

Survivors: Tales from the Tornado

Opening up about May 22, 2011

It would have been perfectly understandable if Mary Burlingame Raley had pushed memories of May 22, 2011, to the far recesses of her mind and chosen to avoid conversations about it.

But that's not the kind of person Raley is.

Instead, she framed newspaper accounts of her survival and hung them just inside the door of a business she opened with her mom, Maggie's Popcorn and Nuts, in an historic building in downtown Ottawa, Kansas.

Among them:

"Woman's scars tell story of survival"

"Annual parade led by tornado survivor"

"As anniversary of Joplin tornado nears, survivor marks moment by opening her own store"

"The tornado crosses my mind pretty much every day," she said. "I wouldn't be the person I am today if it wasn't for what happened."

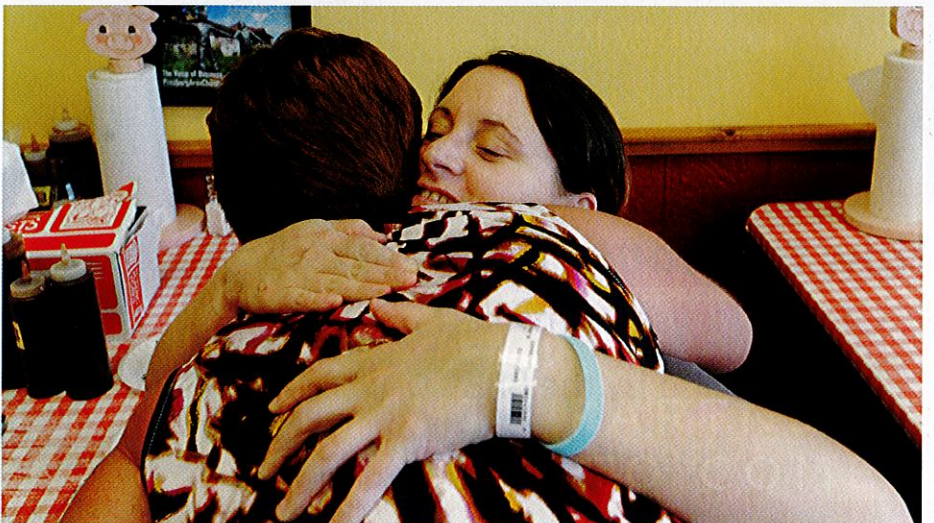
In the days and weeks and months after the EF-5 tore across Joplin, killing 161 people and leaving destruction in its wake, thousands of such headlines accompanied harrowing stories of survival.

Ten years later, six of those survivors reflect on where they wound up after those headlines.

MARY BURLINGAME RALEY: PICKING UP THE PIECES

Raley had been managing her parents' Nutty Bavarian cart at Northpark Mall that day when a security guard warned people to find shelter. Unknowingly, she drove into the path of the tornado on her way home to the 2400 block of South Joplin Avenue.

She was excited to get home to bake cookies in her new kitchen that she and her father had just finished after a three-year remodel to her first home. Instead,



she found herself badly battered by the storm and her home a total loss.

Her injuries required multiple surgeries. She dealt with shock. But she summoned every ounce of resilience she had.

"I think you have two options when something like this happens: you can have pity, or you can pick up the pieces and move on. I chose to move on," she said. "I look at it that I was given a second chance, and I was going to make the most of it."

Her boyfriend Kyle, who slept in her hospital room while she recovered, became her husband in May 2013. She opened her business in May 2017. This year, they're expanding it to include an ice cream parlor next door.

"Every year after the tornado, I've tried to do something positive in May," she said. "Hopefully this May, on the 10th anniversary, we'll be able to have that ice cream parlor open."

She visited a tattoo artist to turn the scars on her back into a tornado tattoo.

"A ruby red cowboy boot is flying out of it along with the date of the tornado," she said.

One wall of her shop has a mural of a twister and a girl flying out of it, throwing popcorn.

"That's me," she said. "I'm never going to not remember it. I have to live with it. The scars don't bother me because I have a story to tell. I'm here. I'm able to be here. I lived through it."