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By: Joe Kovac, Jr.

2 years after the Mother's Day tornado: Some still recovering

The tidal wave of wind that thrashed trees, which in turn walloped rooftops and ceilings and fences and automobiles and bedrooms in south Macon on a fateful Mother's Day morning two years back, huffed and puffed but couldn't blow away Timothy Battle's car stereo and rim shop. Well, it did and it didn't. The roof of Music World Auto sailed away and crash landed on cars in the rental lot next door. The shop lay in ruins. Battle had no choice but to vacate what had been, for his then-7-year-old company, prime rental space on Pio Nono Avenue next to Krispy Kreme.

Recalling the morning of May 11, 2008, Battle said, "I got a call about 7 o'clock. They said my business was gone. I was like, 'What do they mean my business was gone?' ... They said I needed to check on my building, that people were running out with stuff. They stole a lot of stuff — rims, speakers, equipment. They looted." Not long after he arrived to inspect the wreckage and salvage what he could by stowing it in a truck, someone wheeled up on a bike.

"Need any help?" the guy asked.

"Yeah, man," Battle told him. "We'll pay you." So Battle piled his wares, "a big old stack of stuff," in the stranger's arms. Instead of lugging it to the truck, the guy bolted, loot in tow, down Hightower Road and got away. "He left the bike," Battle said. Two springs after the twister of 2008 clobbered the city's southside, and points all across the midstate, the wake of destruction has, at least for some who live and work there, begun to become a distant memory. If you know where to look, you can still tell something menacing rumbled through. Tree lines remain tattered. Decapitated pines and hardwoods don't stand out as much as

they used to. Chain-sawed tree parts litter the occasional curbside. People's spirits seem long since restored. Some can't believe it's been two years already. Some think it was longer than that.

For a time after his established car-audio business was uprooted, Battle said, "I kind of gave up." His shop, he said, "didn't have an address."

An industrial-supply company somehow got his phone number and gave him \$2,500 to pick up the pieces. The grant was part of a \$50,000 donation the company handed out to hard-hit small-business owners.

Battle, 37, reopened his shop down Pio Nono in the Roses plaza a month or so later. He said the Mother's Day twister "changed it here."

"The (economy) already was kind of shaky, and the tornado really just made a lot of the businesses close on up," Battle said. A nearby audio shop was reduced to a heap of prostrate beams and hunks of concrete-block wall and never re-opened. Its owner now runs a soul-food eatery on Houston Avenue. "It's hard to find another location," Battle said.

His store is now just down Hightower Road from the old Westgate shopping center, in what used to be a doctor's office.

Battle owns the place. What little advertising he can afford — beige business cards with orange print — provides potential patrons with directions to the place. "Turn between Krispy Kreme & Checkers," they read. Just down the road from Battle's shop is a snapped-in-half pine trunk standing in the corner of Jerry and Betty Johnson's tiny front yard. It is a 12-foot-tall totem of twisted, dead wood. "I left it as a reminder,"

Jerry Johnson said. The yard, just across Hightower Road from Neel Academy, south of Eisenhower Parkway and just up a hill to the west of an Interstate 75 overpass, used to sport a whopper of a cedar tree.

"We used to have shade," Betty Johnson said, "but we don't anymore."

The house where they have lived since the mid-1970s, a place they rent from Glad Tidings Tabernacle next door, survived the storm intact.

As for how they dealt with the full-on body blow to their neighborhood, Betty Johnson said, "Well, we've still got everything. We were lucky. A lot of people moved out." Her sister, who used to rent a place a block or so away toward Eisenhower and a Taco Bell, was among them. Her house was clobbered. Trees punched holes in the roof. "Her bedrooms got flooded," Betty Johnson said. At the Johnson house, with a south-

facing front yard that is now afforded sunlight all day long, a raised-bed vegetable garden is sprouting. They're growing banana peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers. "We're doing all right," Jerry Johnson said.

On the eastern slope of the Krispy Kreme hilltop, one of the south Macon geography's most prominent ridges, a tidy, one-story rental with a birdbath out front has a sweeping, postcard view of the interstate valley below and Evergreen Cemetery rising beyond it. Next door and two doors down, amid a tangle of brush and keeled-over trees, a pair of left-for-dead vacant houses with busted-out windows await a fate the tornado, for all its might, could not deliver. The houses, empty even before the storm, will be bulldozed. Eventually. They are on the city's condemned list. Beside them, Michael Carden's \$310-a-month rental, the one with the birdbath, overlooks the Neel schoolyard and, from the front steps looking east toward the horizon and Houston Avenue, an almost foothills' panorama spreads out. "At night, it kindly favors like if you're sitting on a lake and you're looking over and everybody's got their dock lights on. It's real pretty," Carden said. However, just north, across Hightower and back toward Eisenhower, a checkerboard of little-known back streets — Pine, Walnut and Maple avenues — were hammered by the storm. Pine Avenue, which parallels an I-75 on ramp near Pep Boys and then ties into Hollis, was a shabby enough cut-through before the tornado. Some places now look more like forgotten, overgrown farm sheds than houses — some with assessed values of less than \$4,000. "The neighborhood is still, to me, overcoming the storm," said Carden, 44. "It's very ugly over here." Speaking of the Pine Avenue end of his road, he said, "It's so nasty, so junky looking. That road is slap full of paper and trash and everything. There were some people who were working on the roof of a house and they just stopped. I guess they felt like it wasn't worth working on." He said the tornado's punch to this pocket of town "was out of this world." "You just don't know," Carden said. "It was tearing the other houses up around us. It tore my backyard all up. I've still got a bunch of debris in my backyard. It came from another house over into my yard. ... I need to get it

cleaned up, but I don't have the money to do all that with. And my landlord, I don't think she does. "I've got my two dogs out here. I've been out there trying to fix the fence for over a year now. ... We need some help from the city."