

Beauregard teaching intern feels tornado loss through students



An Auburn University student and Beauregard Elementary School intern said the EF-4 Lee County tornado reminded her to love on her students every day.

Jessica Bilek is a senior graduating in May 2019 from Auburn University with a degree in early childhood education. She is from Birmingham, Alabama, and spends her days interning at Beauregard Elementary School. During the week, Bilek helps kindergartners with calendar studies, reading, study centers and math.

Bilek said that growing up in Birmingham she only experienced a few tornadoes. "I would always downplay potential tornadoes. I never knew how bad they could be," she said.

That's why, despite tornado watches, she was taking a nap March 3 when the EF-4 tornado hit, killing 23 people and injuring 90.

Later that night, Bilek's mom and a friend at the school told her the tornado hit Beauregard. She found out her teacher's house got hit as well.

"The top left of her house was damaged," Bilek said.

On March 4, the day after the tornado struck, Bilek went to school and experienced the aftermath of emotions.

"They were all so upset. It made me cry when I found out about the students who were affected," Bilek said.

Only one of Bilek's kindergarten students was affected by the tornado, but a first and third-grader died, and one student is badly injured. According to Bilek, a tree went through the kindergartner's kitchen, so

she and her family had to move. The injured student's mom, best friend and step-dad died during the tornado.

Later that Monday, Bilek went to help out and see the destruction from the tornado. She said the tornado-stricken community looked like "another planet."

"Being in the community helped me visualize where the children live or used to live," Bilek said.

According to Bilek, many teachers and staff members at the school went to help serve the community.

"A substitute teacher is still going out in the community looking for things. She found one of the tornado victim's library book in the rubble," Bilek said.

Bilek mentioned how she came across a mobile home with a Beauregard student sitting in front of the home with her mother and father. The little girl was not at school the day after the tornado. She went up to the little girl, hugged her, and told her she missed her.

"It's been about a month since the tornado hit, and the children are doing much better. One of our students slept during circle time the week after, but now she is doing well," Bilek said.

"Beauregard Strong means a whole community coming together for the greater good. It exemplifies the children who went through the most horrible times in their lives, came back the next week, and were strong for the teachers and the whole community," Bilek said.

Bilek says the disaster impacted her life and taught her to love on the children every single day.