

COMBERMERE *Tornado**Transformed by a tornado*

BY BRENDA MISSEN

It was the pines that drew me — seven years ago — to Combermere. There were the sparkling Madawaska waters, too, of course, and the rounded outcroppings of Shield. But those rare majestic white pines, the real forefathers of Combermere, were a major draw.

Four years ago, when I bought the property I previously had been renting, I was happy to become the official custodian of four towering white pines. But if I didn't — couldn't ever — have enough white pines on my own property, they were always just up the road in the village, particularly in a lush grove at the intersection of Highway 62 and County Road 515. The pine grove on that corner defined Combermere, and home, for me.

It's true that Combermere has been perhaps more about landscape for me than community. As a self-employed writer, working out of my home and living on my own, with no children, and not being a church goer, I haven't had the usual means of becoming involved or known in the community through work, church or school. It's also my nature to be content to stay mostly on the edge, occasionally joining in.

But last week things changed.

The sight that greeted my eyes on Thursday, August 3 at the corner of 515 and 62 was shocking and disorienting. Where there should have been a high, familiar, expansive velvet-green canopy marking the corner, there was open sky jaggedly framed by spike-topped trunks of trees that had been snapped in two. Below, the ground was obliterated by a tangle of branches and logs. An unnaturally potent scent of pine filled the air.

I cried all the way to Barry's Bay. On my return, though I am not one to gawk, I did park my car near the intersection and, like so many others, walked past the traffic blockade. I needed to see what had happened to my village and the people in it.

What I saw stunned and saddened me, but also filled me with amazement and gratitude because no one had been killed or even seriously injured.

I would have liked to help in the clean-up, but a rotator cuff injury prevented me from offering the obvious physical assistance. So I went back to my untouched home just a few kilometres downriver, and back to work on my laptop on battery power until the hydro was restored that evening.

I was, in fact, disappointed the power came back on so soon. Without hydro, I was connected, in some small way, to what was happening in Combermere. If I couldn't help physically, I could at least stay mindful. With the power on it was too easy to carry on business as usual.

It wasn't until Friday that I heard about the command/relief centre that had been set up at the recreation hall. Here, at last, was something I could do. For the next four days I joined others in making sandwiches, serving meals, keeping coolers stocked with donated ice and beverages, and staffing the volunteer sign-in/information desk.

And I bore witness to the incredible coming together of a community, a township, and businesses and individuals from near and far. I watched dozens of volunteers sign in each day and be sent out to the properties in need of brush clearing. I watched armloads, even truckloads, of donated food and bottled water and hot meals pour in, day after day. I watched members of local churches work long hours to coordinate meals and food. I watched Hydro workers, volunteers, Madawaska Valley Township roads crews, and those still without power stream in to eat the plentiful feasts. I watched volunteers load up sandwiches and bottled water to take out to crews working through the heat of the day. I watched friend comfort friend and stranger comfort stranger. I watched representatives of the township, OPP, fire and ambulance take long shifts to keep the centre open and assistance at the ready. And I watched the phenomenal organization and leadership of the township that underpinned the whole relief effort.

In a largely unobserved but quietly affecting moment, I also watched a 12-year-old girl and her mother present an Ottawa Hydro worker with two beaded bracelet/necklace sets they had made for him to take home to his daughters because he couldn't find any souvenirs of Combermere in town. The bracelets bore the daughters' names and the neck-



Heather Kendall photo

Mangled pines left standing around a home on Farmer Road in Combermere after the tornado. "What I saw stunned and saddened me," writer Brenda Missen says of the destruction in her adopted home.



The remains of many fine trees are piled in the Radcliffe Number 2 yard this week during the cleanup effort.

laces spelled out "Combermere." I heard the girl's plans to make a third set that evening at the request of another Hydro worker.

But I was not allowed simply to bear witness and lend a hand. As I watched this small, caring community reaching out to both those in need and those who had come to help, I felt myself pulled in, too.

Over the four days that I was able to assist in a minor way, I met more of my neighbours and community than I've met in the past seven years; put names to faces and personalities to names. Working, and laughing, and in the odd moment shedding tears, in an intense environment with the

same group of wonderful people, day after day, a rapport was built. The people of Combermere may not realize it, but during the incredible effort they put forth, they not only wove the patchwork quilt of their community a little more tightly, they also added a new patch to the quilt - stitched her in with their love and caring, their welcoming smiles and teasing conversation.

I still cry when I pass "my" corner at 515 and 62. The grass is rapidly becoming a cleared meadow. But the trees, I know, will grow back in years to come. In the meantime, in the opening, I've found an exceptional community, right next door.