

# Waiting for Greater

*Director Tonya Bozeman-Dixon stands inside the partially demolished infant building at Dominion Child Development Center. More than two feet of water flooded five infant rooms as a result of Hurricane Harvey's unprecedented rainfall.*



It wasn't until four days after Hurricane Harvey's unprecedented rainfall that center director Tonya Bozeman-Dixon knew the entire infant building at the Dominion Child Development Center had flooded. She hadn't known the rainwater rose two-and-a-half feet into the five infant classrooms because she was stranded at her home across town while the storm dumped 51 inches of rain on Houston, including her center, which had a pre-storm enrollment of 40 infants.

Stuck at home, with the rain still pouring down and the streets of Houston flooding and not being one to ever sit still for long, Tonya did all she could do during the storm – she started coordinating volunteers to staff the emergency shelter opened at Dominion's affiliated church, the Community of Faith. As people were being rescued from flooded homes by neighbors and strangers, many in the Northside area were brought to Community of Faith for shelter. "It was really a blessing we did not discover that the building had been destroyed right after, because it would have been a distraction from us serving the thousands of people we serviced," Tonya says.

Hundreds of volunteers worked around the clock at the church shelter, just across the street from the child care center. But no one had any need to access the infant building while the city was shuttered for the storm.

The rainwater had receded before Tonya unlocked the doors to the infant building as she prepared to reopen the facility for families slowly returning to work when the rains finally stopped and some streets became passable. But when she opened the doors, she knew.

"The smell hit me first," she recalls, with a glassy look in her eyes that tells you she's reliving that moment all over again. She tells of stepping onto the saturated carpeting that ran throughout the infant classrooms, and hearing the unmistakable "squish squish" sound of her feet slogging through the floodwater's aftermath. She tells of inspecting children's shelving and finding mold, of spotting the waterline slashed across drywall, of seeing waterlogged children's playthings and of the dawning realization of what had happened here. Through tears she confides, "We were here on the campus serving and helping everybody else and we didn't even know we needed to be served ourselves."

Those same volunteers serving at the shelter found a new calling across the street. "Thankfully we had all those volunteers on campus. So everybody just emerged from the church building to the infant building and they began pulling everything out," Tonya remembers. "And even then I still did not understand the magnitude of it. Even at that point."

Almost immediately, Tonya began contacting the families with children enrolled at Dominion. “I personally contacted every family. It was reliving the devastation on a totally different level,” she says. “My position here is to relieve hardship, not to be a hardship. These families had already gone through a lot. Some of them had lost their own residences. Many of them had lost wages because they couldn’t go to work. So here it is I’m adding more to their devastation.”

With the infant space destroyed, Dominion staff scrambled to transform its only available space – an existing pre-school science classroom – into a space compliant with state requirements for infant care. It can accommodate ten infants. That means the families of the 30 other babies enrolled in the center prior to Harvey would need to make other arrangements for their children. “I felt helpless because I didn’t have another means to provide for them,” Tonya says. She worries about those families. Will they lose wages or their jobs because they no longer have child care? If they find other child care, will they ever return to Dominion when the building is repaired?

The impact of Dominion’s reduced enrollment extends to the Dominion family as well. With current capacity for just 25% of the center’s original infant enrollment, Dominion can no longer afford to employ all of its infant teachers full-time. To avoid laying off staff, which Tonya says she has never done in her 30 years as director at Dominion, she has reduced staff hours and schedules them in rotating shifts, to at least provide her employees with some continued income. But that schedule reduction has a real impact on those loyal employees and their families, affecting not only their household budgets but also the care arrangements they may have for their own children.

It took the insurance company three weeks to come out and do its first walkthrough. By that time, the infant building had been remediated. Drywall was cut. The entire air conditioning system had been identified as a loss. Recently purchased cribs were tossed out. That soggy carpeting was removed. Materials and equipment were hauled away with the rest of Harvey’s trash. Tonya could finally turn her attention to rebuilding.

She knew money from the insurance company wouldn’t be enough to return Dominion to full operation. So she wasted no time in contacting FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. “They said, ‘Well, you’re a business so the most we can do is you can take out a small business loan.’ I’m like, ‘A loan? A loan!?’ We lost enrollment. We can’t afford to do a loan. We won’t be able to pay a loan back.”

But Tonya never loses faith. In fact, she now sees Dominion’s rebuilding and recovery as an opportunity for something she calls “the Greater.” “We had been talking about new beginnings. A ‘never-before-season’ is what the pastor was preaching on before the storm. And he said things were going to be greater,” Tonya recalls. “So my spirit said, ‘Don’t lose hope. There is so much you wanted to have done.’”

So Tonya pulled out old plans and sketches of what she has long dreamed her center could be, and is working to build something greater than what was.

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Dominion is one of nearly 200 child care centers that is receiving hurricane recovery funding from Collaborative for Children, which is managing the child care recovery process in 13 counties with funding secured from the national Save the Children organization, the local Hurricane Harvey Relief Fund and other private donations. With money from Collaborative for Children, the insurance company and fundraisers she is planning, Tonya has big plans for Dominion.

“Three years from now I see Dominion filled to capacity again with kids having a blast, experiencing all of the different activities at their fingertips. Every child has a genius in them but for us to be able to tap into that genius we have to be able to expose them to different things. The genius is different in everybody,” she explains. “Having different equipment and materials at their hands will help us to discover that genius so we can help that to blossom. That’s what I see again. In three years, I know it’ll happen.”



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