Leading Up to Moore Service, Florists Spring to Action

By Mary Westbrook

The historic tornado that devastated Moore, Okla., last week brought about a situation familiar already to florists in places like Boston, Newtown, Conn., and nearby Oklahoma City: a feeling of anguish, followed by the impulse to help and then a frantic rush to contribute, meaningfully, to a community’s recovery and victims’ memorials.

Within hours of the storm, Marie Ackerman, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, Teleflora’s vice president of education, started fielding calls from industry members eager to help. Questions came rapid fire: What can we do? Who needs product? Anyone need design space? Based on her experiences with the 1995 bombings in Oklahoma City, Ackerman knew the industry needed a plan – and a leader – to coordinate its response; otherwise, flowers would go to waste and important events would fall through the cracks.

And so last Wednesday, Ackerman joined two Teleflora colleagues at a five-hour planning meeting for Moore’s citywide Tornado Memorial Service, to be held on Sunday. The meeting included representatives from all sectors – transportation, security, government officials. Ackerman and her peers quickly became “the flower people.” They wanted to keep flowers “front and center” for the event and they didn’t waste time. Before the meeting and during lulls in conversations, they quickly measured the sanctuary of the church that would host the memorial and cast their eyes around,
searching for prominent, camera-friendly places to set up arrangements during the televised service. It wasn't a self-serving effort.

“I knew that people would need something to focus on, visually, during the service,” Ackerman said. “Flowers bring hope.”

Hope was something Ackerman and her colleagues nearly lost on Wednesday, when another planning member, worried that the service would seem “too funeral like” suggested cutting flowers entirely. Thankfully, Ackerman is an experienced florist, accustomed to brides who don’t want “bridal flowers” and sweethearts who shun reds and pinks. If the group didn’t want “funeral flowers,” she would assemble a team to create designs that celebrated life and community. The committee agreed. Flowers stayed in the plan.

After a final, marathon planning meeting on Thursday (the president’s visit to the area added even more logistical considerations to the mix), the design team – 75 florists assembled with the help of state associations, including the Oklahoma State Florists' Association, Texas State Florists' Association and Arkansas Florists Association – sprang into action and the floodgates of donated product from growers came in with the assistance of industry transportation companies and area wholesalers.
“Once we had an event to focus on, everyone came together to do what they do best,” Ackerman said.

Working out of Greenleaf Wholesale Florist in Oklahoma City, the florists got to work. Ackerman served as the benevolent leader – pushing the most experienced volunteers toward the more intricate designs, including a pave-style design of white hydrangeas and lilies with a pop of chartreuse foliage that would hang, garland-style, from the choir rail. (“I’d say, ‘You do a lot of wedding work? Great! Come with me,’” Ackerman said. “I think some people were probably like, ‘Who is this lady?’”)

In addition to designs for the main church and two satellite locations, there were roses to process – 5,000, or one rose each for all of the expected attendees – and gerberas to prep for the 100 children who would sing a moving rendition of “Jesus Loves Me.” The gerberas were Ackerman’s idea. On Wednesday, the planning committee was struggling with how to keep the kids calm during a teacher’s moving speech about how the tornado bore down on a local school. One person suggested musical instruments (too loud, the group decided) and then Ackerman said gerberas. Photos of the children grasping the flowers have become among the most published image from the event.

Egos had to be set aside. Celebrated designers stripped flowers and lugged buckets. Team members who handed out roses told community members the flowers were from “the floral industry and the florists of Oklahoma.” The community was together, and so
was the floral industry. Ackerman worried briefly that people would chafe at her leadership role – but someone had to step forward and direct. At one point, she feared the choir rail garland would have to be jettisoned – too much work on the tight timeline – but a group of 15 designers rallied to get the work done, and at the service it seemed effervescent, hanging by the choir and the orchestra, music and flowers together.

Heavenly. Perfect.

During the service, the design team members’ phones began to buzz as friends and colleagues saw their hard work on camera. “Wow!” read the texts and emails. “Great work.” But after a heady week of exhausting work, many of the florists, including Ackerman, were suddenly in a different place, not florists, but grieving community members seated next to families who had lost loved ones – who had lost everything. It made the pain real, Ackerman said, who was happy herself to have flowers to focus on.

Even then the work wasn’t finished. The gathered florists already had moved on to 200 additional designs that would never be seen by the cameras. With product they couldn’t use in memorial designs, the florists created thank-you arrangements, get-well designs – happy concoctions to cheer a beleaguered and grieving place – and delivered them to lesser-known areas...hospitals and food stations, even a FEMA office, where a flummoxed official asked, “Who are those for?” Ackerman said, relating a story from a team member.
“They’re for you,” one florist said.

“But we weren’t affected by the storm,” the official said.

“The heck you weren’t,” the florist said.

Then the team took off, ready to deliver the next arrangement, determined to get back to the design center at Greenleaf and finish the task of cleaning up, doing, as it turned out, what the industry does best.