

Phoenix Award for Outstanding Contributions to Disaster Recovery by a Public Official
Kathy Stewart O'Nan, Mayor
City of Mayfield, KY

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'We will fly that flag': Mayor of demolished Kentucky town shares moment of hope amid destruction

The mayor of Mayfield, Kentucky said that structures like churches, banks and a candle factory where more than 100 people were working were decimated.

By Francesca Gariano

After a [series of tornadoes](#) hit a number of states in the South and Midwest on Friday, many communities, including Mayfield, Kentucky, were left devastated by the damage.

Mayfield's mayor Kathy Stewart O'Nan spoke to Willie Geist on [Sunday TODAY](#) about the damage that was done to the town and how they're coping as a community. Mayfield's downtown area decimated by the storm, and emergency responders are still searching the site of a [collapsed candle factory](#) for survivors.

O'Nan described in detail the widespread "heartbreaking" destruction across the town, including damage to major buildings like the community's courthouse, city hall and banks. Yet, even through all of the debris and destroyed infrastructure, there was one item that stuck out.

"What I did see though, and I've seen them pop up all over town as I drove around yesterday, the American flag from our fire station No.1 was damaged in the rubble across the street from the bank," O'Nan said. "I got the flag, I walked across the street, I picked up the flag and I handed it to two of our firefighters who immediately began to fold in ... that ceremonial, beautiful pattern."

She continued, adding, “I thought, here we are standing in this rubble and the most important thing to us is being so tenderly taking care of. That flag is now safely in my care and we will fly that flag ceremoniously when we recover.”

When discussing what gave her hope, even after all of the destruction that happened to the community, O’Nan credited “the volunteerism that sprang up.”

The mayor said she was inundated with text messages from people reaching out asking how they could help, explaining it was “heartwarming” to read the influx of touching notes. O’Nan explained, “Many people I know, I taught here for a long time, and so I hear from former students all over the United States, ‘Ms. O’Nan, when can we get there? What can we do?’”

“The volunteerism, the ‘what can I do,’ is what gives us hope today,” she said. “And our prayers, of course.”

O’Nan recalled a moment one week prior when three congregations came together, including hers, for a combined advent service.

“We came together, we started at one and walked to the other two,” she said. “We were smaller congregations and all of us talked about what a beautiful service that was, could we please do it again soon? We will, it won’t look the same, but we will do that again some day.”

Services in Mayfield will go on as scheduled Sunday morning and will be held at standing churches across town. O’Nan said she still has hope for her community, even though it has been irrevocably changed by the damage.

“There’s always hope. We hope for a miracle for the days to come,” O’Nan said. “Right now, what we hope for is that our surviving people are warming cared for and have a place to shelter.”

Kentucky was among half a dozen states affected by the storm system, along with Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri and Tennessee. The storm appears to have travelled hundreds of miles.

Andy Beshear, Kentucky's governor, appeared on [Weekend TODAY](#) on Saturday, December 11 to discuss the tragic deaths that occurred due to the storms that ripped through the state. Beshear estimated that the death toll would "exceed 50" and would instead be in the range of "70 or 100." Many of the deaths could be linked to [Mayfield's collapsed candle factory](#).

"We've never seen a tornado that touches down through four states, 227-plus miles, and goes through the very middle of multiple towns," Beshear said. "You can be prepared, people can know, and it still be absolutely devastating."