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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARYANN BATES



# After the Storm

## Carol's Linens reopens after five-month whirlwind

Everyone remembers what they were doing that early morning of May 11, 2008, when the sirens blared their shrill warning. Everyone has their story about the Mother's Day tornado because tens of thousands of people went without power, thousands of trees were felled and hundreds of homes and businesses were damaged. Carol's Linens, a Macon icon for more than 30 years, was one of the most heavily damaged businesses. This is, however, not a story of devastation, but of determination.

### Mother's Day

When the sirens sounded in those dark hours just before dawn, Carol Kaplan woke her 6-year-old granddaughter, Sophie, and they dutifully went to the basement. Carol didn't worry because the sirens had gone off so many times without tornadoes materializing. When it was safe to return to bed, they did so and slept peacefully.

Later that morning, Kaplan was making pancakes for Sophie's breakfast as she always did when her granddaughter spent the night. She hadn't turned on a television or radio yet, but she could have if she wished. Ironically, her neighborhood had electricity when so much of the city didn't. But just a few miles away, her store was in ruins. Kaplan had no idea there had been a tor-

nado until a friend called at 8:15 a.m. with the news that it had traveled down Eisenhower Parkway and had ripped through her building.

In spite of the warnings to stay off the roads because of downed power lines, Kaplan and her son-in-law, Drew Denisar, drove to the store. The sight was heartbreaking, but she kept her composure. Her first thought was how to secure the building so they wouldn't have to spend the night guarding the merchandise. Her next thought was gratitude.

"From the time I drove up in the parking lot, I never approached this as a tragedy," Kaplan explained. "I was grateful that no employees or customers were here when it happened and no one was hurt. We lost nothing that was not replaceable."

Tears are not Kaplan's style. She learned a lesson from a friend's mother years ago that she has never forgotten. The mother was a Holocaust survivor, and she had a saying, "Don't cry over anything that can't cry over you."

### The Cleanup

The first thing Kaplan and her staff had to do was to call their vendors to stop all shipments and explain that orders would have to be canceled or held indefinitely because of the tornado.

"I told them they would receive payment, but I couldn't tell them when," she said. "They were willing to work with us on terms because they trusted me. I haven't been in business for 31 years without paying my bills."

The next step was cleanup and the insurance assessment. Even though some of the inventory hadn't been directly hit, all of it had been affected by dust and debris. The insurance company took the entire inventory, but they wanted it boxed up and ready for shipment.

"It was a sad day when the last truck pulled out with the merchandise. There was nothing in the store. It looked so big and cold," she said. "A little part of me rolled away with that truck."

It took Kaplan and her staff until the end of May to clear out the building and pack up the inventory. During that time, they were overwhelmed with support from the community. Friends, family and customers brought lunch, drinks, flashlights and even a generator. The phone calls and e-mails were so numerous that Kaplan's daughter, Jenna Denisar, set up a separate e-mail address, carolstornado@aol.com, to handle the extra inquiries.

### Rebuilding

While the construction crew repaired the building, Kaplan and her staff had to purchase all-new inventory. Changing a couple of beds to display new merchandise was normal, everyday work, but starting from nothing was mind-boggling. They had to design 35 vignettes, each with a bed, tables, window treatments, rugs, pillows, lamps and artwork. In addition to making the purchases, they had to coordinate shipments so that the merchandise didn't come before the repairs were completed but also in time to be assembled for the reopening.

"It wasn't just a series of steps that we had to go through. It was choreography,"



Kaplan said.

Of course there were problems. Kaplan had been in business long enough to anticipate most of them, but some were beyond her experience. For instance, the Olympics in China were a big factor in late shipments and canceled orders.

"What has the Summer Olympics in Beijing got to do with me in Macon, Georgia?" Kaplan asked. "A lot, it seemed."

China had shut down manufacturing facilities to reduce air pollution before and during the Olympics. One of the factories couldn't ship its merchandise because there was a shortage of cardboard boxes for packaging. Kaplan had to rethink many of her orders and choose different items.

Another challenge was the physical labor involved in setting up the displays. It's typical when redecorating to try furniture in different spots until it works. Kaplan and her staff had 35 beds and, yes, they had to rearrange things more than once. A good example of the magnitude of their work was curtain rods. They had to figure how many they needed, what sizes were required and where they would go before they could hang them.

"Our customers tell us that hanging curtain rods is something that can cause a divorce," Kaplan said, laughing. "We had to hang 150 of them."

### Reopening

On Oct. 15 everything was finally ready. More than 750 people came

through the store in the first 10 days of its reopening, and their comments were heartwarming and inspiring. Countless customers thanked Kaplan and her staff for reopening.

"One customer told us that she had moved into a new house just before the tornado," Brenda Turetsky, Kaplan's sister and staff member, said. "She needed window treatments but had waited five months for us to reopen before buying them."

"A customer from Vidalia was in Macon for a doctor's appointment, but she didn't have much time before she had to return home. She told her doctor that she had to stop by Carol's Linens before she left town, and he rushed her through so she could," said Kaplan.

Some business owners might have made the decision to close permanently after such devastation, but not Kaplan.

"The outpouring of support was amazing and reopening has been like a family reunion with our customers," she said. "I think that was why it never occurred to me to close."

Reopening in only five months was a tremendous accomplishment. It was only at the end of the process that Kaplan fully realized what she and her staff had achieved in such a short time.

"It hit me on October 15th, when I walked in and saw everything done," Kaplan said. "If anyone had shown me this empty building and said, 'you have to open a new business in five months,' I would have thought it nearly impossible." **M**