARKERSBURG

On May 25, 2008, the state’s fiercest tornado in 32 years wiped out half the town of Parkersburg, Iowa. Seven lives were lost, but with the help of hundreds of AmeriCorps members and countless other volunteers, the lives of many more are now being rebuilt.



Christy Madsen

Volunteers clean up rubble at Parkersburg, Iowa.

Local pastor, Neil Ohms, initiated the volunteer effort at Parkersburg after the storm raged through. AmeriCorps VISTA member, Melissa Simmermaker, was the first member sent to assist him. Later, DNR AmeriCorps members Jana Matthiesen, Henry Narigon, Keith Wunder, Christy Madsen and Shelly Codner, also helped.

Hundreds of AmeriCorps members from branches other than Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps provided disaster relief, as well. Adam Lounsbury, Executive Director of the Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service, coordinated the AmeriCorps involvement with Parkersburg officials.

“It’s been amazing. We’ve had two solid months of sustained efforts of 300-400 members helping with Parkersburg and the floods, and I think the impacts have been felt across the state,” said Lounsbury. “A lot of people still didn’t know about AmeriCorps before this, but they’re going to remember them now.”

For Christy Madsen, a nature interpreter at Springbrook State Park, the excitement started on July 1st, when she was asked to help at Parkersburg. Less than a week later, she and Keith Wunder, a nature interpreter at Springbrook, were on the road to the devastated town.

“Knowing I was going to be helping so many people was simply exhilarating,” said Madsen. “I couldn’t wait to get there.

When Madsen and Wunder arrived in Parkersburg, they assumed many job duties and took direction from Pastor Neil Ohms, and AmeriCorps VISTA member, Melissa Simmermaker.

“Our main responsibility was to help direct volunteers to sites where they were needed most, but we also analyzed sites that needed work. When we weren’t helping volunteers, we physically worked to get things done, like clearing debris,” said Madsen. “On one day, we moved landscaping, so trucks could back in and raise a house so its basement could be fixed. I saw so much progress made, and could see the difference by the end of each day.”

With the warm July weather, Madsen checked on volunteers regularly to ensure they had enough water and were taking needed breaks.

“The generosity of all the volunteers was overwhelming,” said Madsen. “They were all hard workers despite temperatures in the 80s and 90s.”

Of the hundreds of people that came to help Parkersburg, many crossed state and even national borders to volunteer. Thirty residents from Parkersburg, West Virginia came to help their same-name community by holding Bible studies, preparing meals and providing day care service. Another group of 40 came all the way from Ontario, Canada to help out for a week. Additionally, hundreds of people called to offer help or donations.

“(AmeriCorps members) set up the infrastructure that connected the community in need to the people who wanted to give,” said Adam Lounsbury. “It went hand-in-hand. AmeriCorps teams are running the donation warehouse, and cataloging the supplies. It’s pretty monumental.”



Christy Madsen

Members Keith Wunder, Christy Madsen and Ben Bengston spent several days at Parkersburg.

# AFTER THE STORM

**AMERICORPS MEMBERS HELPED COMMUNITIES STATEWIDE PREPARE FOR AND CLEAN UP AFTER THE SUMMER STORMS, BUT THE WORK DIDN'T END WHEN THEY RETURNED HOME TO THEIR PARKS AND WORK SITES.**

“Our office is adjacent to Ledges State Park, which has suffered major damage. A few weeks ago, people were fishing in the road, which is a rare sight at Ledges! I was monitoring an osprey nest in Jester Park and the water got so high that the hatchlings had to be rescued by boat. The three little guys are currently with a rehabber and will be released with some other birds later this month.”

- **Ann Cannon, wildlife diversity program assistant at the Boone Wildlife Research Station**

“The flood has modified my job from onsite park interpreter to part-time flood restoration and part-time off-site interpreter for interested groups. Water was up to the roof of most of our park bathrooms and buildings and each of our electric hookups for camping must be replaced. The initial clean-up of pulling out sludge filled debris was an experience I will never forget. We threw away a lot, including most of my educational materials.”

- **Jessica Furlong, nature interpreter at George Wyth State Park**

“With our park being so close to the Des Moines River, we were highly impacted. The water level rose 24.5 feet, just one foot below the flood mark from 1993, forcing both major roads that go through the park to close. Up to this date, the roads are still partially underwater or covered with feet of silt. Visitors can hike down as far as they can get, but there is a lot of silt, mud, and debris left over from the impact.”

- **Emily Haase, nature interpreter at Ledges State Park**

*For complete and updated information on park closings and other DNR disaster recovery efforts, visit:*

<http://www.iowadnr.gov/>

*To keep up on DNR AmeriCorps activities visit:*

<http://www.iowadnr.gov/volunteer/amicorps/index.html>

**THOUGH THE DNR MEMBERS COMPLETED THEIR OFFICIAL DISASTER-RELATED SERVICE, SOME CONTINUED TO ASSIST THE RECOVERY EFFORTS AROUND THE STATE BY DEDICATING THEIR PERSONAL TIME AND RESOURCES.**

“Even though our deployment was over I knew there were still people in need in the Hamilton County Area, so I set up a volunteer event. Originally, we were going to do litter removal and recycling-type activities, but that all changed after the floods. The cities greatest need was picking up the leftover sandbags. We worked with the city and, with the help of students from Webster City High School, removed sandbags from around residents' homes. Some of the sand will probably be used for ice-control this winter.”

- **Shelly Codner, communications specialist for the DNR volunteer program**



Kristy Mason

Member Shelly Codner and high school students from Webster City with sandbags they removed from homes.

“I found myself still wanting to help out after deployments so I organized an event at Parkersburg. Five of us from my unit assisted with the clean-up there, mainly cutting down trees and hauling them to the curb for further clean-up. We also assisted with the clean-up of the Manchester Fish Hatchery after it was flooded by heavy rains. We assisted by cleaning muck off the road, and helping clear out the flooded offices.”

- **William Martin, wildlife habitat specialist at Sweet Marsh Wildlife Unit**



Shelly Codner

Members Andrea Blong and William Martin clean up Parkersburg.

# NEIGHBORS: OUR HEROES

## OF THE HEARTLAND



By Shelly Codner

In Iowa, neighbors aren't just people who live next door; they're human beings who consider every Iowan their neighbor.

Living in Iowa, there are givens. It's a given that our compassion for our fellow man - our neighbors - is stronger than the most powerful winds of an EF5 tornado. It's a given that raging flood waters are far weaker than the spirit and determination that rages in our hearts. It's a given that Iowa's fields yield not only unlimited opportunities but an infinite passion for getting things done and making a difference. This passion was prominently displayed on the faces of the countless, nameless volunteers that poured out to assist their fellow man - their neighbors - during the disasters that took place throughout Iowa in the summer of 2008.

From Butler County to Polk County and places in between and beyond, I've witnessed selfless acts of giving that have not only humbled me but have made me prouder than ever of our community - our Iowa.

On the evening of the tornado that ravaged Parkersburg and New Hartford and brought my home county of Butler to its knees, I witnessed an outpouring of neighbors. Among them was a contingent of high school students who were among the first to mobilize heavy equipment and strong backs to assist their neighbors in cleaning up debris.



Christy Madsen

Civilian volunteers help neighbors clean up at Parkersburg.

Neighbors, regardless of where they lived, worked side by side and around the clock - first cleaning up tornado debris and later sandbagging and recovering personal items from receding flood waters. These same neighbors and countless others also crawled on hands and knees over Parkersburg High School's "sacred acre" football field methodically picking broken glass out of the precious turf that has yielded several collegiate athletes and four NFL players. In addition to tending to their cherished football field, Aplington-Parkersburg football players volunteered to dig the graves for the souls and neighbors they had lost in the wake of the storm, stating, "It's an honor."

Even now, nearly three months later, neighbors keep coming and bringing more neighbors. They not only continue to help with recovery efforts in Parkersburg, they also answered the call for response efforts during the flooding by sandbagging in Clarksville, Greene, New Hartford, and Shell Rock. People from all backgrounds and stages of life worked side by side - lawyers, doctors, farmers, students and bankers answered the call. Fred Maifield, owner of the Iowa State Bank in Parkersburg (which sustained considerable damage from the EF5 tornado), Clarksville and Kesley made special efforts to have his banks open as scheduled so that disaster victims whose financial information was found as far away as Wisconsin could have the peace of mind that at the very least their financial matters were in order.



Three members and Codner's son, Jeff (far left), take a break from raking tornado debris at Parkersburg. Members from right to left are Andrea Blong, Donald Frank, and William Martin.

Not unlike other mothers, I had safety concerns regarding my seventeen year old son and his friend's participation and involvement in disaster and recovery efforts. He put my mind at ease and made me one of the proudest mothers in the state by saying, "Mom, quit worrying, we'll be fine and we're making a difference." Indeed, they were, and they were not the only ones. As raging flood waters began to rise and engulf our state, so did the unwavering volunteer spirit of all Iowans and our out-of-state neighbors. Even our neighbors from Minnesota and Nebraska, who have been known to take a good deal of interstate joking from us on occasion, voluntarily crossed state lines to assist their neighbors in need.

In Iowa, there are no age restrictions or ability requirements when it comes to selfless acts. While on disaster response assignment in Polk County, I also met countless heroes. At a sandbagging site at the Polk County Sheriff's Office in Des Moines, an elderly couple made sandwiches and provided water, stating, "We are too old to sandbag, but wanted to help." They had endured the floods of 1993 and recounted how volunteers had made a difference for them.



One of many unsung heroes that returned day after day to help at Union Park.

Another volunteer strolled up in her wheelchair and said, "What can I do to help?" We quickly put her to work signing in volunteers entering the site. A proud, dark-haired mother of a new baby girl dropped her husband off to assist with sandbagging and with her young daughter safely strapped into her car seat, drove throughout Des Moines and Ankeny soliciting food and beverages for onsite volunteers. Her efforts yielded Subway and Arby's Sandwiches, Pizzas from Pizza Hut and Papa John's and water from Wal-Mart and Casey's. After she left the Polk County site, she headed to Union Park to organize and solicit food and beverages for volunteers sandbagging at that site.



Even the youngest neighbors made a difference.

I am a part-time Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps member and was deployed to assist with sandbagging and served as a team leader in Des Moines. I serve also as the Iowa Waste Exchange Resource Specialist for the I-35 corridor and am a Butler County resident and native Iowan. No matter my title, I was deeply humbled by the outpouring of assistance

and support from all of our neighbors. Not a day will pass by that I won't remember the countless stories shared with me by individuals who were impacted by the disasters. Many of them conclude their stories with how, regardless of their personal situation at the time of the disaster, a volunteer or a group of volunteers assisted them by lending helping hands to pick up the pieces in the aftermath.

Because of these experiences and the unsung heroes of the heartland that made them happen, my appreciation for volunteerism and my definition of what a neighbor is has grown, much like an old state motto proclaimed - Iowa is and will always be a place to grow - it's a given!



Volunteers amongst a sea of sandbags--a common site at emergency response locations.

## DISASTER STATS OF 2008

- 18 Iowans lost their lives
- 40,000 Iowans were, or are still, displaced
- 80 of 99 Counties declared disaster areas
- 367 Homes splintered by tornadoes
- 3,000+ Homes destroyed by floods
- 3,000+ Polk County sandbag volunteers
- 500,000+ Sandbags filled
- Approximately 500 AmeriCorps assisted with response and recovery efforts throughout Iowa.

(Sources: Des Moines Register, Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service)

# MEMORABLE MOMENTS



Jane Mild

First responders gather at DNR central office before leaving for their first mission.



Kate Lydon

Local residents check out the rising waters in Des Moines.



Shelly Codner

DNR Keepers of the Land Volunteer Program Director, Merry Rankin, speaks with Pete McRoberts, Ameri-Corps alumnus and Deputy Press Secretary from the Iowa Governor's Office.



Shelly Codner

Members unwind at their makeshift "home base": Drake University's Sigma Chi Epsilon fraternity house.



Tricia Rummer

Member John Delaney shows off his bandaged hands, blistered from tying sandbags.



Tricia Rummer

Shelly Codner and Ann Cannon receive phone calls from Iowans in need.

# SPECIAL THANKS

AmeriCorps' impact on Iowa communities over the summer would not have been possible without the outpouring of assistance from countless volunteers, organizations and businesses from across the state.



Tasty Tacos staff served lunch to hungry volunteers.

DNR AmeriCorps would like to extend special thanks to Aluminum Distributors, Brueggers Bagels, Clear Channel Radio, Citadel Broadcasting Company (KGGO) and KLTi-lite 103.1, Dahls, Department for the Blind, Friederich's Coffee, Hardees, Hy-Vee, Home Depot, King and I Restaurant, Machine Shed Restaurant, Metro Waste Authority, Ritual Café, Salvation Army, Subway, Tasty Tacos, Target, and Wal-Mart for providing food, beverages, and miscellaneous supplies.



A former AmeriCorps member delivered juice and sandwiches from Salvation Army to members sandbagging a business in Des Moines.

Special thanks also go out to the Drake Chapter of Sigma Chi Epsilon for housing 30 members, Phyllis Jensen, of Des Moines, Iowa, for providing massage therapy services to members after a long day's work, and to Mel Pins of the Iowa DNR, for serving as AmeriCorps' designated bus driver.



Mel Pins, Environmental Specialist for the Iowa DNR, transported members from site to site.

DNR Keepers of the Land AmeriCorps would also like to thank the countless unidentified and anonymous volunteers and donors who dropped by to offer a hand and provide supplies, food, and encouragement. Our efforts wouldn't have been possible without you!



With Sincere Gratitude,

The DNR AmeriCorps team: Christine Bates, Emily Backes, Justin Blake, Andrea Blong, Erin Bradford, Damien Bruce, Renee Buck, Ann Cannon, Shelly Codner, Tim Campbell, Chris Cimely, John Delaney, Cory Dunlay, Jesse Dorn, Scott Frieden, Jess Furlong, Donald Frank, Bri Goodin, James Graham, Tiernan Gordon, Tony Grimm, Elizabeth Gull, Emily Haase, Brooke Irlmeier, Erin Kelly, Andrew Kuckler, Kate Lydon, Christy Madsen, William Martin, Jana Matthiesen, Joe Meyer, Carol Maples, Marc McKinney, Jane Mild, Nichole Nagl, Henry Narigon, Matt O'Hearn, Tim Paulsen, Tricia Rummer, Merry Rankin, Robert Schlichting, Jacob Schuler, Todd Steichen, Ashley Tate, Michael Travaille, Brittnie True, Brenda Vargas, Hank Vogel, Krista Williams, Keith Wunder, and Jeff Williams.