

**Gov. Nixon remarks to Missouri Broadcasters Association
Annual Convention and Awards Presentation
The Lodge of the Four Seasons
June 3, 2011 – noon**

I want to thank all of you in the Missouri Broadcasters Association - especially those of who are here today from Joplin, Sedalia and the surrounding areas.

Some of you may have been personally affected by the tornado; you may have lost friends, neighbors, colleagues, homes and possessions.

But you kept going.

On behalf of all the people in the state of Missouri, I salute your courage, your professionalism and your dedication to serving your community throughout this catastrophe.

Courage.

Professionalism.

Service to others.

These are the hallmarks of broadcast journalism at its finest.

And in the last two weeks in Missouri, in the aftermath of one of the most destructive tornadoes in history, I have seen broadcast journalism in its finest hour.

You play a critical role in getting accurate information to the public when time is of the essence: warning folks of the coming dangers, helping them prepare and get to safety, and finding help after the immediate crisis is past.

We've had more than our fair share of crises this year: the historic blizzard that required us to close I-70; the flooding of 130,000 acres in the Bootheel; the New Year's and Good Friday tornadoes; and, of course, the devastating E-5 tornado in Joplin.

Unfortunately, it doesn't look like Mother Nature is ready to give us a break. Yesterday I was in St. Joe, where we are trying to help communities along the Missouri River prepare for imminent flooding. The river's already up, and it's only going to keep getting higher.

So you'd better keep some boots in the trunk of your car.

In times of crisis, things are chaotic.

People are scared.

People hear rumors.

People don't know what to do or where to go for help.

And in times like those we've witnessed in Missouri in the last six months, what you do - or don't do -- can literally make the difference between life and death.

Unlike the national media, you are in it for the long haul.

Unlike the national media, you've got skin in the game because you live here.

When you get it right, your community gets the benefit.

When you get it wrong, your community suffers.

The point is that what **you do matters**. Not sometimes; all the time. Not in theory; in the real world.

In the first few days after the Joplin tornado, my office received hundreds of calls from the national and international media asking for interviews and updates, body counts and damage estimates.

Everyone from the BBC to Al-Jazeera wanted to know what was happening in Joplin, and what we were going to do next.

I was interviewed on Fox, CNN, NBC, CBS, NPR and many others. It was an exceptional opportunity to share Joplin's story with a global audience, and hopefully it will help in Joplin's recovery.

But if the national broadcast media get it wrong, they don't have to live with the consequences the way **you** do.

National media don't run the risk of bumping into the city manager or the police chief in the checkout lane at the grocery store, or in the next pew on Sunday.

They're one and done.

All of **you** are part of your communities; you're in it for the long haul, for better or for worse.

And that brings me to a remarkable story I'd like to share with you today, about some of your colleagues down in Joplin.

At about 4 p.m. on May 22, Radio station KZRG in Joplin began getting reports that severe weather in Kansas was sweeping in from the West - headed right toward Joplin.

They crashed their normal schedule, and went to live, wall-to-wall coverage of the impending storm.

As he watched the rain blowing sideways and chunks of debris flying through the air, News Director Josh Marsh was on the phone with emergency responders on the scene, as the tornado touched down, chewing its way through the heart of Joplin.

At exactly 5:41 p.m., the line went dead.

The tornado had knocked out cell phone towers and 20,000 people were without electricity.

But the radio signal was still strong.

Once their back-up generators kicked on, KZRG broke the "Golden Rule" of radio, and began taking live, unscreened calls on the air.

The first caller was a woman, pregnant with twins, frantically looking for her husband.

Hearing her voice on the radio, he called the station to let her know he was at work and OK.

Then a call came in from Duquesne, where the tornado had knocked out police radios; they wanted help dispatching officers where they were needed most.

Two KZRG reporters, Chad Elliot and Rob Meyer, hit the streets, describing a scene that looked like hell had exploded: mangled cars, houses and business in ruins, people screaming and running.

The calls kept coming: Can you find my daughter? Can you help me get a doctor? I have food, where can I take it?

It was chaos.

But in the eye of the chaos, the folks at KZRG had a moment of clarity.

Joplin needed a lifeline; so that's what they would be.

"You **have** to step into that role, so that's what you do," Marsh said.

Miles away, station owner James Zimmer had a similar moment of clarity. He was on vacation with his family; they had gathered to observe the one-year anniversary of the death of James's oldest son, Michael, 25. Michael had just graduated from St. Louis University law school. On Mother's Day of last year, he was in an accident. Two weeks later he was gone. He died on May 22, 2010.

When the call came in from Joplin, James answered.

He got off the phone and his surviving son looked at him and said, "Dad, you need to go." And James said "I know. That's what we do."

Like his five brothers - [three of whom are here today] James Zimmer grew up in the radio business started by their dad, Jerome. James started working at radio stations when he was 12, emptying trash cans and cleaning bathrooms.

And so, just minutes after the tornado struck, James put his grief on hold, drove to Joplin and went back to his old job...emptying trash cans and cleaning bathrooms. At age 52.

Things snowballed from there. Everyone at Zimmer pitched in, including eight employees - a quarter of the station's workforce - left homeless by the tornado. Sales manager Chris Bullard got a relief effort going in the parking lot.

Others brought barbecue pits and started cooking for anybody who was hungry. For days, so many people came to the station to give and get help, it looked like a street party, 24/7.

And 24/7, KZRG was on the air with the latest news and information, holding that lifeline taut between victims and volunteers, shelters and the homeless, state services and those in need, the lost and the found.

They helped spread the word about the Memorial service held last Sunday at Missouri Southern State University, where the President Obama and I were present.

Their coverage was interrupted only once, at precisely 5:41 p.m. last Sunday, when the city of Joplin observed a moment of silence.

By Wednesday of this week, the mood of Joplin had started to shift.

After talking with community and business leaders and taking their pulse, James felt it was time to move on.

The wall-to-wall disaster coverage was getting folks down. They were ready for a little music... a little laughter... ready to reconnect through broadcast news to the rest of the universe.

This weekend, James and his wife are going to get out of town and take some time off. They need to grieve a while, James said, and then they'll be ready to move on.

I offer their story to remind all of us here of the great power, and the great responsibility, of broadcast media, not just to inform and entertain us, but to connect and protect us, to unite and uplift us.

The role of the free press is sacred in our democracy. In fact, it was so important to the framers, Thomas Jefferson in particular, that the press is the only economic enterprise mentioned specifically in the Constitution.

In the course of more than five decades as a public figure, Jefferson took his share of lumps from the press, and it left him a little sensitive to criticism.

But because the press both re-flects and a-ffects public opinion, Jefferson considered it essential in holding government accountable to the people.

There's a lot of responsibility on both ends of that transaction.

It's your responsibility to hold government - to hold your Governor - accountable.

It's also your responsibility to hold yourselves to the highest standards of accuracy, fairness and balance in order to serve the public.

When the next crisis comes, I hope you will seize the opportunity to serve the public the way no other entity can.

It could very well be ... your finest hour.

###