

Matt Deighton – Molly and the Tornado

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

When a disaster strikes, what do we need? First aid, emergency help, transportation, supplies, support, and more. Maybe we also need something to lift our spirits, in the way that only a good dog can do. Today we'll meet a remarkable Kansan whose dog's role in disaster recovery has taken him into print, across the nation and beyond. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Matt Deighton is an entrepreneur and former volunteer coordinator in Greensburg, Kansas. Matt has deep roots in rural Kansas. In fact, his great-great-uncle founded the town of Dighton, although the spelling was changed by a surveyor. Matt's mother came from Barton County and his dad came from the rural community of Rozell, population 176 people. Now, that's rural.

In 1976, Matt's dad became the county road supervisor in Kiowa County so the family moved to Greensburg where Matt finished school. He took engineering training and became Lane County Engineer for a time, before joining a couple of friends who had moved to Waco, Texas. Two important things happened in Texas: One, he co-founded a fun restaurant called Buzzard Billy's which would go on to become world famous, and number two, he found a dalmatian puppy named Molly.

"I went to look at a litter of dalmatians, and Molly came home with me," Matt said. Eventually he moved back home to Greensburg to become a caregiver for his parents, and then his mother after his dad passed away. Matt found the dog was a loving and caring companion, and a comfort to those around her. "She was wonderful medicine," Matt said.

Then came May 4, 2007. A devastating F-5 tornado destroyed most of the town of Greensburg, including the Deighton's home. "I came out of that basement with four things," Matt said: "The clothes on my back, my mother, Molly the Dalmatian, and my faith in God."

He had to climb over a freezer to get out of the basement, and when he did so, a bolt of lightning revealed the devastation around him. Within one hour, he pulled 31 people out of the rubble. Eventually he and other survivors were taken on a bus to the shelter in nearby Haviland. Molly had been told to stay with his mother and had faithfully done so. She accompanied them to the shelter, where she befriended the survivors. Matt noticed how her presence seemed to calm and encourage those around her.

After the devastation, a flood of volunteers descended on Greensburg which presented another management challenge. Matt Deighton was asked to become volunteer coordinator. "I told them I would take the job if I could bring my dog to work every day," Matt said, and the deal was done. After the initial recovery of the community, she became a lobby dog for the local veterinarian.

During this time, Matt was living in a FEMA trailer. In the evenings, he started experimenting with various types of seasonings and spices, and he came up with a blend that he really liked. It had no MSG and was low in sodium. Since duct tape (sometimes called duck tape) was something that had really come in handy after the tornado, he decided to call this new blend of spices Duck Salt. The product took off and is now

being sold as a fundraiser by non-profit groups across the central U.S. For more information, go to www.ducksalt.com.

Meanwhile, Molly the Dalmatian became so popular that she began to get fan mail and Matt decided to capture her story. Eventually he self-published a children's book called Molly and the Tornado. The book is based on the true story of Matt and Molly's experience in Greensburg and includes storm safety tips for kids.

The book also took off. For more information, go to www.mollyandthetornado.com. Matt now works closely with the New York Says Thank You Foundation. "It's about paying it forward," Matt said. He has taken his message of disaster recovery and resilience all over the nation and as far away as Japan. He and Molly even walked the red carpet at New York's Tribeca Film Festival. Wow.

When a disaster strikes, there are lots of things that we need, but let's not forget the encouraging presence which a loving pet can provide. We salute Matt Deighton and Molly for making a difference in the lives of others. She was a good dog.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.