



Profiles of Technology  
IN TENNESSEE

## Broadband Technology Provides Crucial Touchstone During Massive Tornado

**Name:** Union University

**Internet:** www.uu.edu

**Location:**  
Jackson/Madison County

**Founded:** 1823

**Innovative Insight:** *“The most important thing is – we were able to tell our own story, in our own words, and not have to be dependent on other news sources.”*

**The Importance of Broadband:** *“It’s truly a testament to the power of the Internet in mobilizing this type of information to a worldwide audience.”*

**Quick Facts:**

- E-F4 tornado
- 51 students injured
- 13 students trapped
- 17 buildings damaged
- 5 hour emergency effort
- \$40 million total damages
- No lives lost

**Jackson, TN** – At 7:02 p.m. on February 5, 2008, the face of Union University in Jackson was changed forever. An E-F4 tornado swept through the campus leaving in its wake 13 students trapped in the rubble, 51 students with injuries, nine of whom suffered serious injuries, and 17 damaged buildings including 40 percent of the school’s dorms in a state of disrepair. Following a nearly 5-hour emergency effort, all students were rescued safely, however, the storm’s shockwaves left the campus without power, without a university website and without any way to communicate for nearly a full day.

“The first thing we noticed was there was no power to our website for 12 to 16 hours,” explains Associate Vice President for University Communications, Mark Kahler. “Our Web Development Agent, Cam Tracy, created a blog on Blogspot.com because the university website was not up.” The site, [UUemergency.blogspot.com](http://UUemergency.blogspot.com), became a touchstone for students and faculty to check in, report their whereabouts and even locate temporary housing.

“We really had to depend upon UU Emergency,” explains Cam. “We created it that night and had it up and running the next day. It’s truly a testament to the power of the Internet in mobilizing this type of information to a worldwide audience.”

“The website really worked in our favor because it was very simple. The students just wanted information,” agrees Mark. “It became a very valuable point of communication.”

School officials quickly created forums to communicate with the students, asking them to log in and report whether or not they were safe and if they had a place to stay. “We were able to get in touch with 90 percent of our students via the Internet and find them housing,” says Cam. The site also provided Union’s president, David Dockery, with a platform to reach his concerned faculty and student body. “People needed to hear from our president right away, that was absolutely crucial,” says Mark. “He was able to use Blogspot to post a daily message, reporting on the progress we were making on campus. In the midst of a very complicated situation, people got to hear directly from the president. The only way we could have done that was through the Internet.”

Broadband technology also allowed faculty and staff who couldn’t get onto the campus to remain in contact with one another and participate in the recovery efforts from home. “Originally the campus was in such disarray, employees were not allowed on campus for the first several days,” explains Mark. “Our staff ended up working from home, thanks to databases accessible via the Internet.”

Once the immediate danger was over and all faculty and staff had been accounted for, students and faculty turned to technology to tell their stories from that fateful night. “Students communicated quite a bit on Facebook, sharing their stories,” says Cam. “It became very valuable early on for prayer requests and posting photos. People also created videos with updates of the damage on YouTube.”

“The response we got from other schools across the country was inspiring,” says Mark. “Universities sent students here to help with the rebuilding effort. And all of this was handled over the Internet.”

Cam went on to create two more Blogspot sites to represent the phases the school was going through, UU Recovery and UU Rebuilding. Within a month, the traffic on Union's homepage skyrocketed to 595,000 unique visitors! "There are a number of people who gave to Union through the website to aid in the recovery," says Cam. "People made donations to our Disaster Relief via the Internet."

The relief efforts went so well, students were able to return to classes less than two weeks after the tornado hit! And ultimately, while there were damages to the school exceeding \$40 million, no lives were lost. This fall, the school is going stronger than ever, with Union celebrating its highest enrollment ever! And at the end of the day, school officials give broadband technology a great deal of the credit for the smooth transition from emergency to recovery to rebuilding.

"I just don't think you can emphasize enough how important the Internet became in our communication efforts," says Mark. "At a time like this, you see how vital it is and you wonder how you ever lived without it."

Cam agrees. "The most important thing is – we were able to tell our own story, in our own words, and not have to be dependent on other news sources."

Visit Union University online at [www.uu.edu](http://www.uu.edu).

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