Faculty and students care for the state’s storm victims

When Kevin Taylor phoned Jerry King from Cullman Friday, April 29, he needed help, and he needed it fast.

King, director of critical education for UAB Respiratory Program, was having lunch with colleague Kerry Whitaker, assistant professor and didactic coordinator of the Surgical Physician Assistant Program, when the call came. Taylor, a friend of King’s and the respiratory director at Cullman Regional Medical Center said the staff at nearby The Sanctuary at the Woodlands hospital had opened a shelter two days earlier for displaced storm victims in need of care. The staff had been working nonstop for almost 48 hours, and they needed relief.

King and Whitaker immediately contacted students and colleagues. Whitaker had a schedule made for the volunteers within two hours. By that evening, King and several others were on site.

“It was a great relief to see them here,” says Charlotte Ivey, administrator at Woodlands. “We were spent. And they were very helpful to us. They stepped right in, they weren’t afraid of doing any work, and they were very good to our community.”

More than 15 faculty, staff and students volunteered their time at Woodlands for four days. At its peak, the Woodlands had needed relief.

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“More than 15 faculty, staff and students volunteered their time at Woodlands for four days. At its peak, the Woodlands had been a diligent process. And we know the hours and days since the storm, the university community has demonstrated its faculty, staff, students, neighbors and friends are not defined by the storm damage, but their response to it.”

The help began immediately with UAB medical personnel at work in the field. Emergency medicine physician Sarah Nafziger, M.D., headed for the shattered Pratt City neighborhood as soon as the

UAB works to help its own, community

Wednesday, April 27 sent violently swirling gray clouds of death and destruction throughout central and northern Alabama. More than 100 tornadoes touched down in the state that day. More than 236 Alabamians were killed. More than 1,000 were injured, and thousands of residents lost everything. Although UAB’s Southside campus was spared, the deadly outbreak touched lives across the UAB community.

A campus in an urban setting, UAB draws many of its faculty, staff and students from hard-hit areas such as Pratt City, Pleasant Grove, Fultondale, Concord, Cordova, Cullman and Tuscaloosa. In the hours and days since the storm, the university community has demonstrated that its faculty, staff, students, neighbors and friends are not defined by the storm damage, but their response to it.

The help began immediately with UAB medical personnel at work in the field. Emergency medicine physician Sarah Nafziger, M.D., headed for the shattered Pratt City neighborhood as soon as the

UAB District Steam System construction project to begin

UAB Senior Project Manager Jerry Corvin has met with members of the consulting and design team planning every minute detail on the UAB District Steam System Project for the past two years. The engineering and design discussions have been intense — five days a week for the past year.

In the coming days, all the behind-the-scenes work will start to manifest itself in public when construction begins on the $69 million project.

“Practically everything we are building for this project is new,” Corvin says. “The construction schedules are very complex and detailed, and this has been a diligent process. And we know that at the best, there will be some issues.”

The District Steam System Project project was approved by the University of Alabama System Board of Trustees this past June. Alabama Power Co. will shut down its existing steam plant in 2013, which makes this project a necessary addition to the campus. The new steam-generation plant will be located at the corner of Sixth Avenue South and 13th Street, across from Bartow Arena and adjacent to the existing Alabama Power plant. The new distribution network will replace the existing steam system and construction of a new condensate-return system will provide high-quality steam service to the campus, research and medical center facilities, including the VA Hospital, Callahan Eye Hospital and Southern Research Institute when Alabama Power discontinues its steam operation in February 2013. The new condensate-recovery system will result in energy savings and reduction of domestic water consumption, which supports UAB’s Green Policy.

Active construction on the project is expected to begin the week of May 16 and be completed in October 2012. The new plant and systems then will go through a period of commissioning and reliability testing and be brought completely online in February 2013.

More than 20,000 linear feet of piping — the equivalent of almost four miles — will be used, and Corvin says the enormity of the construction will affect campus traffic on foot and by vehicle.

Approximately 55 to 60 percent of the project will be confined to campus property. Some sidewalks and streets will be affected, including some of the newly paved streets.

While the unknown always brings its own

See CONSTRUCTION PROJECT p5
Free eye care for tornado victims is rolling into town

The sight of the aftermath of the deadly tornadoes that ripped through the Southeast April 27 is shocking for most. But some may not be able to see it well at all because their eyeglasses or contact lenses were lost or damaged during the storms and the aftermath. Now, a bus rolling into hard-hit towns will help restore that vision.

This relief is being sent by the Alabama Vision Alliance, comprising the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Optometry and Callahan Eye Foundation Hospital at UAB, Sight Savers America, Lions Clubs of Alabama and Vision Service Plan. VSP, the nation’s largest vision insurance company, has provided a bus — a traveling clinic — that is enabling alumni and faculty of the UAB School of Optometry to provide free eye exams and make replacement lenses on-site. For more information on the mobile eye-care unit, call Sight Savers at 205-991-4878.

In Birmingham, Callahan Eye Foundation Hospital and Optical Prescription Lab will conduct refraction services and provide replacement lenses at no cost to qualified individuals through the Alabama Lions Eye Clinic, located in the Callahan Eye Hospital, 1720 University Blvd.

More Alabama Vision Alliance members, including Cahaba Valley Health Care, the EyeSight Foundation of Alabama, Alabama Academy of Ophthalmology and Alabama Optometric Association are expected to assist.

Origin of AIDS is June 9 lecture topic

Professor Beatrice Hahn, M.D., co-director of the UAB Center for AIDS Research, will discuss the “Origins of AIDS and Malaria in Wild Apes” at noon Thursday, June 9 in Margaret Cameron Spain Auditorium. Lunch will be provided.

Registration with the Center for Clinical & Translational Science Forum is required, visit at forum@uhals6911.eventbrite.com.

CORD still enrolling campers, employee discounts available

UAB’s Center for Community Outreach and Development (CORD) summer camps still have openings available, and faculty and staff can receive a $50 discount for enrolling their children.

ChemBridge for 9th Graders features two one-week sessions for July 11-15 and July 25-29 at a cost of $100 for children of faculty and staff. The Summer Science Camps for Middle School Students offers six exciting science camps weekly for six weeks beginning June 23. The Summer Science Institute for High School Students is scheduled throughout June and July. For more information on these camps including detailed pricing, call 934-5171 or visit www.uab.edu/cord. For more information on all UAB summer camps, visit www.uab.edu/summer.

Learn to care for a loved one with memory loss May 25

Caring for someone who has progressive memory loss is a challenge with unique issues for caregivers at each stage. The UAB Resource Center Employee Assistance Program will offer strategies that can help you cope during a program at noon Wednesday, May 25 in the Hospital West Pavilion Conference Center Board Room.

UAB Campus Rec offers free training sessions, upgrades

UAB’s Campus Recreation Center is offering special deals and incentives for faculty and staff, including four free personal-training sessions or three months of free membership to those who sign up for a 12-month membership.

The offer is valid through Aug. 31, on new, primary and annual memberships.

Other changes for spring also have been implemented:

• Extended hours: Weekend hours have been extended to 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday and 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday.
• Family Fun Night: Faculty and staff are encouraged to bring the kids the third weekend of the month beginning in May as part of Family Fun Night. The evening includes a cookout and movie on the Green.
• Locker room upgrades are planned.

Call Member Services at 998-5038 or visit www.uab.edu/campusrec for more information.

James Spann to discuss ham radio use in emergencies

ABC 33/40 Chief Meteorologist James Spann will discuss the role and importance of ham radio during natural disasters and inclement weather at 7 p.m. June 28 in Margaret Cameron Spain Auditorium. This event is free but requires notice to J. Van Martin, president of the sponsoring Healthcare Community Amateur Radio Club; email jmartin@uabmc.edu or call 975-0069. A “talk-in” will be held prior to the meeting, from 6 to 7 p.m.

Tornado relief: Want to help? Need help?

A list of resources to help those affected is online at www.uab.edu/tornadorelief.

A special Benevolent Fund account has been set up to provide emergency relief to faculty, staff and students; donate online at www.uab.edu/benfund.
Plan: Ensure your family is prepared in any emergency

Preparing for disaster

Ideas to consider as you formulate your disaster plan:

• Make sure every family member knows where to find your disaster-supply kit.
• Try to make sure everyone has a pair of shoes easily available to them.
• Locate the gas main and other utilities and ensure family members know where and how to turn them off.
• Be sure you have any special-need items for children and seniors or people with disabilities.
• If you have pets, don’t forget their water and supplies.
• Include your children in family discussions and planning for emergency safety.
• Teach children basic personal information so they can identify themselves and get help if they become separated from a parent or guardian. Prepare an emergency card with information for your child, including their full name, address, phone number, parent’s work number and out-of-state contact and have it with your emergency kits.
• Provide comfort food and treats for each child in your disaster-supply kit.
• Keep a recent photo of your children in your emergency kit.
• Teach children to dial their home telephone number and Emergency 911. Role-play with children on what to say when calling Emergency 911.

The tornadoes that ripped through the Southeast April 27 left many with nothing — no power, no water, no home, no possessions. Meteorologists warned a few days in advance that the potential for a major severe weather outbreak was possible. Still, no one anticipated this devastation. The vicious weather is a sobering reminder that disasters can strike any time, anywhere.

Bryan Breland, director of UAB Emergency Management, says all employees and students should take inventory of items in their homes to ensure their families are prepared if disaster strikes.

“Being prepared means being familiar with all types of emergencies and knowing how to respond to them,” Breland says. “You should also be ready to be self-sufficient for at least three days. This may mean providing for your own shelter, first aid, food, water and sanitation.”

One key aspect of preparedness is a family communications plan. Discuss how, when and where you will meet if you are separated. And while you should have your cell phone, don’t rely on it solely; service isn’t always available during widespread damage.

“One plan for all family members to check in with a relative or family friend who lives out of the area who can relay messages for you,” Breland says.

Pack an emergency kit

Part of your plan also should include packing emergency kits with essential items. These include a three-day supply of ready-to-eat food and water, change of clothing, personal hygiene items, flashlight and batteries, blankets, first-aid supplies, essential personal documents placed in a container, hand sanitizer and medications.

Also consider storing emergency water rather than relying on municipal water systems; they may become contaminated if there are breaks in the waterlines outside of your home. After the essentials, consider some items that provide comfort, especially for children. Family pictures, toys, games or a favorite stuffed animal can help manage fear and anxiety during and after a crisis.

Brenda says it’s also important to teach children who are old enough to understand that different situations require different actions.

“For example, show them that the safe place during severe weather is the basement and the safe place during a fire is the mailbox outside,” Breland says. “And it’s important to practice these routines as a family. Kids often do what their parents do, not what their parents say. Take it seriously, and practice with your kids often.”

Also, talk with your family about potential disaster scenarios and the need to prepare for them. Involve each member of your family in the planning. By showing them simple steps to increase their safety you can help reduce anxiety about emergencies.

Make sure everyone knows where to find the family disaster-supply kits. It’s also important to store your emergency kit near your safe place and check it periodically. Don’t count the food in your pantry as part of the emergency supply unless you intend to maintain it and know that it will be accessible during a disaster.

For more on basic personal preparedness, including emergency planning and checklists, visit www.fema.gov/areyouready.

When it comes to clearing arteries – sex may play a part

Gender may play an important role when choosing treatment options for clearing dangerously clogged arteries, according to a new study from researchers the the UAB School of Public Health. The researchers say the short-term risk of stroke after carotid artery stenting (CAS) is more than double for women of stroke after carotid artery stenting of approximately 91,000 CAS procedures. Howard says use of CAS as an alternative to CEA is a relatively new procedure and primarily is used in patients for whom surgery is considered high-risk. The American Heart Association estimates that approximately 91,000 CAS procedures were performed in 2007, and 11,000 CAS procedures.

“The importance of these findings relate to the fact that CEA together now with CAS are the most frequently performed procedures to prevent stroke,” Howard explains.

Jennifer Vock, Ph.D., an assistant professor of epidemiology and lead statistician on this study, says because women bear the greater burden from stroke, the gender aspect was important to explore.

“In previous trials of these procedures, women were under-represented. But in the CREST study, we have one of the largest numbers of women — 872 out of 2,502 participants or 35 percent,” Vock points out.

Howard says further study is needed with additional gender-based subgroups with different risk factors to definitively answer whether sex is an important factor in the selection of revascularization techniques.

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke of the NIH funded this study with supplemental support provided by Abbott Vascular System.
Coker’s oil spill research focuses on degrading microorganisms

James Coker, Ph.D., has spent his adult life searching for the smallest of living organisms that thrive in harsh environments. His graduate student work was searching for bacteria in Antarctica, and his post-doctoral work examined an organism that grows in high-salt environments, including the Great Salt Lake in Utah and the Dead Sea near Jordan and Israel. Now he’s in search of microorganisms closer to home. Coker, assistant professor of biology, hopes to find new microorganisms that will dominate the carbon-rich environments of the Gulf of Mexico affected by the April 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. He is part of a consortium of researchers that includes Alabama State, Auburn University and the University of West Florida that received a $60,000 Small Grant for Exploratory Research (SGER) from Alabama’s Marine Environmental Science Consortium. The study will link ecosystem contamination by oil and dispersants to its effect on prokaryotic microbial communities.

“We’re trying to see how the microbial population has changed and find out what’s there,” Coker says. “We think the oil that was spilled into the Gulf is a natural selector for certain groups of organisms that are able to degrade oil naturally. Therefore the amount of microbes there, or at least the numbers of certain types, should shrink. But certain groups will thrive.”

As an example, imagine that there are 100 groups of microbials in the ocean, 30 of which are predominates. The hypothesis is that now — after the spill — there will be fewer predominante microgroupomans. But the ones that are there and can degrade the oil will be flourishing.

“Certain microbials now have a bunch of food available to them, and they’re all like pigs to a trough,” Coker says. “They’ll run there and eat it all up. And because they have a lot of nutrients, they are able to divide and grow and multiply faster, so there will be hundreds of thousands more of them than everything else.”

The research team will take pre- and post-spill water samples to calculate the number of microorganisms currently there. Coker’s main role is to find the archael communities so they can be comparatively analyzed with the bacterial communities, which is the area of research focus for the other investigators. The group will employ technical advances in DNA molecular microbial community analyses — known as denaturing gradient gel electrophoresis (DGGE) and automated ribosomal intergenic spacer analyses (ARISA) — to understand ecosystem response to assaults of this scope and magnitude. They also plan to develop a model for aquatic ecosystem response at its prokaryotic base and provide a generalized approach for further studies of ecosystem response to different stressors.

Coker knows there are three big microbial players — Alcanivorax, Vibrio and Pseudomonas — he expects to see. Alcanivorax is known especially for its ability to degrade oil.

“One of the reasons the dispersant was spread throughout the Gulf after the spill was because it’s thought that it breaks the oil apart well enough to enable these microbes to chew it up and bioremediate it,” Coker says. “The real data behind that is a little bit sketchy. However, we know about Alcanivorax, Vibrio and Pseudomonas, and we know they do all of this on the surface or close to the surface because they need oxygen in order to break apart the oil and to grow. The question is, what’s further down in the water that’s getting rid of the oil — or is there anything getting rid of it? We believe there is, but they haven’t been discovered yet or studied as well as the big three.”

The ultimate goal

The communities of bacteria in the ocean naturally primed to bio-remediate or remove the oil work at a much slower rate than researchers prefer.

Coker points to the 1979 Amoco Cadil oil spill off the coast of France as an example. At the time, it was the largest oil spill of its kind in history. Coker says it took almost a year for the microbes to remove the near 220,000 tons of light crude spilled by the tanker.

“The microbes idea of using all of this oil up is on the scale of months, years and decades,” he says.

That’s one reason this research is important.

The idea of trying to do biore- mediation in waters all over the world has been around for a long period of time. One of the first patents awarded on a microbial species was for organism thought to be good at degrading oil. And spraying oil spills on sand with dispersant has shown that it will help stimulate bioremediation.

Scientists hope to eventually create an environmentally friendly microbe that will degrade the oil, possibly using it in addition to or instead of a sprayed dispersant like that used in the Gulf spill.

“That’s the long term, ultimate goal — to create a microbe that would take care of all of it,” Coker says. “There are some problems with that. There already are microbial groups there that do this, and they are adapted to live in that environment. So if you’ve got some outsider coming in, they’re probably going to have a harder time out competing the ones that are already using the oil as a food source. There are still many questions, but it’s something many researchers are looking into.”

Funding for the SGER is for one year, and Coker and the other collaborators hope to have their work completed early next year.

Antioxidant may prevent alcohol-induced liver disease

A n antioxidant may prevent dam- age to the liver caused by excessive alcohol, according to new research. The findings, published online in April in the journal Hepatology, may point the way to treatments to reverse steatosis, or fatty de- posits in the liver that can lead to cirrhosis and cancer.

The research team, led by Victor Darley-Usmar, Ph.D., a professor of pathol- ogy, introduced an antioxidant called mitocondria-targeted ubiquinone, or MitoQ, to the mitochondria of rats that were given alcohol every day for five to six weeks in an amount sufficient to mirror excessive intake in a human.

Chronic alcoholics, those who drink to excess every day, experience a buildup of fat in the liver cells. When alcohol is metabolized in the liver, it creates free radicals that damage mitochondria in the liver cells and prevent them from using sufficient amounts of oxygen to produce energy. Moreover, the low-oxygen condi- tion called hypoxia worsens mitochon- drial damage and promotes the formation of the fatty deposits that can progress to cirrhosis.

Darley-Usmar and his collaborators say that the antioxidant MitoQ is able to intercept and neutralize free radicals before they can damage the mitochon- dria, preventing the cascade of effects that ultimately leads to steatosis.

“There has not been a promising pharma- ceutical approach to preventing or revers- ing the long-term damage associated with fatty deposits in the liver that result from excessive consumption of alcohol,” said Darley-Usmar. “Our findings suggest that MitoQ might be a useful agent for treat- ing the liver damage caused by prolonged, habitual alcohol use.”

“As it has been shown to decrease liver damage in hepatitis C patients, it may have potential to ameliorate the initial stages of fatty liver disease in patients with alcoholic and non-alcoholic liver dis- ease,” said Alan Chocko, Ph.D., a research associate and co-author of the study.

The journal Annals of Hepatology esti- mates that alcohol abuse costs $185 billion annually in the United States, and that 2 million people have some form of alco- holic liver disease. It links as much as 90 percent of cirrhosis of the liver to alcohol abuse and up to 30 percent of liver cancer.

The research team, led by Victor Darley-Usmar, Ph.D., a professor of pathology, introduced an antioxidant called mitocondria-targeted ubiquinone, or MitoQ, to the mitochondria of rats that were given alcohol every day for five to six weeks in an amount sufficient to mirror excessive intake in a human.
AAFA awards third scholarship on the road to endowment

Carolyn Walden, chair of the African American Faculty Association (AAFA), says junior Erica Jackson and freshman Jesse Strickland — AAFA scholarship recipients — have a bright future. “We’re so pleased to have had the opportunity to be a part of their education, and we’re excited about the future students we will be able to help,” Walden says.

“It gives a student recognition and shows other hopeful students it is possible to be rewarded for going to class, getting good grades and studying,” McCall says. Providing financial help, she says, can keep students from being discouraged and derailed by the cost.

Walden, head of cataloging and collection management at Sterne Library and chair of the AAFA, says: “Providing financial help is an opportunity to succeed.”

Past recipients echo his sentiment. Jackson, a junior majoring in exercise science, received the 2010 scholarship, which she says enabled her to stay in school. “I come from a single-parent home, and my mom has worked really hard, but she hasn’t been able to save enough money for me to go to college,” Jackson says. “This scholarship has given me an opportunity to pursue a career in occupational therapy.”

The 2009 scholarship recipient LaTavia McCall, a junior majoring in materials science engineering, is an intern in a new steel-testing lab at Mill Steel. She says the scholarship enabled her to focus on her studies and motivated her to continue to excel.

“Providing financial help is an opportunity to succeed,” Walden says. “They’re all excellent students, and their accomplishments have been remarkable. We’re so pleased to have had the opportunity to be a part of their education, and we’re excited about the future students we will be able to help.”

The scholarship will give me an opportunity to fulfill my goals, including graduating from college, and it’s definitely lifted a burden from my family,” Strickland says. “I’m blessed and privileged to receive it.”

Past recipients echo his sentiment. Jackson, a junior majoring in exercise science, received the 2010 scholarship, which she says enabled her to stay in school. “I come from a single-parent home, and my mom has worked really hard, but she hasn’t been able to save enough money for me to go to college,” Jackson says. “This scholarship has given me an opportunity to pursue a career in occupational therapy.”

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From left to right: UAB Surgical Physician Assistant faculty Kerry Whitaker, students Dawn Winslow, Felipe Valencia, Vincent Baglini, Laura Nugent and Matt Carroll and faculty Paul Harrelson were among the UAB volunteers who worked at The Sanctuary at the Woodlands hospital in Cullman after the April 27 tornadoes.

The UAB Benevolent Fund immediately established a Tornado Relief Fund to aid faculty, staff and students affected by the disaster. To date, 71 different individuals or families have received $65,000 in aid. Included in that 71 are 14 students and two who are students and employees.

UAB Benevolent Fund Program Manager Lisa Higginbotham says the group worked to streamline the process to make it easier to get funds to those who needed them as quickly as possible.

“We’re tried to work with employees to get whatever documentation they can provide, whether it’s from the Red Cross, FEMA, insurance claims, photographs of their house with the street number, hospital or emergency room reports — whatever we can get to document that and try and get them some immediate assistance to help stabilize their situation,” Higginbotham says.

“We’re trying our best to give people what they need so they can have clothing, toiletries, a safe place to stay, transportation to and from work — whatever they feel is their most immediate need — so they can start to rebuild.”

UAB and Sodexo/Campus Restaurants also made it possible for students to donate a portion of their Dining Dollars at any Campus restaurant by scanning a check-out register using their CampusCard until May 31; all monies go into the Tornado Relief Fund.

Online donations to the fund from have generated more than $85,500 — $28,100 of which have been donated online at www.uab.edu/tornadorelief. One man in Brazil, whose sister attended UAB a decade ago, contacted the school to find out how to donate online.

Because of the storms, the Benevolent Fund’s annual April campaign now has been extended through the end of May. Money pledged by UAB employees supports more than 120 nonprofit organizations in the Birmingham metro area, including the American Red Cross-Mid Alabama Region, Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity and the Amelia Center — organizations that have spent or will spend considerable resources to aid the area during recovery.

“Tornado relief efforts are helping with immediate needs, but needs of this community are going to be significantly increased over the next several years,” Higginbotham says. “The work is just beginning. It’s not a sprint. It’s a marathon.”

**Massive impact**

Andy Marnich, assistant vice president for Student Life, says he's seen just about everything in his 28 years at UAB. But this event? He says its impact on the UAB community is “massive.”

March spent that Wednesday night and the next several days reaching out to students personally affected. “I’ve
Senior Graphic Design student Katelyn Armstrong has been through this before as a 10-year-old growing up in Houston. A tornado ripped through her city in a nearby neighborhood.

“It took years for the area we lived in to be able to rebuild and become normal again,” she says.

When Armstrong, a student advocate for UAB Student Government Association (SGA), was approached by SGA President Brad Watts to secure volunteers to be ready to go out Thursday and Friday, she knew just what to do.

“When the tornado first hits, they’re in the search and rescue phase and you can’t really go in and help with debris,” says Armstrong, a Madison native. “The best thing you can do is get everyone organized and wait for someone to tell you where to go. We wanted to organize 100 to 150 volunteers so we went to Facebook.”

The Blazers for Birmingham Facebook page was created, and Armstrong and other students began spreading the word through e-mails to student life, housing, deans and other student organizations.

The first student drive, which lasted just seven hours on the Sunday following the tornadoes, almost filled up a 10-foot truck. A subsequent drive three days later netted 30 students on the list right now,” he says eight days after the tornadoes struck. “In five minutes it will be more because it’s changing that quick.”

What has he heard from students? “Their homes are gone. Or their family’s home is destroyed. Close family members — even parents in some cases — were killed.”

UAB students have signed up under the UAB Students Group Assistance Fund.

Marc’s role has shifted a bit since the early days after the storm.

“The conversations I’m having are changing,” he says. “At this point they’ve heard about some resources and are starting to think about talking to a counselor. It’s hard because the further you go and the more stories you hear from students, the more difficult situations you hear about. It keeps growing, and at some point you wonder when is it going to stop growing? I don’t know when that is.”

The response from the UAB family, Marsch says, has been overwhelming. Faculty, staff and students have offered to help through donations, volunteering their time and setting up mechanisms to help others.

“From medical students to Greek organizations, to student government and individual employees — all were reaching out,” he says. “I cannot say enough about the response of the many people reaching out to help our students.”

Groups from all corners of campus stepped up in various ways. Volunteers from UAB’s eight sorority and fraternity chapters in the National Pan-Hellenic Council and other student groups collected bottled water, clothes and other necessities.

Hospital Laboratories, which holds an annual Hospital Laboratory Week Luncheon, donated its warm meals April 28 to the Christian Service Center. As a result, more than 400 first responders and residents within the Pratt City and Pleasant Grove areas had a 12-seat van full of warm food, fruit and vegetables delivered to them.

“We’ve had students go out and volunteer in Pratt City and Concord, and they say their lives have been changed,” Armstrong says.

The Blazers for Birmingham group also has held several drives on campus to raise money and collect food and clothing for storm victims. The items were delivered to Danial Cason Ministries, a United Way Distribution Center that works specifically in Pratt City, Pleasant Grove and Concord.

The first student drive, which lasted just seven hours on the Sunday following the tornadoes, almost filled up a 10-foot truck. A subsequent drive three days later netted enough supplies to fill two 20-foot trucks to maximum capacity.

“I’m in awe, and I’m overwhelmed by the UAB family,” Armstrong says. “That’s the word that’s the best way to describe UAB — family. I’m not just a student, I feel a part of something bigger because people are so passionate about the city they live in as well.”

There were many students doing some heavy lifting. Surgical Physician Assistant student Carrie Cole, a firefighter with the Gallant Volunteer Fire Department, worked in the Shoal Creek area of St. Clair County along with classmate Laura Winn. The seniors spent the first weekend after the disaster clearing debris and lending a hand wherever they were needed.

“In how many other fields do you have the privilege to help someone at the absolute worst moment of their life, and have them place their absolute trust in you — a stranger?” Cole says. “It be it with my fire department or in the medical field, I feel a sense of pride and accomplishment when I am able to help someone.”

Instead of hosting the planned Chili Cook-Off to benefit the Benevolent Fund April 28, UAB Hospital employees donated 180 gallons of chili to the Red Cross/ Emergency Management Agency mobile kitchen. The mobile kitchen received and distributed the food to first responders and victims from the storms. The cook-off also raised $3,700 despite its cancellation.

For Mother’s Day, the National Alumni Society honored 32 displaced mothers living temporarily at Boutwell Auditorium with bouquets and gift cards for a free lunch at Jim’s Neck, a small but welcoming gesture of encouragement and hope.

Faculty, staff and students are showing they will be there every step of the way.

The Public Health Student Association, headed by Emily Caplousto, is holding a donation drive throughout the summer. Recognizing that the need is great and will be ongoing, they are coordinating with hard-hit areas across the state and identifying the needs of each individual site.

They will then send the requested items collected directly to the sites. They are encouraging donations of personal hygiene and care items, non-perishable food items, baby care items and cleanup items (shovels, gloves, water). Visit their UAB PHSA Facebook page for more information.

UAB student Katelyn Armstrong’s Blazers for Birmingham Facebook page is also preparing ways to continue their efforts to aid the community.

Meetings with fellow USGA members have led to numerous projects and ideas. A benefit music concert is being planned and at least one big universitywide service day per month through the fall are being set.

The group also is looking into creating a partnership with their counterparts at the University of Alabama to see how the groups can help each other.

“Everyone is excited to volunteer in the beginning, but this is a marathon, not a sprint,” Armstrong says. “Our classmates, friends, family and communities are going to need help for a long time. We want to be there every step of the way.”

Editors note: Have a storm-related story you want to share? Use the Request Publicity form on www.uab.edu reporter or share on UAB’s Facebook page or UAB’s GreenMail Facebook page.

Social media mobilizes Blazers for service

Senior Graphic Design student Katelyn Armstrong has been through this before as a 10-year-old growing up in Houston. A tornado ripped through her city in a nearby neighborhood.

“It took years for the area we lived in to be able to rebuild and become normal again,” she says.

When Armstrong, a student advocate for UAB Student Government Association (SGA), was approached by SGA President Brad Watts to secure volunteers to be ready to go out Thursday and Friday, she knew just what to do.

“When the tornado first hits, they’re in the search and rescue phase and you can’t really go in and help with debris,” says Armstrong, a Madison native. “The best thing you can do is get everyone organized and wait for someone to tell you where to go. We wanted to organize 100 to 150 volunteers so we went to Facebook.”

The Blazers for Birmingham Facebook page was created, and Armstrong and other students began spreading the word through e-mails to student life, housing, deans and anyone else they could think of, asking them to forward the information along to students.

The page had 75 “Likes” within the hour of its creation. When Hands on Birmingham finds out where needs are in the community, they communicate those to Armstrong and she relays it to her army of volunteers. They have responded.

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