



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

# Long live Berry's trees

**O**N APRIL 27, A LIGHT RAIN HAD JUST STARTED FALLING ON AN OTHERWISE TYPICAL WEDNESDAY MORNING. At 8:32, the wind gusted a bit, and then suddenly, without warning, branches began to snap and fly. Intense winds from the south blasted through the Berry campus and surrounding communities at tree-top level, snapping 60-foot pine trees in half like toothpicks and toppling massive 80-year-old oak trees from the roots up.

In less than three minutes, many hundreds of majestic trees were felled on the main campus, at the Virginia Webb House (the president's home) and at Oak Hill, as well as in adjacent fields and pastures. Particularly salient was the loss of the regal "graduation tree," the magnificent willow oak that presided over Berry's commencement in recent decades. Based on an initial aerial survey, thousands of pine and hardwood trees were also downed in the Berry forests.

At 8:35, the light rain continued with a mild wind. By 9:15 the skies were clearing and the morning was eerily calm and pretty.

Given the storm's abruptness and severity, it is astounding that no one on campus was injured and that no major buildings were damaged. Dorothy Cottage, which served as a residence hall for 16 students until December 2010, was badly damaged but vacant. Staff families residing in Julia Cottage escaped injury despite two large pine trees falling through the second story; trees fell on several other campus homes as well. Large

oaks came down alongside the Child Development Center, but children and teachers were safe and sound. The main campus walks were littered with trees, but no pedestrians were hit. Fifteen parked cars were destroyed, and all access roads were blocked by multiple trees, but no occupied cars were hit. One Black Angus cow was mortally injured by a falling limb in a pasture.

We know that our good fortune is not to be taken for granted and not something we earned. Surely, tragedy could have struck at Berry as readily as it did in the nearby communities of Ringgold and Cave Spring or in Tuscaloosa, Ala. God's providence occurs both in the midst of storms and in the aftermath; no matter how tragic, it is right to give thanks. In this case, we are grateful and humbled that we could smile in the midst of our massive clean-up.

Students today give "props" (apparently short for "proper respect") for an act worth recognizing. Many props were deserved in the 36 hours following the storm. Our main entrance was cleared immediately by our grounds crew. The stretch road was soon cleared by the joint efforts of grounds, land management and WinShape crews. Within the first hour, several of our long-term service providers arrived with heavy equipment (cranes, bucket trucks, etc.) to assist campus teams with triage (in this case, tree-age) efforts. Campus safety officers closed Berry's campus to the public to ensure the well-being of the work teams. By early afternoon, crews



Photos by Alan Storey

had stabilized the most damaged areas.

The campus was without electrical power for approximately 28 hours. Our electrical crew was able to identify and repair damage to all major campus lines while Georgia Power was working on downed transmission poles along Redmond Road, as well as many other locations. Meanwhile, even without power, Aramark Dining Services provided more than 1,500 meals at lunch and dinner as well as brunch the next day. End-of-the-month payroll was processed using a crisis computer room powered by gas generators. Residence life and campus safety staff prepared students for the high threat of tornados that evening. Physical plant crews remained on campus until after 1 a.m. Thursday morning, when it was clear that the storm danger had passed. In true Berry spirit, classes resumed Thursday morning, even before power was restored, to prepare for



Above, workers on the Memorial Library lawn are dwarfed by the remains of the "graduation tree," a mammoth oak brought down by the April 27 storm that struck the Berry campus. Inset, from left, Dr. Cathy Borer, assistant professor of biology, uses the storm as a learning opportunity for her students; damage to Julia Cottage; students pitch in with cleanup efforts. Top left, a plaque mounted on a damaged tree outside Jewel Cottage reminds us of the beauty and majesty of all trees, those lost and the many more that still remain.

final exams. That evening, 200 students went ahead with a scheduled "quidditch" tournament on the intramural fields. Friday, April 29th, was National Arbor Day.

So while we regret the loss of many of our beloved and stately trees, we are reminded again that our campus is a special place. It is a community with a can-do spirit, where staff and students alike demonstrate ownership – of their job, their team, the campus, and Berry's vision and values. In the midst of a crisis, people ran toward the problem and took initiative that also promoted our

collective safety. Throughout Wednesday and Thursday, hundreds of students and staff lent a hand in small and individual ways that altogether made a substantial difference. Then, on Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., the weekend before final exams, Berry students gathered for a campuswide cleanup.

We wish that our majestic legacy trees could last forever. Many were planted to honor significant people in Berry's history. But such trees are not statues – they are living monuments that have a life cycle in the same way as did the people they

commemorate. As these trees pass, it is important to plant new trees to stand in their place, to grow and mature and grace our campus over time. In the same way, we need for this generation of students to grow and mature and grace our communities and nation over time. We also need faculty and staff who believe in the vision and purpose of Berry, and we need a new generation of benefactors for us to honor and commemorate.

God bless the students, faculty, staff, benefactors and trees of Berry! **B**