



A view of the destruction, looking east down Duane Street toward Hattiesburg High School. Trees and debris had been cleared from the road to allow emergency and relief vehicles to pass.

YCP

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pitch in.

“We brought the kids out on February 12 to help with the tornado effort, cleaning up shingles, debris and tin roofing material that was everywhere, as well as helping out some of the residents with moving their stuff out of damaged homes and generally assisting them in any way we could,” said Master Sgt. (Ret.) David Williamson, a platoon leader with the Mississippi Youth Challenge Academy. “We rotate duty platoons between seven different platoons, and it was our turn that week, but the kids really enjoy being able to help out like this.

Williamson said that the number of cadets volunteering for the disaster relief efforts exceeded the number that could be safely supervised, which caused some disappointment.

“I had ten cadets who really wanted to come out and pitch in, but I couldn’t bring them because I can only supervise so many in a disaster area like this, and they were really mad that they couldn’t come with us,” said Williamson. “The kids at the academy get pretty excited about doing whatever they can to help people in need.”

As the week passed, more and more areas called for assistance, and the duty platoons of the Youth Challenge Academy continued to pitch in wherever they were needed.

“We sent cadets to different areas around Hattiesburg throughout the week after the tornado,” said Hosey, “and on Saturday, February 16, we

took 100 cadets from three different platoons out to Lamar County, where they worked for several hours. The devastation we saw out there was as bad or worse than what we saw in Hattiesburg. It was terrible.”

The first work site that the cadets arrived at in Lamar County was a lot which formerly had three mobile homes on it, one of which belonged to Sgt. 1st Class Albert Pickens of Camp Shelby’s Regional Training Site Maintenance element. Only half of Pickens’ mobile home was left on the lot, and in the aftermath of the tornado, it was a twisted wreck surrounded by debris of every description.

“The kids came out and worked until about 2:00 that afternoon, picking up debris like nothing I’ve ever seen, and all I could say was ‘God is good,’” said Pickens during a phone interview. “I told the colonel (Hosey) that I sure appreciate what they did for me, because it would have taken me more than a month to clean this up. It was a mess out here.”

Community service is one of the most important elements of the program at the Mississippi Youth Challenge Academy, and this tornado is not the first time that the cadets have stepped up to help.

“This isn’t new for our cadets,” said Hosey. “We started this program in 1994, and in 1995, we sent cadets down to help with the Jordan River flooding, in 1999, Hurricane George hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast and we were there. In 2005, we not only had to clean up our area here at Camp Shelby after Hurricane Katrina, but we also sent cadets down to the gulf coast for two weeks, where they worked to help Families around



Mississippi Youth Challenge cadets from Camp Shelby, above, assist a homeowner on Duane Street in Hattiesburg by moving salvageable items out of the damaged home. At right, Cadets carefully navigate the interior of a damaged Duane Street house.



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