

BBQ = HOPE

OPERATION BBQ RELIEF

Anyone who has experienced a natural disaster that snatches everything you have—especially your sense of normal—knows it is simply paralyzing. In the fog of the trauma, it can be hard to figure out where you are going to lay your head the following night, and until you feel your stomach rumble, what—or in the case of an entire community that is destroyed, how—to eat is likely far from your mind.

You might remember the massive tornado that devastated Joplin, Missouri, in 2011. The storm was labeled the second deadliest in national history, killing nearly 150 people and demolishing more than 7,000 homes.

That May afternoon in Joplin's neighboring community of Kansas City, a group of competitive BBQ guys wracked their brains to find a way they could help. Looking around at what they had and what they knew how to do, this group of pitmasters decided to pack up their mobile cooking equipment and go feed Joplin residents while they figured out their next move.

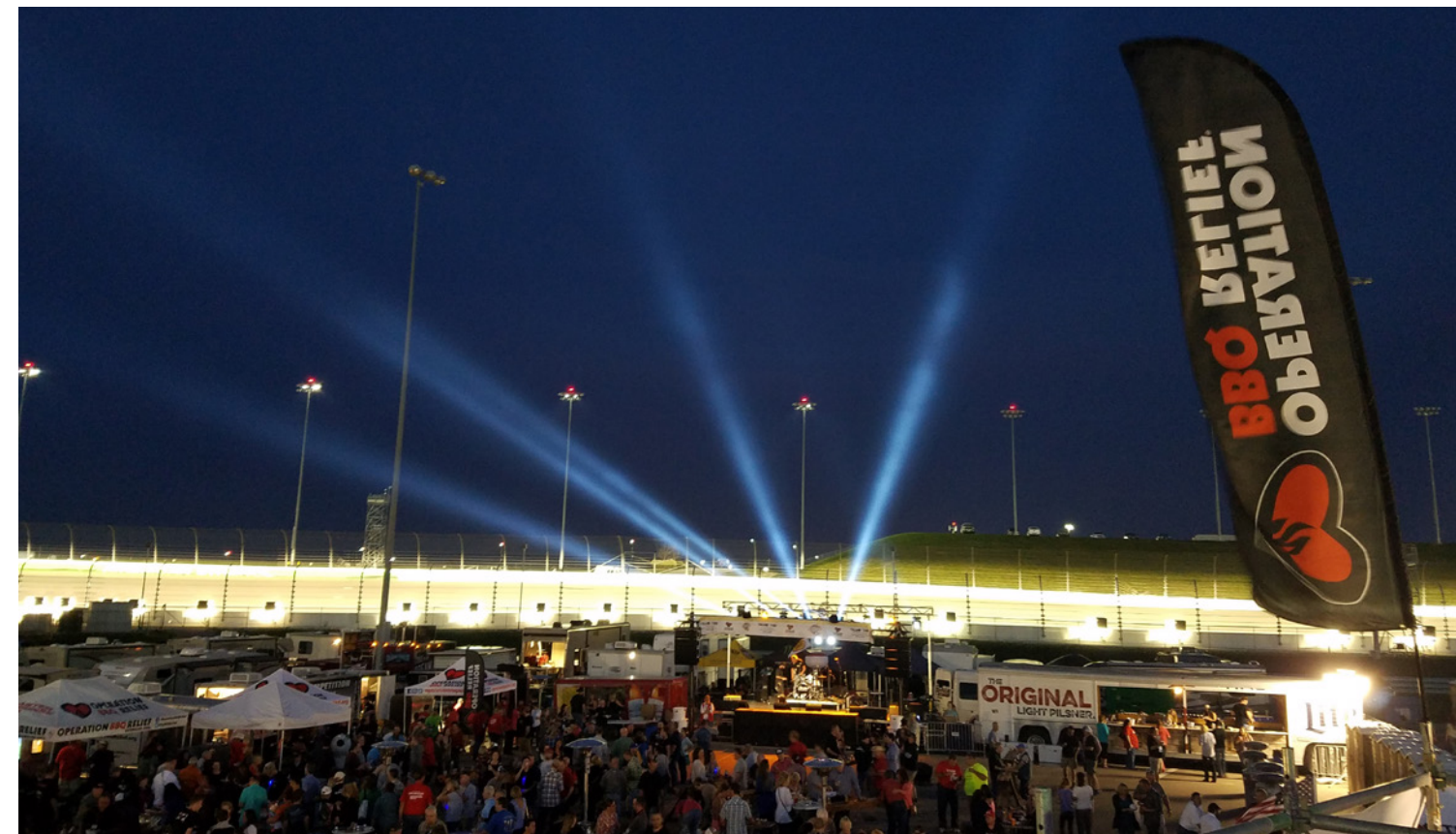
THESE GUYS HAD NO INTENTION OF STAYING IN JOPLIN AS LONG AS THEY DID AND NO IDEA THEY WOULD BE COOKING MORE THAN 120,000 MEALS ON THAT TRIP

These guys had no intention of staying in Joplin as long as they did and no idea they would be cooking more than 120,000 meals on that trip—but when all was said and done, they knew they were onto something big.

The newly-formed team started to keep an eye on the weather around the country, specifically the TOR:CON index, which determines the risk of tornadoes that a storm brings with it. They developed a plan to activate resources when Mother Nature threatens lives—and kitchens. So, Operation BBQ Relief (OBR) was born.

“You’d be surprised how many competitive barbecueers are now amateur meteorologist,” says David Marks, OBR’s Chief Marketing Officer. “When we see a TOR:CON 7, we know it’s time to gather resources and hit the road.”

Six years later, Operation Barbecue Relief is an active member of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) and regularly practices mock deployments with FEMA. Strategically-placed storage facilities house supplies around the country, ready to be deployed when disaster strikes.



No job is too big for the team at Operation BBQ Relief. Having served over 35,000 meals in a day, the volunteers that make up this organization help to spread hope and kindness to those in their time of need.



The volunteer group has been deployed to disaster stricken areas in 21 states and dished up far more than a million meals.

The smokey smell of meat on the grill and taste of homemade sides elicit memories—for most, happy ones. “It brings comfort,” says Marks, “and gives them not only energy to keep going, but hope. It’s a reminder of good times and brings hope that times will be good again.”

Last year, when Hurricane Matthew came barreling up the East Coast, Operation BBQ Relief set up shop in the Sam’s Club parking lot. More than 100,000 people stood in line for almost three hours to get not just a hot meal, but a meal fired up by some of the best pitmasters our country has to offer.

What started as a good deed has evolved into a nonprofit made up of 5,000 registered volunteers, about 100 of which are active on a regular basis, donating their talents and skills to help the organization run smoothly and to spread the word.

“Our volunteers are our grassroots PR,” says Marks. “Sharing stories on social media makes it real for people. It’s the inside scoop on the lives behind these disasters, the stuff you don’t see on the news.”

OBR has filled bellies and served up hope during every major disaster in the last three years. In the early days, they cooked up more

than 100,000 meals after Hurricane Sandy. With significant help from volunteers and supportive companies, OBR was able to serve 330,000 meals in Louisiana during the flooding in Baton Rouge last year.

With a cause so strong, they’ve garnered support from companies like Blue Rhino, who provides all the propane they need to cook during these disasters. Yeti outfits all of OBR’s trailers and trucks with coolers for transporting meat and food that would otherwise spoil. Sunbelt Rentals donates generators, forklifts, light banks, and more. The list goes on, but the people who get behind the cause make it go.

“Most of our volunteers are just people who love barbecue—people in the backyard who just want to do good in the world,” says Marks. Boy Scout Troop 409 in Olive Branch, Mississippi, is a great example, cleaning all of the equipment that comes back to their area after a deployment. “I love to watch a community support itself,” says Marks.

Operation BBQ Relief doesn’t take their supporters’ involvement lightly. Ninety percent of every dollar donated to OBR goes on a plate. Simply by showing up and filling a need, OBR has created a demand for their service of serving up hope—and they still need all the hands on deck that they can get.

WORDS BY **GINNY ELLSWORTH**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF **BBQ RELIEF AND ALEX CHAPMAN**