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### **GWU Professor Serves Storm Victims in Moore, Okla. & Granbury, Texas**

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# GWU Professor Serves Storm Victims in Moore, Okla. & Granbury, Texas



Office of University Communications

June 11, 2013

## *Sharon Webb Returns from Recent Deployment through American Red Cross National Response*

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – The young father’s eyes filled with tears as he clutched two Mickey Mouse stuffed animals. The Moore, Okla. tornado had destroyed his home, and his family had nothing left. His voice was broken with sobs as he told the Red Cross worker that he had two children, ages two and four, and he didn’t want them to see the remnants of their scattered toys among the rubble.

As a volunteer with the American Red Cross (ARC) national response, Gardner-Webb University Assistant Professor of Psychology and Counseling Sharon Webb has dozens of similar stories of heartbreaking strength after returning from a two-week deployment to Grandbury, Texas and Moore, Okla. where monstrous storms left miles upon miles of devastation. A licensed professional counselor, Webb provides emotional support to disaster survivors, serves as a supervisor to other mental health counselors, and checks on other ARC volunteers to see how they are doing emotionally throughout their responding roles.

“The most challenging aspect of providing mental health support to disaster survivors is being able to make time for self-care and ‘alone time’ to reflect and process what I’ve witnessed,” Webb explained. “I have to make sure I don’t become emotionally overwhelmed while I’m trying to help others.”

The work, while rewarding, does not come without an element of private grief. “I was most personally affected as I stood in front of Plaza Towers Elementary School in Moore early one morning before beginning my time with my clients,” she shared. “I was asked to be at that location on the day the school demolition was scheduled to begin and was the first to arrive that morning. As I read the names of those young children on the memorial crosses, I cried for their families and friends. Then, I compartmentalized my own emotion so that I could prepare to be supportive for the community members and others who would be coming that day.”

Although each individual’s trauma experience is different, Webb recognized common themes shared by many of the people she assisted.

“In Moore, I talked with many people who are struggling with survivor’s guilt, post traumatic stress disorder from previous traumas, and some children who were not ready to acknowledge or discuss the event,” Webb recalled. “However, I also discovered that many

were very resilient, even finding creative ways to express humor at the sight of their demolished homes. There were also messages of strong faith painted on garage doors of homes that were left only partially standing.”

Initially deployed to Grandbury, Texas, Webb encountered many survivors who did not own their homes, but were renting and had no insurance. “Most of the people were determined to stay in their community, but there were a few who said they would relocate to a place where tornadoes were not a threat,” she said. “I had the honor of meeting people with great faith and resilience. One young couple wore rubber bracelets with the words ‘God is Big Enough.’”

After just five days in Texas, Webb was transferred to Moore, Okla. for the remaining nine days of her two-week deployment. She returned home just over a week ago and the memories of her experiences are fresh and vivid. Last summer, Webb participated in her first national deployment with the Red Cross when she assisted individuals affected by the Montana wildfires. She also spent a week on a Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation where she met with clients in the shelter and throughout the community. She believes her volunteer service benefits her students at Gardner-Webb in a variety of ways.

“Volunteering with ARC for national mental health response enhances my ability to share real-world experiences with my students who are pursuing similar professional degrees,” Webb offered. “I hope to increase students’ awareness of needs for service in diverse areas. Those who take my crisis intervention course this fall will be volunteering with a crisis agency of their choice and will be trained in national disaster response. Hopefully, that will inspire them to continue their involvement.”

As a volunteer with the ARC for several years, Webb believes there is a place of service for individuals of all ages and backgrounds. “If you enjoy meeting and helping diverse people from all walks of life, then national response with the Red Cross is a wonderful area to be involved in,” she encouraged. “I always come away from deployments with gratitude for the people I have had the opportunity to serve, and with reminders of gratitude for God’s grace.”

*Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University’s purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).*