

**Phoenix Award for Outstanding Contributions to Disaster Recovery by a Volunteer**  
**Sandra Kaye Delk, Volunteer**  
**City of Mayfield, KY**

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## **2022 Southerners of the Year: Citizens of Mayfield, Kentucky**

After a tornado devastated this small Kentucky town, the strength of the community helped pick up the pieces to bring it back to life.

By

[Rebecca Angel Baer](#)

On the evening of December 10, 2021, an EF4 tornado with wind speeds up to 190 miles per hour ripped through Mayfield, Kentucky, leaving dozens of its 10,000 citizens dead and forever changing the footprint of this small town.

Graves County Courthouse, built in 1888, was not only the center of community activities for many decades but was also the architectural gem of Mayfield with its redbrick facade and octagonal clock tower. Now the tower is gone, and the future of the city's infrastructure is in question. The Mayfield American Legion Post 26 building is just a shell of the place that was once a vibrant hub of social gatherings, from sock hops to movie screenings. The Hall Hotel has been a part of the landscape at 7th Street and Broadway since 1929, and while there is still hope that it can recover, the storm damage here was significant.

Citizens of Mayfield mourn the loss of the tangible elements of their town's history and also the personal artifacts—the moments marked in family photo albums and lovers' initials etched in trees. There's a collective grief over the churches, where couples were married and babies were baptized, and the court square, where elderly gentlemen once gathered for card games and teenagers went on their first dates.

For weeks following the storm, farm fields were littered with glistening pieces of mangled metal as far as you could see. A mural that welcomes visitors to Mayfield is still intact at the mouth of the historic downtown, but now all that's visible behind it are mountains of splintered wood and heaps of bricks.

The tornado struck just two weeks before Christmas. As masses of people poured in to help, the juxtaposition of tumbled-down businesses and homes decorated with festive wreaths and colored lights was striking. Truckloads of Christmas trees were being unloaded in the very same parking lot where insurance companies were taking the claims of families whose homes were lost. There was a fierce determination that the blessings would overpower the grief.

## **Sandra Delk - The Community Organizer**

That Friday night, as [news about the weather](#) flashed on her TV screen, Sandra Delk knew the drill. She wasn't particularly concerned as there had been another storm less than a week earlier that hadn't caused much of a ruckus. She assumed this one would be the same and fell asleep on the couch.

On Saturday morning, Delk, who lives just outside Mayfield, woke up safe. But she soon learned the news of the mile-wide EF4 tornado that had destroyed so much of the only place she has ever called home. Delk got into her car and headed toward the fairgrounds, where she has worked for 24 years. Once she arrived and saw that it had been mostly spared serious damage, she drove around to survey other areas. Just a mile or so away, Delk found entire neighborhoods wiped out. She tried to make it to the center of town but quickly realized she couldn't, so she went back to the fairgrounds and got to work.

With a siren call for help issued in a Facebook post, Delk was soon leading an army of volunteers to collect donations of essential goods and organizing a system to distribute them. After a few days, several warehouse-size spaces were filled with everything from baby formula to winter coats. There was no time for a formal title for the person at the helm of this operation. "I'm the woman in the yellow jacket," Delk says. "I wore it from the first day because it's got pockets—lots of them—and I love pockets. That was good so people could say, 'Find Sandy in the yellow jacket.' "

For the first few days of this Herculean effort, Delk and her 13-year-old niece spent nights in her car to remain on-site. She wanted to keep watch over the goods they had collected and to be on hand should someone need something in an off-hour.

Eventually, with a better security system in place, Delk returned to sleeping in her own bed—but just barely. Every day from early morning until suppertime, she kept things moving in the donation center she created. If she wasn't helping folks through the lines to gather essentials, she was behind the scenes conducting a symphony of volunteers or putting out social media calls for reinforcements. Delk has been in awe of the kindness displayed by others. She recalls a family who came in because they needed assistance but wanted to do their part first. "And they did," she says. "They walked in, signed up, got their yellow vests, and started helping."

From the beginning, Delk knew that her neighbors would require assistance for longer than a few weeks and that their needs would change over time. Her motivation was simple. "I was born and raised here," she explains. "I can't imagine living anywhere else."

The scenes she saw when she first made it into downtown are images that will haunt her. "I was looking at this, and it was just like somebody had punched me in the chest because some of these things are gone forever," Delk says. She remembers that her grandfather would play cards and chew tobacco sitting on a ledge outside the courthouse and that she met her husband on the court square when she was 16. She got her first job at Princess Theaters making 95 cents an hour. All of those markers of her personal history have been destroyed. Yet she's hopeful. "Those are memories that I have, and these spots are just gone," she says. "But the town will be rebuilt, and we're going to have to make new memories. That's what we do."