



## **Thome never came through in the clutch as well as for Washington, Ill.**

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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To Jim Thome, all Illinoisans – and for that matter, everyone on the planet – are citizens of Washington, Ill.

“The tornado could have easily hit Clarendon Hills, it could have hit Western Springs, Burr Ridge (his present residence),” said ex-White Sox slugger Thome. “It could have hit anywhere. It hit in our state and I think we’re all affected by it.

“They just like the fact that our area has shown the support. Anywhere I go in Peoria, people’s comments are, ‘Man, we didn’t realize how much Chicago really cares about us downstate. It’s great to see Chicago step up like that.’”



**Jim Thome works with a youth baseball player at the Bulls/Sox Academy in Lisle.**

Outpourings of support and, more importantly, financial aid have streamed from the state’s population and economic center into Washington, a few minutes east of Thome’s native Peoria, since part of the town of 15,000 was in essence bombed flat by an F-4 tornado, second strongest in meteorological ratings, on Nov. 17. But Thome, now special assistant with the Sox, could be first among equals in coming to the city’s aid.

With a lifetime of character-building behavior on and off the field already to his credit, Thome and his family contributed \$100,000 to tornado relief efforts in just the season it was sorely needed – at holiday time. Better yet, Thome’s persona was so admired four of his six career teams – the Sox, Indians, Phillies and Twins – are contributing to the family’s donation.

The Sox also announced the team will organize a youth- and athletics-focused event in Washington in the spring of 2014 in support of the Thome family efforts. Details of the event, which will involve the White Sox Volunteer Corps and the Chicago Bulls/Sox Academy, will be announced closer to the spring.

“Everyone really stepped up and showed their class,” said Thome.

Three days before Christmas, Thome donated even more of his time headlining a youth baseball clinic at the Bulls/ Sox Training Center in west suburban Lisle, Ill. But his front-and-center effort helping Washington was still the center of conversation. Much of Washington’s tornado debris has been cleared, but many residents don’t have a permanent roof over their heads for the holiday, and with winter’s bite being felt earlier than usual.

Obviously, Jim Thome will never forget where he came from, even though this small-city guy has made his permanent home in the Chicago suburbs. He’d have acted in the same manner had brother Randy Thome not lived in Washington, his home luckily escaping the tornado’s wrath.



**Jim Thome was moved by the sight of absolutely flattened homes in Washington, Ill.**

### **Death toll light, but post-storm suffering heavy**

The only “break” Washington caught was suffering just two fatalities. Most residents sought shelter due to TV weather segments’ accurate storm-path reports, made possible by Doppler radar technology, and local emergency sirens being sounded just in time. Three decades ago, without every extra minute of warning available at present, the death toll would have been much higher.

Little miracles abounded. The top floor of the 280-unit Georgetown Apartments was blown apart. The complex did not have a basement. Somehow, residents rode out the tornadic winds in stairwells. Washington Police Commander Jeff Stevens said one man hung onto his sink to survive.

Survival, though, has begat mass suffering and dislocation at the worst time of the year. Some 1,087 homes were flattened or heavily damaged. Thome and wife Andrea had an easy decision where to put their time, effort and money.

“I’ve personally never seen damage of a tornado,” Thome said during a break in the youth clinic. “I’ve never have been in one. It puts everything into perspective after. Obviously, having it hit so close. Then realizing what are these families going to do 10 days or seven days away from Thanksgiving?”

“You put things in perspective as easy as, ‘OK, I’m going to brush my teeth tonight.’ But the toothbrush is gone. It’s the little things that put into perspective of the damage that was really done. I couldn’t believe it. There were cars in trees. There was just debris everywhere. It looked like the whole half of the town of Washington was leveled.”

Every dollar of Thome’s donation would have a positive effect. All aspects of post-tornado life in Washington need help.

### **Cleanup progresses, but is costly**

“Debris removal is not paid for yet,” said Stevens. “The city is taking a lot of different avenues to pay for it. It’s millions of dollars of cost. They’re still asking for donations. A lot will go to housing.

“People are safe. Mass shelters have been emptied. But there are still people who are struggling to secure affordable housing. A number of apartment buildings were destroyed. They’re having to struggle for affordable housing. People lived in an apartment close to work, and they had no car.”

The debris-clearing effort is also a small blessing. Exposed power lines and transformers have been turned off. Homeowners can get back onto their property to start the rebuilding process.



**Jim Thome finally got to play close to his Peoria home as a White Sox in 2006. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).**

“If they hadn’t made the effort and progress they did, it would really be bad (next spring,” said Stevens.

Thome regularly goes home to visit family and friends. He also has a rural hunting lodge west of Peoria.

“We’ll divide the money up where it needs to go the right way,” he said. “As this process goes on, the White Sox talked about going down and being part of just the community efforts. Beyond the money, just showing your face (helps) and being interactive with the community and letting them know how much we truly care about what happened.

“I think the community is coming together to show the support to put the people in the right places. That’s the struggling part of this. Think about that. You’re not supposed to have tornadoes of that nature in November. Next thing you know it’s the winter months.

“They’re all working hard to accomplish that. Everybody in the community cares and wants to get by and get over with as quickly as you can.”

Thome’s fans in Washington, Peoria, Chicago and elsewhere are thrilled he’s close by the help. They’re also pleased he returned to the Sox in a scouting/instructional/advisory role in 2013. Thome the community activist is fully complemented by Thome the wizened baseball mind.

### **Listening a top baseball skill**

“I got to learn a lot from the other side (player),” he said. “You learn a lot by listening. You’ve got great baseball minds. Jerry (Reinsdorf). Kenny (Williams). Listening to Robin (Ventura). And when they ask, give your input. What you think. I think that’s important. Playing over 20-some years, your thoughts and what you value in the game. With our young players, we’re in perfect line to get everything where we want it to go.”

Thome definitely exists in his second, different baseball life, compared to the one that produced 612 career homers, including 134 with the Sox from 2006 to 2009. He slugged his 500<sup>th</sup> career homer as a Sox.

“The thing that I love is I didn’t have a schedule,” Thome said. “My last 15 years of playing was all about a schedule. I needed to get here, I needed to do this, I needed to get ready for this.

“What this did for me personally was all that stuff that sat on your shoulders kind of released and you could be an everyday guy. I never, ever had a summer vacation. To get that opportunity with Andrea and the kids was great.”

And yet parts of Thome will always be the dedicated player and the kid who grew up admiring moody Cubs slugger Dave Kingman. At age 9, Thome sneaked into the Wrigley Field dugout in an attempt to snare Kingman’s autograph. His parents, Joyce



**Thome was joined at the clinic by former Sox outfielder Mike Huff (left).**

and Chuck Thome, were astonished to see Cubs catcher Barry Foote carrying their son back out of the dugout into the box seats.

Little did Kingman, Foote and every other player on the premises that day realize the kid would outdo them all on the field and in the community.

“I’ll always have the urge (to play),” said Thome. “I love the game. You can’t play forever. I understood that. It’s fun to be around it. That’s the best thing about last year was I got to come back to the game and be around it a little bit.”

It’s obviously inspiring to be around Thome. To learn more about the relief efforts of his family and the Sox, visit [whitesox.com/Community](http://whitesox.com/Community).

Donations can be made directly to help Washington. Checks can be mailed to Morton Community Bank, c/o the city of Washington Tornado Relief Fund, 721 W. Jackson St., Morton IL 61550.

“As a police officer, you don’t often see the best in people,” said Stevens. “I’m seeing it now.”

He’s seeing it most clearly with Thome. His latest expression of a sterling character is only further enhancing chances of an express journey to Cooperstown around 2018.



**Parents got a chance to get sage advice from Jim Thome.**