



Storm damaged the building but not our commitment

By Shelley Tougas / Library Director

Book lovers might note the metaphor in the library's storm story:

Winds knocked Andrew Carnegie's portrait off the wall, flipping it face down on the history room floor. The philanthropist built the original Hudson library and 62 others statewide in the early 1900s.

Also note: The library's Carnegie portrait is unscathed.



The news came by text shortly after 5 a.m.

Russ texted me that the front of the library is gone and there's a lot of damage.

The message - from city technology director Bryan Watson – made my stomach clench. *Gone?*

I'd been awake since the sirens blasted. My windows rattled in the wind, and rain drummed the roof. A typical Wisconsin thunderstorm, it seemed, so I planned a typical Friday workday.

Until Bryan's text.

No time for a shower or coffee. I rushed to the library. Downtown was dark except for the flash of police lights. Officers blocked streets covered with branches and downed power lines. I turned left onto Vine Street and saw the library's dumpster in the middle of the parking lot. Straight ahead, rubble surrounded the library's main entrance.

I entered the back door, found the work room exactly as we'd left it; so I looked for Russ Jensen, the custodian who takes care of both the police and library sides of the building. At our recent staff party, we crowned Russ the library's "Most Valuable Player." Our motto: If Russ can't fix it, it can't be fixed.

On that morning, we needed an army of Russ Jensens.

The lobby's massive blinds lay crumpled on the floor next to wood fragments, twisted strips of metal and chunks of shingles. The wall of curved windows – a feature that characterizes Hudson's most iconic building – had exploded, spraying shards throughout the building. The glass crunched under my shoes.

I'm a former reporter, and those old journalism instincts took over. I shot photo after photo, posted on Facebook and texted a picture to Library Board President Paul Berning with a message: *Call ASAP.*

Upstairs looked fine during the first walk through. The conference room? Fine. Teen section? Fine. Friends of the Library Bookstore, kitchen, adult section, reading nook, history room—all fine.

Then I circled back to the children's area. A few pieces of glass. Then a few more—a trail of glass shards like bread crumbs scattered by Hansel and Gretel. Around the corner the carpet was covered with glass. The wall behind the board books was crushed by wind and debris. The balcony there had served as a net of sorts, catching large chunks of the bath house, but small pieces of shingles and wood were strewn among toys and the children's nonfiction.

It was going to be a long, stressful day; a day with an unforgiving to-do list and no time for emotion. I gave myself a moment to sink into grief. Twelve hours earlier, babies had crawled on this glass-saturated carpet. Their play area was destroyed. Glass in the Legos, the puzzles, the Magna-Tiles.

The force of the wind pummeled glass into spaces that should be impenetrable—between shelved books and inside the Mylar book covers.

Five minutes. I took five minutes to feel sad, frustrated, angry. *Why us?*

Then I steeled myself for the day.

Downstairs, Russ and Bryan were using the only tools that made sense. Brooms.

They swept glass into piles while Russ told me how he discovered the damage.

I knew there were trees down, that Hudson had been hit. But I came in the back of the library and went straight to my closet. I didn't even notice the damage. One of the guys from the police department said, 'Hey, Russ, you're not going to be doing that kind of cleaning today.'

Apparently powerful winds swept the roof from the beach house and hurled it into the library. I wondered what would have happened to the homes and buildings behind us if our tall, strong building hadn't blocked the debris. Or if the storm struck during the day. Images much worse than structural damage flashed before me: injured patrons, injured staff. Or fatalities. Our beautiful lobby windows flood the building with natural light and provide great views, but glass walls also provoke a sense of vulnerability.

We were lucky. Buildings can be restored—lives cannot.

Library board president Paul Berning arrived early. The sun had peeked over the horizon, revealing the extent of the damage. The letters on the building – L I B R A R Y – were gone.

It's going to be okay, Paul said. These events are terrible, but they have a way of bringing people together. The community will rally around the library. Look, they're already coming.

People gathered at Lakefront Park and along First Street. Cameras and phones in hand, they gasped, snapped photos and shook their heads in disbelief. Many offered to help clean the sidewalk and lawn, but the public works crew pointed to downed power lines, exposed nails and chunks of glass.

Thanks, but it's too dangerous. We're getting a crew.

Paul and I developed a to-do list. Communications. Insurance. Public works. An engineer. A staff plan. Inventory. A plan for maintaining services. Emergency board meeting. The inevitable media. Assistant Director Madeline Page and Program Director Michelle Saifullah can knock out to-do lists faster than renowned efficiency experts, so they dug in.

City Administrator Aaron Reeves and Public Works Director Mike Mroz had their hands full dealing with the rest of the city, but they made the library a priority. They already had started paperwork, called the building inspector and rounded up the construction crew working on city hall renovations. The team from Market and Johnson arrived with equipment, tools and protective gear.

As Paul and I greeted the throng of reporters, I realized not only did I skip my shower, I didn't brush my teeth, and I was wearing last night's clothes.

Don't worry, a TV reporter said. You look authentic.

Paul was right. The community rallied: emails, visits, phone calls, comments on social media.

Mayor and library board member Rich O'Connor called to make sure staff members were safe. City Administrator Aaron Reeves checked on us throughout the day with encouraging words and status reports. Board member Barb Peterson called from Croatia. Chris Kost from the YMCA drove down the hill to wish us well. New Richmond Library Director Monica LaVold offered her help. Former library board president Roy Sjoberg arrived with a rake to work on the lawn. Library tech specialist Matt Campana made sure computers were working. Buddy's Bakery sent donuts.

Also, I got a rare phone call from my phone-adverse father. He'd looked at the photo I'd texted and panicked because he thought the rubble was my house.

Perhaps it sounds overly sentimental, but the library *is* my home. Our staff is a family, and the library is our "home away from home" for all of us. It's a privilege to work for an institution that's the cornerstone of our community.

No storm could ever change that.

The lobby was cleared before noon; the windows boarded up by 5 p.m. After consulting with Mike Mroz, the city's public works director, we concluded the earliest staff could return to the building would be Wednesday, Sept. 23. We need assessments about the structural integrity and a plan from the insurance company before moving forward, and it's unclear whether patrons will have to wait until repairs are complete.

The pandemic prepared us for a quick pivot when the building is closed. We'll ramp up curbside service. As for programs, we'll scout offsite locations, hold them virtually or use our YouTube channel.

Soon staff will revive the children's department. We will literally study every single book to ensure glass isn't caught in the pages, the seams or the Mylar covers. Thousands of books and countless hours.

We're ready to serve.

Libraries are more than buildings. Yes, we still keep books and items for community members to check out. But in many ways, we don't have walls. We're *in* the community providing service, collaborating with other organizations and ensuring opportunities for life-long learning are accessible regardless of space and schedules..

That's a long way of saying we're still here for you. We'll always be here for you.

Hundreds of people have asked how they can help the library.

First, let me say this: The library took a big hit – a very visible, public hit - but other people are hurting, too. Your neighbors, your church, your friends, your favorite business ... the storm took a toll on the entire community. The last thing we want is any suggestion that the library deserves to be at the front of the line.

If you're inclined to help, we appreciate it. If you can't offer financial support – or simply prefer not to – you can help in other ways. Subscribe to our YouTube channel. Follow us on Facebook. Sign up for our e-newsletter. Get a library card and attend programs. Explore the unique items you can check out, including snow shoes, Lego kits for kids, a virtual reality helmet, an American Girl doll, a microscope and so much more (all paid for by the Hudson Area Library Foundation and Friends of the Library). Visit the Friends of the Library bookstore upstairs. Tell your friends, families and neighbors about us.

We're not sure about costs not covered by insurance. Regardless, the Foundation and Friends regularly raise money to buy books, movies, technology, nontraditional items for the collection, furniture, special projects and program costs.

Every single program—from the summer reading program to STEM events to performances to author visits—is paid for by community members who donate. In 2019, 20,300 community members came to library programs!

Our support organizations have played a critical role because of our longstanding funding crisis. In 2010, for example, the library spent \$109,000 on books, movies and parts of the collection. In 2022, more than a decade later, the same budget is \$52,000. They will infuse desperately needed funds so we can buy more books, movies, audiobooks, etc.

The Foundation's donation page is here:
hudsonarealibraryfoundation.org/

Thank you for your support.

