

Brother, can you lend a hand?

Neither time nor distance
nor Mother Nature can
disrupt the bonds of
an F&M brotherhood

Scott Fasnacht '83

During the early morning hours of Sunday, Aug. 28, 2011, rain from Tropical Storm Irene agitated the normally polite Ottauquechee River, causing it to erupt beyond its banks, destroying roads, leveling businesses and disrupting lives across Vermont's Upper Valley.

One life so disrupted was that of Patrick Crowl '84. Crowl is an owner and "chairman of fun" for the Woodstock Farmers' Market, located in Woodstock, Vt. In 1992, his father purchased what was then a humble roadside establishment. Crowl stepped in when his father retired from the business later that year after a fire destroyed much of the property.

Crowl dug in and committed to the market, building a multi-million-dollar enterprise that was named 2009 Retailer of the Year by the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade. It has grown into the hub of the community, and the tragedy of Irene would make clear to Crowl, and to others, just how important a community can be.

A river runs through it

"We were expecting some high winds and took the precaution of consolidating perishable items into the walk-in coolers in case we lost power," Crowl said. "I never imagined that a flash flood of that magnitude was possible." Indeed, there had never been even the suggestion of major flooding from the Ottauquechee in the recent past.

Sitting along the river's bank, the Woodstock Farmers' Market had some 5 feet of the Ottauquechee coursing through it as the river crested. The structure, which had just undergone a renovation earlier that spring, was extensively damaged, but it was still standing when the water receded the next day.



PHOTOS: GWEN STANLEY,
THE VERMONT STANDARD

Inside the 5,000-square-foot store, merchandise was broken and unsalable, food-preparation tables were tossed on their sides and embedded in 3 feet of mud, and the freezers were full of decaying perishable food as the area was without electricity.

"I knew I needed to develop a game plan, but there just was no time," Crowl said. "Things were moving so quickly, as volunteers from the town started arriving with a ferocity of the spirit that was incredible."

Together, the volunteers and store employees managed to clear the majority of the market that first day. Still, Crowl knew he faced far more than a wrecked building.

"That's when the cavalry came in from F&M," he said.

The power of an extended community

Crowl was a government major and an active brother of the Chi Phi fraternity during his years at Franklin & Marshall College. Several of his brothers were among the first people to hear of his dilemma.

"I told them that everything was okay and that there was no need for them to come up," Crowl said. "The truth is I needed them to be here. They're my best friends in the world. So of course they ignored what I told them, dropped what they were doing and came up."

Among the first to rally to Crowl's side were Craig Kravit '84, an attorney and CEO of iVision International LLP, and Steve Kennedy '85, an entrepreneur and small business owner. They arrived in Woodstock on Tuesday.

"We didn't know what we would do," Kravit said, "But I knew there were too many things for Patrick to do by himself."

The Chi Phi network came alive as emails and social-media postings shared the news of Crowl's travails. Brothers responded in many ways, including one who dispatched portable toilets from his business to the farmer's market and another who opened his Vermont condo so the others had a local place to stay.

Kravit, Kennedy and others joined Crowl and his staff in mucking out the remaining mud and debris from the market. But their real contributions came with the setting sun.

Creative solutions

"After the others had left," Crowl recalled, "We'd pull up a bench in the parking lot, crack open a six-pack and brainstorm solutions to the countless issues the business still faced."



Patrick Crowl's Chi Phi brothers were among the first people who came to help.



Beyond repairs to the physical infrastructure, Crowl needed to get his hands around insurance claims, federal and state relief programs, tax implications, payroll and benefit considerations for the market's employees, and replacing the store's inventory.

"Despite the overwhelming nature of everything Patrick was experiencing, there was a decision to be as proactive as possible on virtually every front," Kravit said. "We contacted everyone in our network looking for answers. And for weeks and months we stayed in touch to make certain that Patrick was on the right path in tracking down the right solutions."

One idea Crowl and his brothers developed was the Irene Card, a prepaid shopping card program that offered customers discounts on merchandise once the store reopened. They hoped to generate a few thousand dollars. But the response to the card program was, similar to the community response in general, remarkable. The cards pulled in more than \$400,000.

"Our goal was to help limit Patrick's losses in any way possible," Kennedy said. "Offering those cards was a brilliant idea and one that Patrick came up with."

After leaving Woodstock, Kravit and Kennedy kept working. Along with several of their Chi Phi brothers, they hosted a fundraising event on Oct. 22 in Morristown, N.J. Attended by approximately 50 people, the event generated an additional \$10,000 toward the market's recovery efforts.

Old friends and a new beginning

"It was an amazing time and very emotional to watch these guys do their thing to help me," Crowl said. "Through it all, I learned a lot about myself, friendship and the importance of the relationships I have built with people over more than 25 years."

According to Kennedy, it also provides insight into the culture of Chi Phi. "The way our brothers responded in this situation is what fraternities are all about," he said. "The existence of that culture is defined by the actions of a group when no one is watching. The response you saw in Woodstock is pretty clear evidence of the culture of Chi Phi."

That culture, in this case, helped bring the Woodstock Farmers' Market back to Woodstock.

With a smile on his face, a grateful Crowl hung the "Open" flag on the market's large roadside sign the morning of Nov. 19, less than three months after the storm. The remarkably quick reopening marked a return to normalcy in Woodstock and for Crowl. It was a testament to the power and importance of his local community and his community of brothers. ■



The Woodstock Farmers Market reopened for business in November.