



*AFTER A DEVASTATING FLOOD IN BATON ROUGE, LA., DESTROYED THE 63-YEAR-OLD **NAYLOR'S HARDWARE & GARDEN CENTER** IN AUGUST, THE OWNER AND LONGTIME STAFF WERE FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE. THAT'S WHEN **CLEGG'S NURSERY** STEPPED IN.*

By Michelle Simakis

**W**hen Johnny Naylor first arrived to his store in Baton Rouge, La., after the floodwater receded, he reached into his pocket for the key to unlock the door, like he's done most days since he opened that location in 1983.

As he held up the key, he got a closer look at the damage from the flood — cracked and crumbling walls, a compromised foundation and shattered windows. The sales counter had floated and was blocking the main entrance, and he realized he didn't need a key. He pushed a portion of an outside brick wall down, ducked under framework left above and braced himself for what he was about to see.

Louisiana has a long history of flooding, but what happened in mid-August was not normal. Twenty parishes were declared federal disaster areas, places that had not flooded before did, and, although figures vary, state damage estimates alone are upwards of \$8 billion. The flood has been described in many ways: a 1,000-year flood, a historic flood and a deadly flood, as it took 13 lives. The Red Cross calls it the worst natural disaster to hit the U.S. since Hurricane Sandy. For Naylor, owner of Naylor's Hardware & Garden Center, a business his dad started the year Johnny was born, it was an unfortunate exit strategy. He thought it was the end of his career.

Longtime friend and customer Phil Moser happened to stop by to check in on the store as Naylor was assessing his

business for the first time. Naylor couldn't get within two miles of his store for three days after the flood because the water was too high and roads were closed. The power was out, so they walked through the dim store carefully. The floor was caked with mud, covered in broken light bulbs and littered with spray paint cans, torn open bags of fertilizer, seeds and other products the family-owned business carried. Moser asked Naylor if he was going to reopen.

"Johnny laughed and said, 'I'm done. This is it.' I was stunned to hear that because I've been dealing with Naylor's for over 50 years," says Moser, who frequented the original store Johnny's dad opened, Naylor Brothers Hardware on Government Street, when he was a kid. Now a landscape architect, he bought supplies and plants from Naylor's. "He had this look on his face, like, 'What the hell happened here.'"

Starting over was not an option for 63-year-old Naylor. "That was my retirement that went under water," Naylor says. "I'm a little too old to start over. I don't have [flood] insurance, just not enough energy, not enough money and not enough time left to start over. When I first walked into that store and looked around, I realized I was unemployed."

Water rose more than 5-and-a-half feet in the store.

"What was above my nose still sitting on the shelf was salvageable," Naylor says. "Everything else below my nose was either hanging on a hook soaking wet or laying on the



From left: Shirley Drewes, Butch Drewes and Johnny Naylor of Naylor's Hardware & Garden Center; Tom Fennell and Scott Ricca, co-owners of Clegg's Nursery.

OPPOSITE PHOTO: ROMERO & ROMERO PHOTOGRAPHY / FLOOD PHOTO: PHILIP MOSER

**'PROUD to PARTNER'**



Naylor's Hardware & Garden Center retained 5 feet of water in the August 2016 flood, destroying the store and ruining at least 80 percent of the inventory.





The August flood in Louisiana was known as a “1,000-year-flood” because of the small chance a flood of that severity will happen. More than 100,000 homes were damaged, and many people lost their cars.

floor. We sold bulk grass seed ... and they had just spread out all over the floor and were germinating. [My daughter] said that the floor looked like a giant Chia Pet.”

Naylor estimates that 80 percent of his inventory was ruined by the rushing waters from the Amite and Comite rivers, two of several that swelled and deluged the area. Estimates vary, but according to state officials, 110,000 homes were damaged by the flood. Naylor’s store happened to be in East Baton Rouge Parish, one of

the hardest hit areas. Antique furniture, plush recliners, bedding, clothes and more floated everywhere, and once the waters cleared, piles of debris, some as high as 6 feet, were stacked on streets and lawns. Moser said some of these “mountains of trash” were so high you couldn’t see the homes behind them.

The disaster is being called a 1,000-year flood because in any given year, there is only a .1 percent chance of an event of that severity happening. Naylor had seen

a 100-year flood in his lifetime in 1983 — and his business didn’t flood — but nothing like what August 2016 brought. Twenty to more than 30 inches of rain fell in certain areas, and all-time flood levels were shattered, as rivers rose 5 to 6 feet above previous records.

Most everything went under the indiscriminating waters. Cash registers, computers, a forklift, a Bobcat.

“Out of \$170,000 to \$180,000 worth of inventory, without even counting the plants, I may have salvaged \$10,000 or \$15,000 out of it. Maybe,” Naylor says. “The vegetable plants in the greenhouse, it was kind of strange. The water went in, the benches floated, and they just sat right back down. They were little catawampus, but I don’t think we lost a thing that was in [the greenhouse].”

That’s one reason Naylor considers himself lucky. He was known for his specialty vegetable plants and seed, which he has cultivated and perfected for 40 years in his home trial garden.

“We had 2, 3,000-square-foot greenhouses, and all we grew is our vegetable plants. That was one of those little things we were known for,” says Naylor, who has a horticulture degree. “It was a service to the community because you just couldn’t buy [those vegetables] anywhere.”

Another reason he said he felt blessed is that his house was spared.

“I’d much rather lose my business than lose my home. I still had my house, my vehicles, which a lot of people lost,” he says. “I had my wife, my life. I figured I was in pretty good shape.”

Little did he know that he also had Tom Fennell.



Outside inventory at Naylor’s Hardware & Garden Center was destroyed, but vegetable plants in the greenhouse survived the flood.



### An unexpected opportunity

When you talk to Fennell, who owns the nearby Clegg's Nursery, Naylor, or Butch Drewes, longtime manager of Naylor's, they'll all explain that the two independent garden center businesses were never competitors. They call themselves friends, even though Clegg's four stores surrounded Johnny Naylor's old business, with most less than a 15-minute drive away from Naylor's. Drewes and Clegg's co-owner Scott Ricca have also co-hosted a radio show together for nearly 15 years. Before they worked for Naylor's, Drewes and his wife, Shirley, started their careers at Clegg's.

"If somebody came in looking for something we didn't have, the first place we'd send them is Clegg's," Naylor says. "They'd do the same thing. If customers came to Clegg's looking for specific vegetables, they'd send them to me. We shared customers."

Clegg's is known for its landscape plants and color, while Naylor's was always known for its hardware department, vegetables and bulk seed.

Perhaps it's not so surprising then what happened after the flood.

Fennell first saw the extent of the damage at Naylor's on Facebook, and he was concerned. Two of the Clegg's stores were hit hard, resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost inventory, but they were able to reopen two days after the flood.

A few days after the flood, Fennell called Drewes to check on him, and Drewes said Naylor's was closing for good.

"I was reaching out as a friend at first, but when I found out they were closing, I said, 'No. We've got to figure this out,'" Fennell says. He asked Drewes to meet with him at one of the Clegg's stores.

Drewes' house was still surrounded by waist-deep water, so when he finally arrived, he was wet and muddy from wading through water to get to his truck.

"And at that point [Fennell] said, 'You don't have a place to go back to. I need you to work with Johnny and do whatever you need to do with him to get that store secured,'" Drewes says.

After talking with Drewes, Fennell reached out to Naylor.



Above: Two Baton Rouge IGCs were impacted by the flood. Clegg's Nursery lost a significant amount of inventory at two stores, while Naylor's lost its building. Although their stores were close in proximity, they called themselves friends and shared customers.



Clegg's Nursery promotes its new partnership with Naylor's.



Johnny Naylor assesses his store for the first time after the flood.

"There was no going forward with [Naylor's]," Naylor says. "Tom called, and he was the one who suggested [a partnership]. He said, 'I've got a building with nothing to sell and you've got stuff that we can bring in and sell but no building.'"

Fennell could reopen his stores, and Naylor could salvage his products and sell what he had left. Naylor asked what exactly Fennell had in mind. He said he didn't have "a clue," but he knew that the community could not lose Naylor's.

"When I first talked to Johnny [after the flood], I said, 'You know, Johnny, I can't hire you because you're a step above

me.' He's an icon in my eyes," Fennell says. "And I said, 'I just want you to work with me. Let's just agree we'll help each other out. We're not going to sit and do nothing. We're going to figure this out.'"

Immediately after the flood, Fennell ended up hiring four people from Naylor's — Butch and Shirley Drewes, who both have about 30 years of experience, Scott Stewart, and Johnny Naylor as a consultant.

"They had the cleaning supplies and wheelbarrows and sheetrock knives, so we started bringing that in our stores, and that gave us a breath of life," Fennell says.

"People weren't looking to spruce up their yard. Everyone was in survival mode."

Drewes calls Fennell a hero for merging the two businesses.

"He's very humble, but he was the one who reached out and made this work," Drewes says. "It is a perfect marriage."

Fennell doesn't consider himself a savior, and says he has benefited from the partnership as much as Naylor's has.

"All of a sudden, I've been blessed with 120 years of experience that's been given to me with Johnny, Butch, Shirley and Scott. And I also have their customers shopping with us," Fennell says, adding

that they also acquired the True Value license once held by Naylor's and have had help from their staff setting up the store. "We had a lot of overlapping customers, but Johnny and Butch were the go-to people in Baton Rouge for seeds and vegetables, and we were the go-to people on shrubs and color. Now we've got the best of both worlds."

When talking to Naylor, who has just lost the business he had worked at since he was old enough to dust shelves and straighten merchandise for his dad, he sounds optimistic and at peace.

"Things have just opened up for me. I

believe God [made] a new path for me," he says. "I'm just following it day to day, and I just watch more and more doors open. You asked how I get through it? That's how."

### 'One bigger, better business'

It has been four months since the flood, and Naylor's and Clegg's have pieced together details of the partnership. Naylor's hardware division, featuring True Value products, will be fully installed at Clegg's main store on Siegen Lane, where the old crew from Naylor's primarily works, and at their Denham Springs location by mid-

TRUCK PHOTO: ROMERO & ROMERO PHOTOGRAPHY / SIGN: COURTESY OF CLEGG'S NURSERY

PHILIP MOSER





Clegg's outdoor nursery and retail greenhouse



Clegg's Nursery is known for its landscape plants and color, and on Nov. 21, the nursery was still selling blooming plants



January. The goal is to eventually have a hardware presence in three Clegg's stores.

Another new initiative at Clegg's sparked by Naylor's is the installation of a point-of-sale system, which is Clegg's first. That will be up-and-running before Christmas.

There are now seven former Naylor's employees working for Clegg's.

"Some of the employees' immediate concerns were getting their houses back together," Fennell says. "We've taken more employees on as they've secured their homes."

All former Naylor's associates still wear their company shirts, and when customers call Naylor's phone number, staff answers, "Clegg's Nursery/Naylor's Hardware on



Naylor's vegetable seed packets he was so well known for now carry his name.



ALL PHOTOS: ROMERO & ROMERO PHOTOGRAPHY



Siegen." Naylor's logo is on Clegg's ads, and Naylor's Facebook page is still active.

"That's the whole idea, is to let people know Naylor's is not dead," Naylor says. "We are Naylor's Hardware at Clegg's. We're still alive, we're just alive somewhere else."

The importance of Naylor's to Baton Rouge was evident from the outpouring of love in comments on their Facebook page. One fan wrote, "No no no! I drive from almost downtown for the selection and service. Please don't close! Will Butch be working at Clegg's? Because I will never not need gardening advice."

Customers are still stopping in just to say hello to see Naylor's staff in their new home. Several local media outlets covered the merger extensively, and U.S. Senator David Vitter (R-La.) praised the businesses, giving them the honor of Small Business of the Week and submitting it into official Congressional Record. Drewes says that the positive press was probably one of the reasons that the two Clegg's stores that weren't flooded have had their strongest fall seasons ever.

"What these two businesses have meant to Baton Rouge for the past 60-plus years, for [customers] to have lost either one of us permanently would have affected a lot of lives that had already been tremendously affected with the flooding," Drewes says. "People are coming to Clegg's because of what Tom did. I'm getting emotional now about it. So often we hear about one business going after another. [Here,] one business reached out to another and said, 'Let's make one bigger, better business.'"

Clegg's is keeping the Naylor's legacy alive with another product as well — the seed that Johnny is known for. Fennell's wife, Theresa, who also works in the business, noticed that Naylor didn't label his seed packets with his name — he simply used True Value-branded clear plastic bags.

"She said, 'Johnny, you need to put Johnny Naylor's seed on the seed package so what your dad started and what you did is carried on. You're not going to lose your footprint and your name in Baton Rouge,'" Fennell says. "His name is going to live on. It didn't die with the flood."





Since collaborating with Naylor's, two of Clegg's stores that weren't impacted by the flood have seen their strongest fall seasons yet.

**A certain future**

Part of Naylor's new role as a consultant to Clegg's is to work with the nursery manager to plan the vegetable offering, and merchandising the hardware products coming in.

There are plans to dismantle one of the greenhouses that survived the flood from Naylor's and install it at Clegg's annual growing operation, so they can offer unusual vegetables like Naylor's once did.

A temporary Rite Aid store housed in a large, double-wide trailer is now stationed at the old Naylor's store parking lot, distributing prescriptions to families in the area who lost their nearby pharmacy. Naylor says he had heard from people interested in the land, and he's optimistic he will be able to sell the property soon.

Fennell was moving Christmas trees into the store just before Thanksgiving. Families in Baton Rouge are still rebuilding their homes, and many are hoping that they'll be moved in and things will be

back to normal in time for Christmas. He expects a strong Christmas season.

Drewes does, too. One week before Thanksgiving, he was standing in line at the bank, and a customer ahead of him spotted him. She walked over, gave him a hug, and started crying, mourning the loss of Naylor's.

"She says, 'I can't believe I've lost Naylor's.' And I said, 'You haven't. You've gained Clegg's,'" Drewes says. "They want the sense of normalcy that sometimes lawn and garden can give a person. [The flood] is very fresh for people still."

Drewes says that Clegg's has made Naylor's staff feel at home. The Clegg's team has benefitted, too, and Fennell says everyone is "re-energized."

"We're doing something new. We're doing something different, and when you've done something for 34 years, sometimes it's hard to get excited," Fennell says. "In all of this destruction that we're faced with, this is something positive. Everybody is excited.

Johnny, Butch and Shirley, they are helping me out tremendously. Johnny has name recognition and offered that. He said, 'Tom I want my customers to shop with you.' That means a lot to me."

Naylor says he's enjoying the work, and will continue to be a consultant with Clegg's as long as he's able.

He wants to make sure everything is in place. He likes that he can focus on what he loves — vegetables and hardware — but he also likes that he can walk away at any time.

"This was a real great opportunity for me. I'm no longer the guy in charge. Once I've finally had enough and am ready to retire, I can just quit. It's absolutely wonderful," Naylor says. "I can go home at night and sleep without having to worry about all of these things. All of the decisions aren't mine anymore. I don't have to go sit at a desk and worry about this and that. That's been one of the real blessings in this whole thing, is a lot of that has been lifted off my shoulders." ❧