

Oklahoma Mom Prays Son Through Deadly Tornado

Many times, Rita Smith has seen her son, Kye, running across the schoolyard at Briarwood Elementary with a smile on his face to meet her. Monday afternoon's scenario at the Moore, Okla., school was markedly different.

Moments after a 2-mile-wide tornado, which the National Weather Service has ranked as an EF5 (with winds of up to 200 mph), a terrified Kye, 7, along with several classmates, came running across a schoolyard cluttered with debris. He ran straight into the arms of his overwhelmed but very thankful mother.

"I thought I was going to faint," Rita Smith says. "Before I saw him, I prayed and I prayed, like I've never prayed before. When the kids came running, I recognized him from the baptism T-shirt he had on from church when he was baptized at Easter.

"All I could think about when I saw him was, 'Praise God, my little boy's OK.' It was just all so surreal. We are so blessed that he is still with us."

Tuesday morning, Smith, staying at a motel in nearby Norman, Okla., says her son suffers from bruises on his back, his legs and his elbow. She says that Kye's teacher, Cindy Lowe, most likely saved her son's life. Kye was underneath Lowe when a wall fell on them. Rita Smith says she believes Lowe is still in an area hospital, but she does not know the extent of Lowe's injuries.

Reuters News Service reported around 10 a.m. EST Tuesday that 24 people have been killed by the destruction of the tornado, not 51, which had been previously reported.

The Smiths live four blocks from Briarwood. Smith says once

the tornado passed her home, she sprinted to the school to find her son.

“Five blocks north of my house, everything was leveled,” she says. “I was about the third parent to get to the school. When I looked at Kye, I don’t even think he understood the situation. We’ve lived here for only two years, and we’ve never experienced anything like this before. We’re all still processing everything.”

Smith, who moved with her family to Moore from Atlanta and has since gotten saved and attends Pastor Steven Earp’s Elevate Church, describes the school as a “pile of rubble.”

“The yellow slide in the schoolyard was still standing, but that’s about it,” she says. “That and one wall of the cafeteria, which is literally steps from my son’s classroom.”

The National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center gave the town 16 minutes warning before the tornado touched down at 3:01 p.m. local time—nearly twice the average warning time for the area.

Cleveland County Undersheriff Rhett Burnett, who also serves as the associate pastor of Elevate Church and is a lifelong resident of the area, says the storm was “the worst [he has] seen in [his] 31 years as a cop.”

Attendees of Plaza Towers Elementary School, which Smith says is only a few minutes due east of Briarwood, weren’t as fortunate. The *Norman Daily Mail* reported that school was also reduced to debris. The newspaper reported Tuesday morning that as many as 24 children between ages 5 and 8 were missing, while seven children were found drowned Monday night after water pipes burst beneath the rubble.

The Smiths have a daughter in high school. She was unharmed during the tornado.

Smith says her husband recently took a job in Montana and that she and her two children were readying to move there in another four months.

"I've been in constant contact with my husband. He wants us to come there now," Smith says. "That's totally understandable after all of this."