

KCMBA Liberty and Justice Gala

November 5th, 2011

Mayor Sly James

- **Good evening. It's so good to be here tonight with an organization in which I have such a long and treasured history.**
- **It's my honor to speak with you about the work of Legal Aid of Western Missouri in helping the victims of the Joplin tornados get back on their feet.**
- **The 2011 Joplin tornado was a devastating EF5 multiple-vortex tornado that struck Joplin, Missouri late in the afternoon of Sunday, May 22, 2011.**
- **It reached a maximum width in excess of 1 mile during its path through the southern part of the city.**
- **It rapidly intensified and tracked eastward across the city, and then continued eastward across Interstate 44 into rural portions of Jasper County and Newton County.**
- **According to the local branch of the American Red Cross, about 25% of Joplin was destroyed.**

- **The National Weather Service reported damage to 75% of Joplin. In total, nearly 7,000 houses were destroyed (most of which were flattened or blown away) and over 850 others were damaged.**
- **162 men, women and children died. Later, still more would succumb to infection from wounds.**
- **Put yourselves in the situation of one of those victims.**
- **Imagine that your home has been demolished. You need to contact your insurance company, but you don't have the paperwork needed to show proof home ownership.**
- **Imagine you're a small business owner in Joplin whose company is leveled and all of your business' documents are gone with the building.**
- **Imagine all of the questions you might have after the disaster:**
- **Do I have to pay my rent if I can't live in my apartment?**
- **How do I redirect child support payments if I have to leave my home permanently?**

- **How can I get in touch with my insurance company if all of my paperwork is gone?**
- **How can I find my family if there is no power for miles?**
- **Thankfully, Legal Aid of Western Missouri was there to answer those questions and provide some comfort in such a dire time.**
- **Months afterward, legal aid attorneys are still helping sort out the legal issues that arise in the wake of catastrophe:**
 - **Rent money paid in advance to landlords who can no longer be found; a mechanic's lien filed by a contractor on a damaged home; sometimes just general confusion about what to do next.**
 - **The professionals at Legal Aid are always committed to helping the weakest among us.**
 - **But in the aftermath of the destruction in Joplin, they took their commitment and professionalism to an even greater level.**
 - **Unlike food, shelter and health issues, legal problems tend to arise several weeks, perhaps months, after a disaster.**

- **The extent of the disaster was tough for some of the lawyers to anticipate, as was the desperation.**
- **One example was a man with four children who had a job lined up out of state but who had lost his clothes and car.**
- **His insurance company was delaying payment because the man couldn't produce proof of what he'd lost.**
- **His free legal counsel advised him to list everything of value that he had lost and to provide it to his insurance agent.**
- **The man later called to say the insurer cut him a check for the policy limits on the spot, with a little extra for his trouble.**
- **That's the difference local attorneys are making.**
- **I could talk to you all night long about all the reasons why Kansas City is such a great place to live and work.**
- **That's one of my job duties and happens to be one of my favorite parts of being Mayor.**
- **The most important reason I can think of, and the factor that makes Kansas City truly unique, is its people.**

- **Everyone involved in Legal Aid is exemplifies that.**
- **Every day, Legal Aid's staff stands ready to help the people of Kansas City.**
- **But last May, they also rushed to aid the people of Joplin.**
- **Any Mayor of any town in the Midwest knows that on any given summer afternoon, the lives of their town could be forever changed by a tornado.**
- **They are ruthless, cold, and unfeeling and their destruction is devastating and unpredictable.**
- **Thankfully, the response of Legal Aid was absolutely predictable. They went to work to help others.**
- **Kansas City is a great place. A strong place. A kind place.**
- **I appreciate that you all went to Joplin as our city's ambassadors.**