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Flood of dedication

The town of High River, Alta., 37 kilometres south of Calgary and home to roughly 13,000 residents, suffered greatly in June 2013, when the Highwood River flooded about 80 per cent of the town.

Bruce Masterman, a 34-year High River resident and SAIT Journalism instructor since 2006, was one of many forced to evacuate. "When we drove away on the 20th, we all truly thought we'd be back the next day," he says. Yet, authorities wouldn't let people return for almost two weeks. Frustration built, especially for those who knew their homes were affected. The chance of retrieving any salvageable items diminished with each day.

Evacuated residents finally returned on July 3. It was a sight Masterman won't soon forget; can't forget. "It was like a war zone. (It) still is and will be for months, if not years," he says.

Masterman and his wife Karen are part of the town's United Church leadership team and focused their attention on rebuilding the downtown church soon after their return. They knew how lucky they were that their house was on higher ground and spared flooding, but their hearts went out to their many friends and acquaintances.

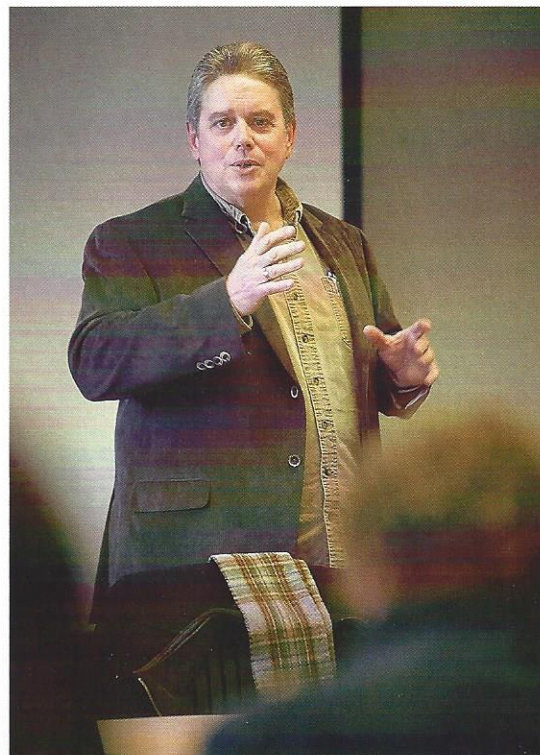
"I felt so helpless. One individual can't help [residents] get their lives back in order and help things get normal again," he says. "You really need local leaders to do that."

The flood got him thinking: maybe he could win a town councillor spot in the upcoming municipal election and directly impact the speed and effectiveness of High River's recovery. He didn't want the town he loved, the town where he raised his two daughters, to have the reputation only of "the place that flooded in 2013."

Twenty-three High River candidates campaigned for the six councillor positions. He had no prior political experience, but Masterman campaigned hard – meeting new people and listening to numerous flood-related stories and concerns. "I thought I had some qualities that could help the town and could bring a (different) perspective," he says.

The election brought voters out in record numbers – a 61 per cent turnout of 6,500 eligible voters – and Masterman won his spot on council. He even spent his 61st birthday at his very first council meeting.

The new council immediately partnered with the province on mitigation projects intended to reduce future flooding impacts and help



Bruce Masterman, a SAIT journalism instructor and freelance journalist, was inspired to run for his town council after witnessing the effects of last June's floods on his community of High River.

High River residents return to their homes and businesses. Council members are acutely aware of their deadline – June, when the Highwood's water typically rises each year – to complete projects including berms and dikes.

"What the town really needs right now is a feeling of security – a feeling that this won't happen again, but if it does, we're prepared for it."

Since the end of last October, Masterman has juggled multiple professional hats: part-time instructor in SAIT's Journalism program, freelance journalist and now, full-time councillor. "I'm just honoured to do all three things that I'm most passionate about professionally," he says.

MICHELLE LINDSTROM