



The path of destruction of the tornado, facing northeast, in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, on Thursday, April 20, 2022. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)

**RURAL LIFE**

## Torn to Pieces: a Photograph, a Band, a Town and a Tornado

*When a devastating tornado struck Dawson Springs, Kentucky, a marching band photo took flight and traveled more than 100 miles away from home. Its journey unearthed more than two decades of local history.*

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by **Katya Cengel**  
May 25, 2022

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**December 11, 2021**

**T**he photo was found in a family garden in New Albany, Indiana, on a Saturday morning in December 2021. It wasn't taken on a special day. There is no bride or groom, no college student in cap and gown, just teenagers in a parking lot playing drums. There is nothing posed or composed about the picture. The faces of several of the nine kids in the image are hidden or too distant to recognize and the top of the band instructor's head is cut off. On the back is written: "Senior DSHS Marching Band, Fall 2000."



**The photo found in a family garden in New Albany, Indiana, over a 100 miles away from Dawson, Kentucky. It made its way to Indiana on the winds generated by the tornado that destroyed the Kentucky town. (Photo courtesy of Greg Johnson)**

Twenty years and more than 100 miles away from where the photo was taken, at Dawson

Springs High School, it appeared undamaged and face up in an Indiana yard. It was brought there by the deadliest storm in Kentucky's history, which struck the western part of the state in the night and early morning hours of December 10 and 11. At least 77 people were killed in a series of tornadoes and more than 1,000 properties were destroyed. In Dawson Springs, home to about 2,500 people, 13 people were killed and an estimated 75% of the town was leveled.



**Graffiti reading D-Town Strong in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, on Thursday, April 20, 2022. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

## **Fall 2000**

**S**he was wearing an Adidas t-shirt and basketball shorts in the photo. Third from the left, in front, her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Vanessa Harper, an underclassman, was playing mallets, the instrument band instructor Andy Hall thought would be the best fit for her when she joined the band in fifth grade. She wanted the

flute or clarinet, “something girly”, a woodwind instrument, not percussion which was mostly drums and boys. That is what stands out in the picture; the majority of the students are boys. Vanessa’s brother Jeremy isn’t in the image. He played baritone. The photo is just the percussion section.

It was because of Jeremy that Vanessa joined the band. There isn’t much space between them, just one year and thirteen days. Their mom, Barbara Carter, had them when she was young and relied on her own mother to help raise them. When Barbara’s mother moved from Arizona to Dawson Springs, Barbara followed, bringing Jeremy and Vanessa with her.

Dawson Springs is too small to have a separate high school. There is just one K-12 school. Children start learning instruments in music class in fifth or sixth grade and playing in the beginners’ band soon after. The real band is the high school marching band, best known for its pep band performances at basketball games. There is no football team, which makes the Dawson Springs Panther Band unusual. Also atypical is how many students participate. According to music educators, you can count on about 10% of the student body taking part in the band. In Dawson Springs it is often more than 30%.

Still, marching in the annual Christmas and Veterans Day parades, taking part in competitions and concerts, and rallying the crowd at basketball games is not for everyone. Some of Vanessa’s friends dropped out. She stuck with it. She had never been good at art and the other electives offered. Playing the xylophone, marimba and bells was different. Despite her initial disappointment she liked using mallets to make music. By eighth grade she was hanging around the high school band as a member of the pit crew that helped set things up. The next year she was performing with them. She remembers the stadium being packed.

“Everybody’s there to see you play.” The nerves kick in. Then a thought: “I can do this.”

It was what she did every afternoon and Saturday mornings during band season: play the mallets. After practice Saturday they headed to marching band competitions where “band moms” served lunches of turkey, roast beef, ham, or peanut butter sandwiches and made sure their uniforms were in order. That wasn’t all the band was about though.



**From left, Dawson Springs High School band members Skye Bratcher, Mackenzie Creekmur, Jonathan Garrett, Eryn Sizemore, Austin McCutchen, Avery Buntin, Annabell Jarboe, and Samuel Adams pose for a photo amidst the area hit by the tornado in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, on Thursday, April 20, 2022. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

There was band camp and biennial spring break trips, including to Pensacola, Florida, one year. It was unseasonably cold that spring but Vanessa and the other teenagers wanted to jump in the ocean and begged and pleaded for an adult to accompany them. (They weren't allowed in without supervision.) Finally, Missy Johnson's mother agreed. She waded up to her ankles. The teenagers went neck deep.

It was the first time Vanessa had seen the ocean. Her mom was on disability and they couldn't afford big trips. Mr. Hall, the band instructor and music teacher, knew that. He held fundraisers throughout the year and let parents pay in installments.

"I know it seems really, really trivial when you look at it," Vanessa said. "But as a kid

growing up with nothing, being able to take trips like that was everything.”

The year the photo was taken the band was strong. The whole group in the picture was good, the kind of kids who came up with their own ideas and didn't just wait for Hall to lead them. Vanessa was a wonderful mallet player and another student, Brandon, made the All-State band, composed of the best high school band students in Kentucky.

His parents' home used to be next to Vanessa's. That is before the tornado destroyed it.

In the photo, Mr. Hall stands on a makeshift platform above everyone else, the top of his head just out of the frame. To his left is Lauren, also almost cut out of the picture. Her mom was a band mom. That is why Vanessa thinks the photo could have belonged to Lauren's mother. She was always taking pictures; her daughter is in the picture and the day before the photo landed in Indiana her home was destroyed.

## **December 10, 2021**

**S**he knew a storm was coming so Vanessa headed into work early that night. Nowadays, at 35, she is no longer a Harper but a Sizemore, married to James “Brian” Sizemore and a mother of five, including three stepchildren.

After high school, she played band in college for a bit but ended up coming home to attend community college and study nursing. She was almost done with her nursing education when a complicated pregnancy derailed her plans. She ended up becoming a medical laboratory technologist, running tests on blood and other bodily fluids.

It worked out better in the end. That's how Vanessa tends to look at things. Like being assigned a percussion instrument as a child and growing to like it, she made her new career work for her. She reminded herself that as a kid she wanted to work in a lab after watching scientists in the 1995 movie “Outbreak” work to control a lethal virus. Now she had that chance.

On the night of December 10, 2021, her husband Brian drove her to the hospital in nearby Madisonville where she works. They planned to do something together when she got off at

6:30am the next morning. When Brain got back to their home in Dawson Springs at 10:15 pm he texted her. A few minutes later Vanessa called him. She had been listening to the weather reports.

“Hey, you know, they’re saying it’s coming.”

She asked Brain to bring the kids – Camryn 17, Eryn 15, and Leland 11 – to the hospital to shelter in the basement. Brian didn’t think they had enough time to get there. It was already getting bad in Dawson Springs. He moved a mattress and the children to the hallway. Their mobile home doesn’t have a basement. There was nowhere else they could go.

Around 10:30 pm Vanessa texted him again asking that he come to the hospital.

Brian texted back. “We got hit.”

Then his phone went silent.

## **Andy Hall**

**T**he photo was taken at the practice field, the “band lot.” How it became known as that is “a story in itself” said Andy Hall. Before the band lot was built the band had to go downtown to practice. The kids with driver’s licenses would drive, while everyone else would walk, carting their instruments across the main highway to the baseball field in the center of town. Hall wanted something closer to the school and had his eye on a small, cleared portion of land next to the school that served as a parking space for a dozen or so cars. It was hilly and unpaved, just gravel.

**Former band director Andy Hall poses for a photo amidst the area hit by the tornado in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, on Thursday, April 20, 2022. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

In the mid-1990s a parent that worked at a coal mine got their company to use the equipment to level and pave the lot so it could fit more than a hundred cars, about 40 yards shy of an official football field. (The high school itself was basically just a separate building from the rest of the school.) With about 180 ninth through 12th graders there were usually only a few dozen cars parked in the lot. Those were mostly gone by the afternoon when the band practiced. No more treks across town and practices in the mud.

Five years or so later they had 57 or 58 members and were doing “really, really well.” At the time bands competed based on band size, not school size. Because the Panthers had a good-sized band, they competed against schools with student bodies of around 1,500. Bigger schools meant bigger budgets that could support multiple band directors.

The Panthers had only Andy Hall.

Size and moneywise said Hall, “we didn’t hold a candle to any of those people”.

But on the field, he added, “we were right there with them”. Around the time the photo was taken they won Reserve Grand Champion, the second-highest scoring band, at a competition. By then they were hauling their instruments in a 24-foot enclosed trailer. That trailer replaced a smaller 16-foot trailer which in turn replaced a pick-up truck with a camper shell.

The pickup truck was how the equipment was hauled when Hall first took the job in 1989. He had spent the previous seven years teaching music and band in Tennessee where he grew up not far from Nashville. He and his wife, Lee, were eager to experience small-town life.

Hall also remembered that in the 1960s and 70s the Panthers were “hot”. They were so “incredibly good” Hall was awed when he met their band director at a band event in Tennessee. The idea of following in the great director’s footsteps was part of the job’s appeal.

Except the legendary band director had been followed by quite a few other band directors before Hall arrived, the last two of which had been let go. Hall found every instrument in disrepair and an almost non-existent budget. Kids took band class not because they wanted to be part of something big but because they wanted time to study. That is what the class had become – a glorified study hall.

The high school band, even with the addition of eighth graders, numbered only 28. There were not enough students to play the instruments needed for the songs. There was no French horn. Other instruments were also lacking in numbers, making for poor instrumentation. Hall had to rewrite songs so they would sound somewhat like what the composer intended.

**Former band director Andy Hall poses for a photo amidst the area hit by the tornado in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, on Thursday, April 20, 2022. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

When he was first introduced to the school board, they had one question – could he teach the band to play the national anthem? Hall didn’t understand

the significance until it was explained to him that the band played the national anthem at the start of every basketball game. They were so bad people didn't recognize it. By the time basketball season rolled around that year the band's opening number was at least recognizable.

Before long the 28 band members turned into 40, then 44, and eventually 63. Along the way, Hall learned to discreetly loan certain students money when they stopped for food on trips. Sometimes they would pay him

back. Sometimes they wouldn't. A majority of the students were close to the poverty line, he said.

If the school didn't supply the instruments they wouldn't have been able to participate. There was no way all of them could pay for the overnight trips, yet Hall made it clear the trips were for everyone and used band funds to make that possible.

"We were pretty much broke all the time," he said. "But we always seem to come up with enough money to get us to where we're going."

He did it because he wanted them to feel what he had felt when participating in a

band.

“Maybe as an individual, I didn’t feel powerful,” he said. “But when I teamed up with those other people that were in the band, they made me feel much more powerful, like a much, much better person.”

The year after the photo was taken Hall and his wife adopted an 11-month-old girl from Russia. Mallory became a band regular, sitting in the shade under the xylophone or marimba, Vanessa’s instruments, on the days Hall brought her to practice.

### **December 10, 2021**

**I**t was 45 minutes before Vanessa heard from her husband again. The uncertainty was agonizing. As she tried to call and text Brian she told herself they were OK because she couldn’t deal with the alternative.

Her mother Barbara called her on Facebook Messenger.

“Nessa, my house is gone,” said Barbara. “My whole house is gone.”

**Crosses in front of a destroyed home in Dawson Springs, Kentucky. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

Then she told Vanessa something even worse. Vanessa's brother Jeremy was missing. Vanessa tried calling 911 but couldn't get through. Her mom also couldn't reach anyone in emergency services. Barbara searched what was left of her mobile home, where she and Jeremy had been just a few minutes before. A huge tree had fallen on it, anchoring it to the ground. Furniture and household items began to topple, landing on Jeremy and pinning him down.

When Brian finally texted that he and the kids were OK, Vanessa sent him to search for Jeremy. He was turned away by emergency workers who promised to dig Jeremy out. It took three hours to free him. He was all right.

When Vanessa got off work her coworker drove her home. "There were so many gas leaks

like you could literally hear the gas hissing from the ground,” she says.

She had to climb over a downed tree to reach her driveway. The four cars parked there were totaled, crushed by the tree. Vanessa borrowed a relative’s car and headed to Missy Johnson’s home, where her mother and brother had found shelter; the same Missy Johnson whose mother had gotten in the water with them in Florida during the band trip decades before. From her mother’s mobile home Vanessa managed to save quite a lot.

“I say a lot, but everything that my mom owned fit in the back of my SUV,” she said. “And I mean, to me, that was a lot compared to a lot of the people around her that lost everything.”

Her grandmother was among those unfortunate people. She had been staying somewhere else that night but the mobile home where she used to live was totaled. Nearby, another one she used for storage was wrapped around a tree. Until a few years ago that was where Vanessa and her family lived. Looking at the way the trailer had been tied almost in a bow she knew that had they still been living there they would be dead.

“It was just devastating to see everything,” said Vanessa. “I mean, it didn’t look like a tornado, it looked like a bomb.”

Unrecognizable. That is how Hall, now 62 and retired, described it.

“There were no landmarks to tell you where you were, that you’re at a certain street and that there had been all these houses.”

There was nothing, he said, “just debris everywhere”. From the tops of Dawson Springs rolling hills you used to be able to see a ways out, but not terribly far. Now you can see almost into the middle of town.

“That would have been a sight you never would have seen because there was just so many things that were there that, you know, suddenly were not there,” said Hall.

The baseball field where the band practiced when Hall first arrived in town is now just bare earth. He was luckier with his home. He lives in the country a few miles outside of town and

spent the tornado in the bathtub with Lee and Mallory and a weather radio. In the bathroom with them were Mabel the dog and the cats, Beauty and Charlie. They all survived; so did their home.

Also spared was Travis Vincent's home in Beulah, officially a Dawson Springs address. Vanessa remembers Travis as outgoing.

In the photo they are standing next to each other.

## **Travis Vincent**

**T**ravis started attending the Dawson Springs school in fifth grade, the same year his father Ronnie bought a car wash in town. He joined the band so he could play the drums. Baseball was his preferred pastime, but the band had its perks. They were always traveling somewhere: competing, taking a trip.

Like Vanessa, he remembers Florida and Mr. Hall.

“He was probably one of the best things about the band,” said Travis.

Hall was an all-around good person who cared not just about one individual or a few people in the band, but everyone. He also did everything. He taught them the music and choreographed the steps they took to make formations, or what Travis calls “pictures.” It was Hall that switched Travis to a set of five mounted drums his sophomore year after the previous player graduated.

That is what Travis is playing in the picture. He is in the back, barely visible.

They marched in the rain, even the snow one time. Just before Christmas, they held their biggest fundraiser. Travis' mom was a band mom who made almost every event and continued to do so when her grandchildren joined the band. Travis' son Ethan, now in college, played trombone before focusing on

academics. His younger son Elly is in seventh grade and still participates in band but he isn't a Panther, he goes to a different school.

The mascot is what the family car wash is named after – the Panther Wash. Travis and his two older brothers inherited it from their father the year before the tornado struck. It had three quarter slot bays and one new automatic wash Ronnie had just paid off before he passed away.

**Streets marked by spray paint in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, on Thursday, April 20, 2022. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

Travis' middle brother Brandon (not the student who made the All-State band from the photograph) handled the books. Travis took care of large maintenance projects and Gary, the oldest, took care of day-to-day supervision. It was Gary who texted Travis a picture of the Panther Wash after the tornado struck. It was dark and dim and Travis had to zoom in to see anything.

“The only thing standing at the carwash is the four walls and Dr. Pepper machine and the rest of our car wash had been blown down.”

Travis is 37, and wears a beard and baseball cap. It took him several hours to reach the wash. Almost every entrance to Dawson Springs has a bridge: one over

the parkway, another over the train tracks. They were all blocked by law enforcement who let vehicles through one at a time. Once over the bridge, Travis didn't see anything for a mile or so until he came around the corner by the cemetery and saw "nothing but destruction".

Toothpicks, that's what the debris that had once been homes, businesses, and other structures looked like. Travis had to park up the road from the carwash and walk the rest of the way. His girlfriend helped him empty out the quarters. He says insurance will pay for about half of what it would cost to rebuild the Panther Wash.

### **Jennifer Fox**

**M**ost of the instruments survived said current band director Jennifer Fox. The homes did not. She names out loud the children who lost homes. Six members of the high school band and even more among the middle schoolers. It came as a surprise to Fox when a few recounted what they saved.

"Some of them told me, 'you know, we grabbed our instrument, when the siren went off and held it with us as the tornado went by,'" she said.

Most of the instruments were at the school in preparation for a weekend performance. The school survived the storm intact. The program took a harder hit. It was already struggling.

In 2019 Hall retired and Fox took over. Her music and Dawson Springs credentials are solid. She was teaching band in New York when she met and later married Allen Fox, a member of the Panther Band in 2000. Before replacing Hall, she helped him with summer band camps. She still calls him regularly for advice.

**Former band director Andy Hall poses for a photo with current band director Jennifer Fox in the bar room of Dawson Springs High School in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, on Thursday, April 20, 2022. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

Hall is not all the program lost. Critical fundraisers have been cut and the school schedule that includes band class changed. What was relatively recently a band of 50 is now 32. For most events, they are down at least three to five students, a lot considering how small the band is. They lack low bass: trombones, baritones, tubas. The woodwind section is in good shape; that is where Vanessa's two daughters fit in; they both play the instrument she always wanted to learn – the clarinet. Percussion, her old group, is small. Though there are quite a few kids coming up from middle school; kids who will beat their drums and mallets in the same parking lot Vanessa and Travis beat theirs.

The current band even made it back to Florida this year, traveling to Panama City Beach. Like under Mr. Hall, everyone was welcome regardless of their ability to pay.

After Florida, Travis never went on another band trip. He dropped out of school the next year after fathering a kid. He took a job in construction. When the

tornado struck, he was working in a scrapyard. A few months later he was digging graves. The destruction of his dad's business left Travis with the chance to start his own project. He plans to use his share of the insurance money to bring Dawson Springs two things it is currently missing, a car wash and laundromat – in one business.

The town is also missing the band photo.

The homeowner who found it posted it in an online forum for lost and found items set up after the tornado. Vanessa saw it while searching for a photo of her great uncle that had been lost. Travis wrote the names of everyone in the comments section. Mallory Hall, who is about to be married, showed it to her father.

Andy Hall found the photo both interesting and sad. Interesting because of how far it had traveled, and sad because it “was probably in somebody's house in Dawson Springs and now their house is probably gone.”

**Dawson Springs High School band director Jennifer Fox amidst the area hit by the tornado in Dawson Springs, Kentucky. (Photo by Austin Anthony for The Daily Yonder)**

Travis thinks it may have been in the storage units that were leveled. He doesn't remember the band ever traveling as far as New Albany, Indiana, for a competition. But the band and Dawson Springs made it far in other ways. Former governor Steve Beshear, the father of the current governor Andy Beshear, grew up in Dawson Springs and played trombone in the band. And now the photo whose owner never came forward to request its return is tucked away in New Albany amongst another family's memories.

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