

Behind the

HAMMER

MENNONITE DISASTER SERVICE / WINTER 2026



Working
together





Building homes in Washington. Story on page 4.

WINTER 2026

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ON THE COVER: MDS Crew Leader Ed Martin, from Pennsylvania, with volunteer Jennifer Hoover, from New York, serve side-by-side in Elk, Washington. **STORY ON PAGE 4.** PHOTO: JULIE KAUFFMAN

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DON YODER
 MULTI-TIME MDS OFFICE MANAGER

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VISION: We strive to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those affected by disasters.

MISSION: We respond to disasters, rebuild homes, and restore hope by organizing and empowering volunteers in the U.S. and Canada.

CORE VALUES:
 Faith in Action
 Caring Relationships
 Working Together



Behind the Hammer is published quarterly by Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) and is available for free upon request. This magazine shares the stories of MDS work in the U.S. and Canada and of more than 5,000 annual volunteers who are the core of MDS. The stories are meant to encourage people to continue expressing the love of God through the work of MDS. *Printed on Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC) certified paper using environmentally friendly plant-based inks.*

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DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Grace and peace to you

In Acts 20:17-38, the Apostle Paul gives a final message to the elders of the church at Ephesus. He feels compelled to go to Jerusalem but has a premonition that this might be the beginning of the end of his earthly life. In 20:24 he says this:

"I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (NIV).

I am on the home stretch as Executive Director of MDS Canada. My last day on the job is in early March. Unlike Paul, I have no premonition that this might be the beginning of the end of my life. In fact, I am hoping for many more years on this good Earth. But what I do love about Paul's message is the centrality of God's grace. He begins many of his letters with "Grace and peace to you." I recently heard a comment that the order in this greeting is important; there is grace, and because of that, there can be peace.

As I reflect on my time with MDS, I think of grace. I think firstly of my personal experience of God's grace that somehow uses imperfect vessels like me to extend faith, hope, and love. I also reflect on the amazing experiences I have had to witness the grace of the volunteers and staff of MDS. When volunteers interact with homeowners and community members, I see grace. When staff work together (the theme of this issue of Behind the Hammer), I see grace. When boards wrestle to keep us on mission, I see grace. When MDS functions as "one body with many parts" (1 Cor 12:12-27), I see grace.

My heart overflows with thankfulness as I leave you with a final word: Grace and peace to you, in, through, and because of Jesus.

Ross Penner
 Executive Director, MDS Canada



Ross Penner retires after 11 years serving as MDS Canada Executive Director.



Native Carpino and Bill Zimmerle's new house under construction

Circles of healing

In snowy eastern Washington, MDS volunteers help restore sacred ground and rebuild homes after wildfires.

On Aug. 18, 2023, the Oregon Road Fire consumed the home of Native Carpino and Bill Zimmerle in Elk, Washington, located in the foothills of the Selkirk Mountains. One of the most destructive fires in the state's history, the fire burned 260 homes and more than 10,000 acres.

By early December 2025, MDS volunteers were building a new home for the couple—an answer to what Carpino, both a Choctaw native and Sicilian, described as “a lot of prayers to the Creator.”

Though the fire made its way around her garden—it didn't touch the garden itself. “I was very, very thankful, because that's where my medicine is housed,” she said.

Carpino and Zimmerle have been in Elk for more than 40 years. “We are a fourth generation—all four generations lived here before the fire, and all were dispersed. We're



MDS volunteer Doug Hartzler



Wildfire near Elk, Washington



Homeowners Bill Zimmerle and Native Carpino

the sole standers but we're not going anywhere,” said Carpino.

“MDS has helped us extremely, extremely well,” said Carpino. “They opened their hearts and their kindness to us, through snow, rain, thaw, weather.”

Zimmerle said he regards Elk as God's country. “We've been here a long time, and it's just a nice, quiet, beautiful place to live.”

Regarding the volunteers, Carpino described them as amazing. “Just breathtaking,” she said. “I don't mind handing them hot cocoa because they don't mind coming out to help me rebuild. So it's been a blessing for us big time. And I'll tell you, not a lot of women can crawl up on top of a building in a pair of jeans or a pair of boots, a dress, and lay down shingles like a grown man,” she said.

“But I've watched women work just as hard as the

men, side-by-side. And that warms my heart, because in my culture, that's what we're supposed to be doing. We're supposed to be giving to our elders and working side-by-side.”

Both expressed gratitude for the people who have helped them.

“It makes the devastation not so hard to handle,” she said. “Unlike most people, we're very connected to this ground. We hold ceremony here, so it's a sacred place for me.”

Carpino said that, in her culture, she is asked to shed material things and to be able to accept change.

“For Indigenous people, we appreciate the change because it's something that's been prophesized and taught to us as children,” she said. “The only things you hold close are your family, hope, and those people in it.”



“That warms my heart, because in my culture, that’s what we’re supposed to be doing ... giving to our elders and working side-by-side.”

NATIVE CARPINO
WILDFIRE SURVIVOR

MDS volunteers
John Nice and
Kathy Hoover

So I had the biggest test and I think I passed.” Her hope for the coming year is that kindness and commitment can come back into most people’s lives. “Kindness isn’t seen a lot in today’s society, unfortunately,” she said. “As you can see in the community of Elk, we are very close knit. I have elders call on me every day and ask if I’m okay.”

On the same road, situated in rugged terrain still deeply scarred by the fire, more than 90 houses were destroyed or damaged.

AMID SCARS, “GOD SIGHTINGS”

MDS is working in close partnership with the Spokane Regional Long Term Recovery Committee, which was created shortly after the fire. With five new houses currently underway, the committee oversaw the construction of eight new houses last year.

Craig Sanders, the committee’s executive director, shares the pain and the hope with the fire survivors. “I used to live out here,” he said. “One of the houses we’re building—the owner’s daughter and my kids were best friends going to school.”

He looked out at the forest. “It’s just scarred,” he said. “There are still so many needs.”

With MDS supplying volunteers to build houses, the need for shelter will be met sooner.

As volunteers go and come from their base—a



▶ Watch the video of wildfire survivors in Elk, Washington, and their connection to the volunteers rebuilding their homes.
youtube.com/MDSMennonite



Elk resident Steve Van Buskirk shows appreciation for the new house MDS volunteers are building for him.

Salvation Army camp in Loon Lake, Washington—MDS Project Director Rollin Ulrich offers words of quiet encouragement.

“Now is your chance to go out again and be the church in this community, and anticipate the God sightings where they may be,” he said. Each day, volunteers report more “God sightings”: the sun peeking out from an overcast winter day, the spectacular view of the snow-covered mountains from on top of a ladder, a hug from a homeowner who didn’t talk much before.

In fact, hearing the stories of homeowners is an important part of an MDS response, said Ulrich.

“At MDS, we often say we are the hands and feet of Jesus,” he said. “I would say, we are also the ears of Jesus because we listen out there.”

For volunteer Bryan Mierau, from Goshen, Indiana,

what deeply connects volunteers across the MDS family is a sense of unity in service. “In January, this room will be filled with different people,” he said, gesturing around the dining area, which held 26 volunteers that day. “What is it that carries continuity?”

In a challenging setting—working in freezing temperatures on homes that are a 45-minute, often snowy, drive from the base camp—continuity resides in the volunteers’ ability to walk humbly as they serve in a community vastly different from their own.

“This gives feet and hands to what it means to walk humbly with our God,” Mierau said.

And each volunteer returns home carrying the gift of a deeper question to unwrap, he added: “Will it give me insight into being a little different?” ■

STORY: SUSAN KIM PHOTOS: JULIE KAUFFMAN + PAUL HUNT



MDS Project Director Rollin Ulrich (left) talks with homeowner Steve Van Buskirk.

The heart of a leader

A glimpse into the experiences of volunteer project leaders in Elk, Washington, for one week in December.

PROJECT DIRECTOR

Rollin Ulrich celebrated his 52nd week of service with MDS in Elk, Washington. He said, "That's a year of service" split into one- or two-month stints as MDS project director at various locations across the country.

What leadership qualities does a project director need?

"It takes someone who can see the whole big picture. I'm responsible for the overall health of this unit. It takes tremendous patience and staying calm. Realizing what's right in front of you is temporary and your role is to

move forward in a positive manner. I am not an expert in construction. However, that's not my role here. I allow others to do their jobs—from construction supervisor to crew leader to cook."

How do you build community spirit?

"This week during orientation I asked the volunteers to consider each day where they're seeing a God sighting in their work. And then as they come together each evening, after they've been working all day, to share that during the reporting time. It tends to



Our goal is to make sure that volunteers leave here with a sense of feeling good about the work they did."

ROLLIN ULRICH
MDS PROJECT DIRECTOR



MDS Crew Leader Nathan Fisher and volunteer Michael Eigsti construct the deck of a house.

bring a spirit of unity and a feeling of inclusion as they're able to verbalize just a small thing."

What motivates you to serve?

"It is being spurred on by what I just experienced a few minutes ago. Speaking with the homeowner here, Steve, and looking him in the eye and understanding where he has been. And then having him affirm the fact that he is now experiencing hope as he sees his new home being built. That's part of our mission statement, to provide that hope."

The Project Director is responsible for the long-term planning and day-to-day operations of the project, including volunteer management, construction, and community relations.

CREW LEADER

Nathan Fisher looked around at the snow-covered forest surrounding the homes under construction in Elk, Washington, and marveled at the beauty—and the meaningful connections. "I see God every day that I work out on the site," he said. "It's just incredible."

What does it take to be a crew leader?

"I oversee the crew at a construction site and make sure everything's getting done right. At times you have to answer questions that are difficult. Just be willing to work and be willing to help other people work. Teach them new things."

What motivates you to serve?

"I'm in an early stage of my life where I can give time and don't have to focus as much on other things, so I very much enjoy doing trips like this.

I get blessed beyond what I can say—just from seeing the expressions on the homeowners' faces and hearing their stories."

NATHAN FISHER
MDS CREW LEADER

Once you do it once, you just can't stop. You got to keep coming back because your heart is there, it seems. So pray about it and just move forward with what God gives you."

The Crew Leader facilitates the day-to-day tasks of weekly volunteers on the construction site, working alongside the crew, training people as needed, and ensuring safety.



MDS Office Manager Don Yoder keeps the project site running smoothly.

OFFICE MANAGER

Don Yoder likes to share facts and figures with the volunteers as another way to tell the story of their faith in action. This week he told the crew, there were 14 volunteers and each one has contributed 48 volunteer hours. In Washington state, a volunteer hour in 2025 is worth \$41.70. That means your contribution to wildfire survivors here this week is the equivalent of \$28,022.

What is it like to be an office manager on site?

"A lot of it is relational. An office manager doesn't get out to the construction site much, but we relate to the people providing accommodations, a lot of vendors, we pick up supplies. We make sure volunteers know what to expect before they come."

From folding sheets (he actually rolls them up and urges you to try this at home), to writing weekly reports of what happened, to reconciling ledgers at the end of the month, Yoder says he likes being office manager. It's the best of all the ways he's served with MDS.

What makes this location a different experience for you?

I don't think many office managers get to look out the window and see deer running through the snowy yard."

The office manager is responsible for a project's financial accounting, communications, and hospitality needs.

// It's always fun to see how all the different leadership positions work together. It really is a good team spirit. Sometimes it takes a little longer, but it almost always ends up there. And then we kind of hate to leave each other."

DON YODER
MDS OFFICE MANAGER



MDS Head Cook Em Yoder serves up a big helping.

HEAD COOK

Before starting breakfast, Em Yoder repeats her favorite morning prayer: "God, I don't know what you have for me today."

Part of the challenge of cooking in the wintertime is looking at the weather forecast and being sure to buy enough food for a few extra days of snow and ice. Another challenge—one present at any site, in any season—is ensuring there's enough food, which may mean doubling or tripling traditional family recipes.

This week, one of the volunteers was celebrating a birthday, so Em asked what their favorite meal was. The answer: pork and sauerkraut. So that's what she made. Her own special version of it.

As a well-seasoned head cook for MDS, she loves feeding the multitudes. On a deeper level, she sees herself as a caregiver for the many hungry volunteers as well as for community members she meets while at the MDS base camp.

"It was really good to see all of you in your places, and your ability to work in the cold like this is amazing!" she told the volunteers.

The head cook plans and prepares well-balanced nutritious meals for volunteers.

// I don't think any of us realize how important our presence is to the people we serve and encounter daily at the work site or hardware or grocery store. Thanks to all of you for being that light."

EM YODER
MDS HEAD COOK





Wildfire survivor Dwayne Stewart at his new home in Barrington, Nova Scotia

HOMEOWNER EXPERIENCE

“I still don’t realize it’s happening”

“It hasn’t been good,” said Dwayne Stewart as he described his long rebuilding journey after losing his home to the Barrington Lake wildfire of May 2023.

As the fire, which burned over 56,800 acres/23,000 hectares and was one of the largest in Nova Scotia’s history, approached his property, he thought it would miss him. But “then the wind turned, and it came back along the lake and burned right to me,” Stewart recalled.

Stewart, who had made his living on fishing boats for over 20 years, shared his frustration of having to start from scratch. After everything on his property was lost and hopes of rebuilding there vanished, he was able to secure a different property nearby.

Through disaster assistance he purchased a temporary trailer to live in, but two years was longer than anyone thought it would take to find a permanent solution. One side of his trailer had a large hole with make-shift walls that closed in the half that could still be heated.

For Shawna Symonds, Senior Safety Coordinator for Shelbourne County, a permanent solution for Stuart that met her standard of “safe, warm, and dry,” was greatly needed.

“There were seven individuals without insurance, and Dwayne is our last to be housed,” said Symonds. In sharing her journey with Stewart following the evacuations that affected the whole community, she

acknowledged the challenge of each individual journey. “It’s not rebuilding, it’s finding a new home.”

MDS began a project in Barrington this past fall. From September to October, almost 50 volunteers served to provide Stewart with a new home. “It was completely overwhelming how much support we received,” said Symonds, reflecting on the build.

For Duane Neufeld, one of the MDS Project Directors, it was a blessing to see the transformation in Stewart as the project progressed. At first, Stewart was quiet and reserved, but as he got to know volunteers, he opened up more and more, shared Neufeld.

He was touched one day when Stewart called to all the volunteers with a big smile and yelled “Thanks very much!” For Neufeld, “the reward is the interaction.”

After nine weeks of building, Stewart received the keys to his new home at a dedication service on October 23, 2025, surrounded by MDS volunteers and community partners.

Receiving a fresh start was something Stewart couldn’t believe even as MDS volunteers were busy building beside him. “I still don’t realize it’s happening” he said.

When asked how it feels to see Stewart finally receive a new home, Symonds said “peace, it just feels like peace. I can’t explain it to you. It just feels like I can breathe.” ■

STORY: MOSES FALCO PHOTO: COURTESY OF BENNY PENNER

“It’s not rebuilding, it’s finding a new home.”

SHAWNA SYMONDS
SENIOR SAFETY COORDINATOR,
SHELBOURNE COUNTY (NOVA SCOTIA)



Repairing a house in West Asheville, North Carolina

ON-SITE EXPERIENCE

Hope takes root again

I had an eye-opening and beautiful experience during my visit to the MDS response in western North Carolina. I had never volunteered in disaster relief before, yet I had been sharing and learning the works of MDS in my new job as web and social media coordinator for about six weeks before arriving in West Asheville in November. So I had only a bird’s-eye view of what a real MDS experience could look and feel like.

Upon my arrival just before Sunday orientation began, I received the warmest welcome from the leadership and long-term volunteers who were waiting for the rest of the weekly volunteers to arrive. It immediately felt like we had something in common, even if we all had very different backgrounds and life experiences. Maybe this is because we all were happy to be in a position to lend a hand to people who need it most.

I was unsure what my week might look like. Was I going to try to gather as many photos and videos as possible for future website and social media content? Would I spend my entire week blending in with other volunteers—painting, spackling, repairing damaged homes? Would I get to interact directly with the people impacted and displaced from their normal lives by Hurricane Helene?

The short answer was yes. The incredible leadership

and long-term volunteers—Josie, Joetta, Jeff, Nathaniel, Deryl, and more—ensured I was able to experience a week where no two days looked the same, while feeling like a valued member of the greater group. Each person I spoke to listened with their entire being, a skill that is often overlooked in modern times but is such a crucial attribute for someone responding to folks who have lost so much to disaster.

Each place I visited had a different story to tell. On a street in a valley where floodwaters had risen to the roofs of every home, I was personally thanked by a local member of the community for showing up to help. At the bridge dedication that all the volunteers attended on Friday, several people honked their horns and cheered from their cars as they rolled by.

In every conversation, at every work site, and every shared meal, I witnessed hope taking root again. I left West Asheville grateful,

humbled, and more convinced than ever that the work of MDS is not just about rebuilding structures, but about restoring community one relationship at a time. ■

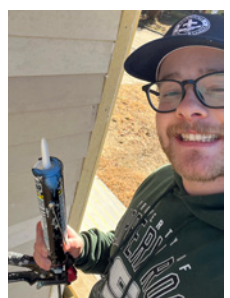
STORY AND PHOTOS: CARSON KENNEDY

“In every conversation, at every work site, and every shared meal, I witnessed hope.”

CARSON KENNEDY
MDS WEB & SOCIAL MEDIA COORD.



Bridge dedication





Dedication of a new MDS warehouse in Shipshewana, Indiana

INDIANA

New MDS warehouse dedicated

The Indiana and Lower Michigan Unit of MDS dedicated a new 60x120-foot warehouse on November 3, 2025, in Shipshewana, Indiana.

Built by volunteers from the unit and from Acknowledging Christ Through Service (ACTS), which operates collaboratively with MDS, the warehouse is big enough to hold 18 cargo trailers, and has five overhead doors as well as space for horses and buggies. The warehouse will also host a leadership training in March 2026.

GEORGIA

Hope rising from the ground

North Ohio Assisting Hands (NOAH), an Amish group that works collaboratively with MDS, has been framing homes in Douglas and Coffee counties.

Thanks to a partnership with The Hope Initiative and Hope Force International, wall systems were transported into the area, where NOAH crews were able to quickly frame them up. "Watching these walls rise into place within days was truly something to behold," said Lisa Mathews, executive director of The Hope Initiative. "Each home was 'in the dry' so quickly that it felt like witnessing a miracle. Hope was literally rising from the ground."

NOAH volunteers gather with partner groups and local homeowners each week for Thursday Share Nights. "Families and volunteers gather to share meals, tell their stories, sing hymns, and encourage one another," described Mathews. "The

relationships formed in these moments are powerful and lasting."

After Hurricane Helene devastated the area, Mathews sees this as "a beautiful example of what can be accomplished when we come together for the Kingdom of God."

ONTARIO

Living museum opened

The former Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford, Ontario, where youth from across Canada served in 2019 as part of an MDS summer youth project, officially opened as a "living museum" on Sept. 30, 2025. While serving at the former school, the youth built desks, tables, and benches for a representative classroom and dining hall. "Many people we talked to [at the opening] remarked on the furniture our volunteers had built," said Nicholas Hamm of Vineland, Ontario, who was the director of that summer's youth project. Their work can "restore hope to the families of the

survivors" and help others who visit the former school engage in the work of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, he added.

NORTH CAROLINA

"It's just worth it!"

That's what Nathaniel shared when asked what he would tell someone who's on the fence about volunteering with MDS. "I felt that with MDS I could pass along my skills in construction to someone who can use them to do good."

Nathaniel Brew and Heather Belanger, a married couple from Abbotsford,



MDS LEADERSHIP JOB OPENING

Seeking a full-time Director of Administration

Based in Lititz, Pa., this role will provide strategic leadership and oversight for all administrative functions including finance, human resources, information technology, and regional administration. This role also plays a vital part in shaping organizational strategy, supporting growth initiatives, and contributing to long-term planning. The ideal candidate will foster a collaborative culture rooted in MDS's core values of service, teamwork, and compassion.

See the full job description at mds.org/employment
Submit your application at Northgroupconsultants.com/jobs

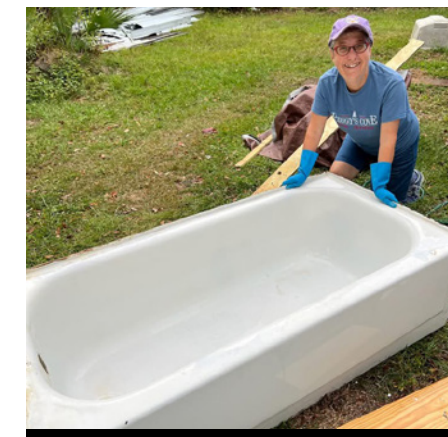
British Columbia, served as long-term volunteers in West Asheville, North Carolina. Nathaniel led one of the rebuilding crews, repairing the basement of Theresa and her father, Cliffe, after flood damage from Hurricane Helene forced them to reorganize their living space for more than a year.

Heather faithfully served by preparing breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the volunteers each day, offering care and hospitality that strengthened the whole team of over 30 people.

HAWAI'I

Home construction underway

November saw new faces, new progress, and new reasons to give thanks in Lahaina, Hawai'i. Eight new long-term volunteers and 15 weekly volunteers from across the U.S. and Canada arrived to continue rebuilding homes for people who lost theirs in the Lahaina fires. Windows were put in place on the first home, framing was underway on the second, and cleanup prepared the way for more to come.



FLORIDA

Progress with not-so-simple repairs

When Hurricane Idalia tore through North Florida in 2023, followed by more flooding and wind damage from Hurricane Helene in 2024, many families were left facing a long road to recovery. In fall 2025, MDS RV volunteers in Perry, Florida, were working faithfully alongside local partners to help homeowners rebuild.



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What began as "simple" repairs soon uncovered hidden challenges beneath floors and behind walls, but the volunteers' perseverance and joy in serving never wavered. Each day, they returned tired but exhilarated, grateful for the progress made and the hope restored. ■

PHOTOS: MDS VOLUNTEERS



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