

Miracles in the Rubble: Oklahoma Tornado Victims Astounded at How They Survived

Tornado survivors thanked God, sturdy closets and luck in explaining how they lived through the colossal twister that devastated an Oklahoma town and killed 24 people, an astonishingly low toll given the extent of destruction.

At least one family took refuge in a bathtub and some people shut themselves in underground shelters built into their houses when the powerful storm tore through the Oklahoma City suburb of Moore on Monday.

While rescue workers and body-sniffing dogs sifted through the ruins on Wednesday, those who escaped told their stories of survival while trying to salvage what was left of their belongings.

"Yesterday I was numb. Today I cried a lot. Now I'm on the victory side of it," said Beth Vrooman, who hid in a shelter in her garage in Moore during the storm.

The tornado's winds exceeded 200 miles per hour, flattened entire blocks and demolished two schools and a hospital on the storm's 17-mile (27-km), 50-minute rampage through central Oklahoma.

Of the 24 people killed, 10 were children, including seven who died at Plaza Towers Elementary School. About 240 others were injured. The youngest victim was 4 months old. The oldest was 63.

Listed as the highest category of storm—an EF5 on the Enhanced

Fujita Scale—the twister damaged or obliterated 12,000 to 13,000 homes and affected an estimated 33,000 people, said Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett.

President Barack Obama was due to survey the damage himself on Sunday, a White House spokesman said.

After rescue workers pulled more than 100 survivors from the debris, authorities said six people remained unaccounted for in Moore, a town of 55,000 people.

“They’re not sure if they’ve walked off or if they are in the rubble,” Albert Ashwood, director of Oklahoma’s Department of Emergency Management, told a news conference.

Experts explaining the low death toll cited a relatively long advance warning of 16 minutes for the tornado and high awareness of the dangers in a region known as Tornado Alley.

Even so, some survivors were astounded they made it.

Tonya Williams, 38, said she still felt in shock after surviving the tornado, as so many did, by taking shelter in a closet.

She put bicycle helmets on her 8-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son, collected her three dogs and pushed them all into a hall closet.

“We prayed. I could feel pressure, and being sucked. I put my body over them to try to protect them,” Williams said.

Neighbors dug them out. The roof and upper story of the house had collapsed into and around the closet. Williams and her children suffered only minor injuries.

A large wooden cross that had been hanging on an upstairs wall was found on top of them, she said.

“If you weren’t a religious person before, you are now,”

Williams said. "No word can describe it but a miracle."

Most of the victims died of blunt force injuries and five of the children died from mechanical asphyxiation, when a person's chest is compressed so that it cannot take in air, the state medical examiner said.

Jessica Parmenter, 26, and her three small dogs were at home and directly in the tornado's path. Neighbors rushed to a nearby storm shelter but she did not make it in time and took refuge in a closet. Afterward, a neighbor found Parmenter inside with her dogs. The rest of her home was gone.

"The only thing standing was the closet," said Parmenter's mother-in-law, Lori Blake. "There is a hole in the closet. It kept trying to suck her out and she kept holding on."

Tornado Alley

Some ascribed the relatively few deaths to "storm safe" shelters, but only 2.5 percent of homes in Oklahoma County were so equipped, officials said.

Moore, which has seen four tornadoes since 1998, had experienced the fury of the strongest category of tornado previously when an EF5 twister devastated the region on May 3, 1999, killing more than 40 people.

The National Weather Service had been issuing alerts for days ahead of the latest storm.

"As much as any place on earth, folks who live in Moore know what severe weather alerts mean," said Bill Bunting, chief of operations for the National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma.

Still, the largely conservative state so far has resisted government imposing requirements that new homes or schools come equipped with storm shelters.

"We're going to have that discussion as a state as well as a

community,” U.S. Representative Tom Cole, a Republican whose district includes the area hit by the tornado, told MSNBC.

Kraig Boozier, 47, took to his own small shelter in Oklahoma City and watched in shock as a fan in the wall was ripped out.

“I looked up and saw the tornado above me,” he said.

In Oklahoma City, Jackie Raper, 73, and her daughter, sought shelter in the bathtub.

“The house fell on top of her,” said Caylin Burgett, 16, who says Raper is like a grandmother to her. Raper suffered a broke arm and leg as well as bruised lungs, Burgett said.

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