

**V**ERONICA DUMAR, 60, of Phil Campbell, Ala., was at home on the afternoon of Wednesday, April 27, when the storm sirens went off. Stepping out onto her porch, she saw a massive tornado funnel coming her way. She and her husband jumped into their bathtub, pulled a comforter on top, and prayed as winds greater than 200 miles per hour—“louder than a freight train”—pummeled their house. When they emerged minutes later, only two walls of their home remained.

Nearly all of Phil Campbell's 1,000-plus survivors have a frightening story to tell about that day. This year to date, the U.S. has experienced the deadliest outbreak of tornadoes since federal record-keeping began, in 1950. The April 27 twister that hit Phil Campbell killed 26 people, injured more than 60, and leveled most of the town's structures, causing \$30 million in wind and water damage. While many townspeople tear up when they talk about the recovery efforts, not all the tears are from sadness. Some are triggered by an outpouring of goodwill from unexpected quarters, including a group of guardian angels from around the world whose names all happen to be Phil Campbell.

One of them, a 38-year-old writer from Brooklyn, first heard of the town—named for a railroad engineer—in 1993 during an episode of TV's *Hee Haw*. The next year, while visiting Huntsville, Ala., he took



A group of strangers are traveling to this tornado-ravaged town to help residents pick up the pieces.

## A Special Kind of Phil-anthropy

*On April 27, the town of Phil Campbell, Ala., was walloped by a tornado. Now it's being rebuilt, with the help of Phil Campbells from around the world.*

a detour to see his namesake. He was greeted so warmly by the town clerk, who kept a record of every Phil Campbell who passed through, that he impulsively promised to assemble all the Phils he could find. He organized the first-ever Phil Campbell Convention, which brought 22 Phils and one Phyllis to town in June 1995. “I was amazed at the hospitality,” Campbell says. “We got a police escort, and people came out to wave. They treated us like royalty.”

Fond memories of the town and its big-hearted citizens stayed with him through the years; so did the idea of

staging a second meeting of the Phils. When he called to ask town officials about holding another gathering there, Rita Barton, 56, head of the parks and recreation department, told him a hoedown marking the town's 100th anniversary was planned for the weekend of June 17, 2011. They agreed to combine events, and in January, invitations to join the festivities in Alabama went out to 385 people named Phil, Phillip, or Phyllis Campbell.

But after the storm hit, town officials decided to cancel the hoedown—and assumed the convention would be called off, too. They couldn't have been more wrong.

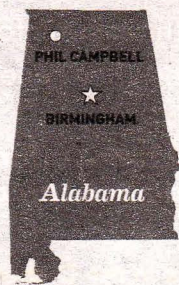
Brooklyn Phil Campbell learned about the devastation on

April 28 when he got a message from a shaken Barton saying the town was “gone.” He told his fellow Phils via Facebook, and they launched an “I'm With Phil” campaign. Phil Campbell, 38, a video producer from Nottingham, England, edited clips from the other Phils into a YouTube video that featured 11 different Phil Campbells declaring support for the stricken town.

The Phils told Barton they'd be there on June 17—to help rebuild. “I was shocked,” says Barton, a motherly woman who's quick to laugh and cry. “It warmed my heart to know that people want to travel so far to assist.” Feeling the town could use a celebration, officials revived plans for the hoedown, too.

**O**NE PHIL CAMPBELL HAS already shown up. A 42-year-old software engineer from Birmingham, Ala., he first learned about the town when he was young. “My dad showed me the encyclopedia and told me there was a place in the state with my name.” He'd never visited, but after Brooklyn Phil contacted him on Facebook and he was invited to the convention, he decided the time had come to see the town.

When he saw photos of the damage inflicted by the April 27 storm, he moved that time up. On May 14, he and his wife packed their car with bottled water and Walmart gift cards and made the two-hour drive. “As I was coming toward the town, I saw the Phil Campbell water tower standing, and I thought, ‘How bad can it be?’” he recalls. “Then I went over the next hill, and it was devastation



as far as the eye could see." He and his wife stopped at the site intended for the hoedown and helped others clear debris.

Birmingham Phil has gone back once more to pitch in, his bond with the town intensified by a sense of purpose. "It means more to me knowing that what I do is touching somebody's life," he says. "Thirty years from now, I'll remember how I came to this town and helped. This'll be the high point of my life, I think." The idea that they can make a difference in the place that shares their name is just one more thing binding all the Phils and Phyllises together. Phil Campbell, 44, a pastor from Coffs Harbour, Australia, will travel more than 9,000 miles this month to be there. Why go to such lengths? His answer is simple: "When tough times happen, we must pull together and lend a hand."

In late May, many of the town's streets were still clogged with rubble and dead trees. Some families whose homes were destroyed were living out of tents. But there were also signs of renewal everywhere: people busy restringing power lines and replacing broken windows.

Those at work will soon be joined by the crew of Phil Campbells, whose commitment is giving townspeople an emotional boost. Mayor Jerry Mays, 67, sums it up: "Everyone is looking forward to them. It's amazing. We've been telling them, 'This is your hometown now.'" **P**

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**P** You can find out how to help Phil Campbell and other tornado-stricken towns at [Parade.com/philcampbell](http://Parade.com/philcampbell)

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