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Journalists discuss experiences with December tornadoes

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Paducah's WPSD-NBC chief meteorologist Trent Okerson (far right) discussed his experiences with the December 2021 tornadoes in Mayfield. Okerson, Daily News photojournalist Grace Ramey (far left), and I participated in the Western Kentucky University School of Media's 2022 Journalism Symposium. JOHN REECER/jreecer@bgdailynews.com

Local, regional and national journalists gathered Thursday night as part of Western Kentucky University School of Media's 2022 John B. Gaines Family Lecture Series to publicly discuss their coverage of December's deadly tornadoes.

The roundtable discussion included Daily News photojournalist Grace Ramey, Paducah's WPSD-NBC chief meteorologist Trent Okerson and New York Times national correspondent Rick Rojas.

Alana Watson, local host for "All Things Considered" on WKU Public Radio, moderated the lecture.

Dozens of attendees gathered in Jody Richards Hall at WKU to watch the three journalists describe their actions and thoughts before, during and after the storms ravaged much of western Kentucky.

Okerson and his team at WPSD near Mayfield had been tracking the storm in the days leading up to that night. He called the weather event one of the worst he had seen in his time at the station.

He discussed how he went on live television and warned the public mere minutes before a tornado tore through Mayfield.

"This was from a metrological perspective an extremely rare setup," Okerson said. "I had to use language and verbiage and a tone that in my 14 years I had not used before. This storm was so powerful and so strong that we

had to figure out a way to convey the urgency to folks in a way that struck the right balance of not scaring them but having them prepared.”

Okerson said he was previously told by his news director that his job as a meteorologist was to “save lives.” This storm made that advice a reality for him.

“We received so many messages from viewers that night who were just appreciative of the work we did,” he said. “We do this to serve our community. This is our town. We knew people who were in the path of the storm that night. That’s why we do this – so we can serve our viewers.”

Ramey, who lives in the Creekwood neighborhood in Bowling Green largely leveled by the storm, discussed how she began to document the aftermath despite just surviving the tornado mere minutes beforehand.

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“While I came down from the shock of it, seeing these brave men and women (first responders) come in with no thought for their selves and trying to help people – I thought I needed to do the same thing in my own way. And so, I stood there and tried to get as much as I could as more and more people were arriving.”

The next morning, Ramey walked around the neighborhood with multiple cameras and took photos showcasing the devastation around her.

Some of her photos are now on display in a photo exhibit called “A Community United” in Jody Richards Hall until April 22.

Finally, Rojas provided a different perspective of an outsider coming into a community and telling a story about the disaster for the entire country to read.

Rojas woke up early that morning at his home in Nashville and arrived in Mayfield at 7 a.m. He spent the rest of the day capturing the story from a community still in shock.

“Very simply, it’s just walking and talking,” Rojas said of his task that day. “I think that’s the only thing you can do is to just observe and listen. ... I just try to be as humble as I can and as open about what I don’t know. I let people tell their stories. I don’t ask many questions. It just comes pouring out of them. There is something cathartic about going through something so rough and wanting any human to hear what you are saying.”

He also discussed the need to return to areas where disasters struck (like Mayfield and Bowling Green) and keep telling stories as many begin healing.

Ramey agreed with Rojas and offered words of encouragement for those affected by the tornadoes.

“As the world moves on, you can start to feel like nobody cares anymore, but we do care,” Ramey said. “And we are here to share your stories and let you know you are not alone. You are not forgotten.”

The late John B. Gaines was president of the Daily News.

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