

Heroic Measures

{ STORY BY JULIE JACOB

Sam Muscari, DO, was enjoying a round of golf with friends July 8, 2001, when a thunderstorm hit. As water crept over the golf course, he called friends back home in Mullens, about 30 miles away, to see if it was raining there.

The news was grim. Come home, he was told. There's been a flash flood, and water is up to the ceiling in your office.

The Sunday afternoon storm dumped 11 inches of rain in four hours on the tiny coal-mining town tucked in the hills of southwestern West Virginia. The two streams bordering Mullens overflowed, and as the water rushed through the town, the 1,700 residents scrambled up the hills to safety, forced to watch helplessly as their homes and businesses were destroyed.

As Dr. Muscari surveyed the wreckage of 38 years of practice, he realized he had lost everything. His medical records, furniture and equipment had all been swept away or ruined by the torrent of mud and water.

"The door was gone off the front of the office, the equipment from the back part of the practice was out in the street, and I found rubber stamps and materials a half-mile down the road," said Dr. Muscari, a family physician from Marietta, Ohio, who opened his practice in Mullens in 1963, shortly after completing his internship.

To make matters worse, Dr. Muscari had cancelled his flood insurance about 10 years earlier because there had never been a flood in the town. At least his home, located on a hillside, was safe.

Dr. Muscari was 65. The easiest thing to do would have been to retire. His two sons and another colleague share his practice and run three other offices about 10 miles away. Mullens residents could go to them for care. Dr. Muscari had endured a bout with prostate cancer and was enjoying good health and had golf and outside interests to keep him busy.

However, as he and a friend, the town's pharmacist, surveyed the damage to the business district, Dr. Muscari realized he couldn't leave. Even driving a short distance on twisting, icy winter roads would be a hardship for the town's elderly residents. What's more, the loss of his practice and the four jobs it created would be one more blow to the town, which had been losing people and businesses for years due to the decline of the coal-mining industry.

"I thought this is the end of the practice, but no, you don't quit that easily," said Dr. Muscari. "These people depend on me, and I wasn't going to let them down now. ... I needed to be here in Mullens. People

needed to see me here. They needed to be around somebody they knew. I've known their conditions for years."

The town did need him, said Eva Smith, president of the Mullens Chamber of Commerce. "Dr. Muscari played a big part in bringing the businesses back. We had 62 businesses that were flooded, and our pharmacist and Dr. Muscari walked the entire town area ... and convinced most of those business owners to come back to business."

Within three days, he and his staff had his practice up and running again in a pediatric medicine trailer borrowed from Marshall University. The town's water supply was contaminated and he had to rely on bottled water, which was hauled in by the truckloads. He also had to forgo several procedures and do without years of medical records.

Meanwhile, Dr. Muscari obtained some low-interest federal Small Business Administration and state loans to cover the cost of building a new office next door to his old one. He obtained some medical equipment from the other offices in his practice and purchased some equipment and furniture. He rented a double-wide trailer and practiced from it until his new office was finished in late October 2001.

The new office is even better than the old one, he said. It has computerized diagnostic radiology equipment, which allows him to send x-rays to orthopedic surgeons in Princeton, W.Va. Soon it will have a computerized medical records system.

But there were times during the months of rebuilding when Dr. Muscari felt discouraged.

"In the beginning I was a little down, but the glass is half full," said Dr. Muscari. "My wife died of cancer eight years ago and I came up with prostate cancer a year ago. This all changes your attitude, and everything isn't as important as it used to be."

The hardest part of rebuilding was reconstructing the 38 years of patient records that had been washed away. Dr. Muscari pieced them together by interviewing patients about their medical histories when they came in for appointments and obtaining copies of records from specialists and the practice's other offices.

But Dr. Muscari wanted to do even more to help his town. The building housing the local Dollar General had been destroyed, and the owners didn't want to rebuild. So Dr. Muscari bought a vacant building down the street, gutted and rehabbed it and leased it to the Dollar General company.

"We need the businesses here," Dr. Muscari stressed. "Being a businessman, I want the rest of the town to survive. The more people we get to shop downtown, the better off we all will be. ... I felt it was part of my duty and moral obligation to help."

None of this surprises his friend, Randall Short, DO, a family physician in Chapmanville, W.Va. Dr. Muscari is "just very dedicated. ... He feels responsible to people in Mullens and even in the county."

For his contributions to rebuilding Mullens' business district, Dr. Muscari received the Business Hero of the Year award from the local chamber of commerce.

The flood was a hard blow to a town already struggling with the losses of businesses and jobs, he said. What made it worse was the feeling among residents that years of strip-mining and timbering increased the water runoff and contributed to the flooding.

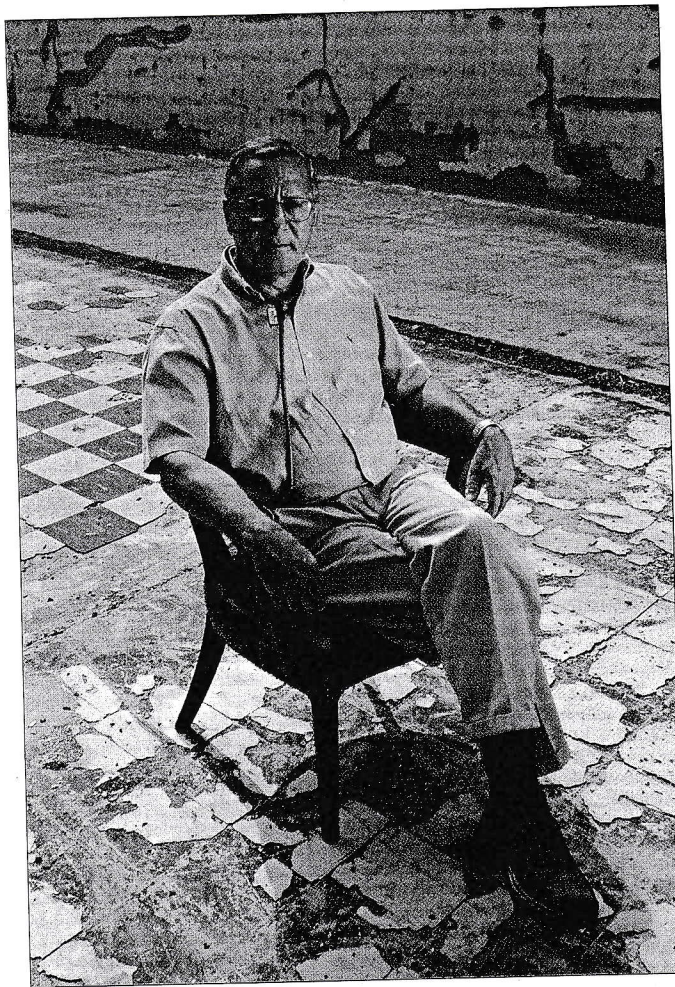
The town residents went through a period of depression, Dr. Muscari said, but the events of Sept. 11, 2001, put things in perspective.

"They saw how things could have been much worse. We are mountain people and real resilient to things of this nature."

He's 66 now, but Dr. Muscari isn't thinking about retirement. "I don't want to quit. What else would I do?"

In July, the town celebrated its rebirth on the one-year anniversary of the flood with a quiet ceremony in the Mullens community center. Otherwise, it was business as usual.

"Everything is back to normal," said Dr. Muscari, noting with pride the rebuilt businesses — the barber shop, the florist, the pharmacy — that line the streets of Mullens. "We're all proud of the fact that we've come back." ♦



{ PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD BOYD