

Tornadoes Took Their Home, Possessions but Not Their Resolve

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ADAMSVILLE, Tenn. – The night the tornadoes hit, Elvis and Liz Doyle huddled around a television with their three grandchildren, monitoring the weather via WBBJ and alerts on their phones.

The first alert came at 8:30 p.m. on March 31. The couple and their grandchildren raced to an aged underground shelter about a hundred feet downhill from the house. They scrambled into it, lit a kerosene lamp and sat on plastic chairs waiting. But no tornado. A second alert came an hour later. Again, a mad dash for nothing but practice. At 10:30 p.m. WBBJ clocked a twister within 10 miles of the Doyle home. Underground they went again. Debris wasn't yet flying, but the tornado soon bore down. Elvis Doyle said it sounded like a giant helicopter.

“The ground was shaking. Our ears were popping in and out. We were crying and screaming. I tried to be the strong one, but my knees were knocking. Then at 12 or 12:30 it was real quiet, and my cousin Randy came up the hill hollering for me,” Elvis recalled.

Several twisters savaged western and middle Tennessee that night. The most lethal of them drilled down for 86 miles, sweeping along a 1,400-yard-wide trail, mostly in McNairy and Hardin counties, the Doyle property in its path. Power went out in 103,000 households across the state, 300 homes were destroyed and 15 people lost their lives. Local, state and federal assistance would get there with extraordinary speed.

More remarkable were the survivors who, like the Doyles, suddenly would be putting their worlds together again. In the city of Covington, 85 miles to the west, the manager of a badly damaged apartment complex tracked down four displaced tenants just to help them apply for FEMA assistance. Then she sent FEMA staff to a nursing home to help another tenant get assistance. The Horse Plus Humane Society offered grants to survivors whose animals got hurt or lost their shelter. And in the devastated town of Readyville, a woman whose seriously damaged



house was draped by a tarp called herself lucky – because she still had a home.

Tiny Adamsville straddles McNairy and Hardin counties and may be known best as the home of crime-fighting Sheriff Buford Pusser, the inspiration for the 1973 movie “Walking Tall.” The town has a small industrial park, but the population of about 2,200 is spread out sparsely along scenic roads that wind through hills with picturesque patches of forest and meadows. Most days, the pastoral views suggest a painting more than meteorological mayhem.

When the tempest ended, the Doyles saw only barren ground where their home once stood. Their eight heavily wooded, rolling acres were left with more than 50 jack-knifed and uprooted trees and the chaotic tableau of debris that an EF-3 tornado can make. From spoons and forks to TV sets, housewares and appliances were scattered like confetti. Elvis’s pistol, rifle and prized 40-piece knife collection had all been airlifted, not to be seen again. One of the fallen trees killed granddaughter Parker’s pony. Another fell across the shelter entryway, ironically reinforcing the door against the powerful winds. Nearby, cousin Randy’s home was partly demolished.

“It felt like there ain’t nowhere to go, like losing your mama or something,” Elvis said.

Before the tornado, the retired grandparents and the children had lived in a spacious manufactured home that Elvis had renovated, adding two bedrooms for the grandchildren. When they bought the property three years ago, the shelter had been a plus. Elvis had always meant to clean it up, and three weeks before the tornado, the grandchildren, 11-year-old Gunnar and 9-year-old twins Parker and Phoenix, volunteered for the task. Liz stocked it with food and drink.

The shelter may have saved them, but the Doyles were fortunate, according to FEMA mitigation experts. They were lucky the tree fell on the door – the tornado’s estimated wind speed of between 136 mph and 165 mph might have vacuumed the door and the family into the heavens. At 136 mph, winds can overturn a train, debark trees, toss heavy vehicles and cause severe damage to shopping malls.

FEMA recommends an easily installed, prefabricated, in-ground safe room, furnished with a modern door assembly specifically made to withstand extreme wind and wind-borne debris. A door failure can leave occupants at great risk of



injury or death. Another concern is a shelter's distance from the home. Occupants need to leave their house early enough to avoid the risk of being hit by flying debris. Protection from stormwater and groundwater is a special challenge for in-ground safe rooms. As an alternative, community safe rooms can provide protection for many individuals during severe weather.

FEMA hosts the **Safe Room Helpline** to respond to inquiries about safe rooms. Email Saferoom@fema.dhs.gov or call at **866-927-2104**. For FEMA's complete guide to safe rooms, visit [Taking Shelter from the Storm](#), which can be saved as a *PDF* file for more leisurely browsing. Also, the U.S. Small Business Administration may help fund construction of a safe room. Approved SBA disaster loans can be increased up to 20% for mitigation work, including a safe room. For information, call **800-659-2955** or email DisasterCustomerService@sba.gov.

The Doyles have plans to upgrade their shelter down the road, but their recovery is now in an earlier stage, where replacing daily essentials is the priority. Liz still winces when she thinks of the immediate aftermath of the tornado and recalls the complete emptiness she felt. Lacking alternatives, the family had squeezed into a motel. Shortly after that low point, the recovery engines kicked in. The American Red Cross set up an emergency center in Adamsville, offering comforts as well as practical help such as putting storm survivors in touch with FEMA. Volunteers provided food and clothing. God's Pit Crew and Samaritan's Purse, groups that help disaster survivors, were there and helped clean up the Doyle property. Elvis applied for FEMA assistance, and the recovery began to take shape.

A FEMA grant enabled them to purchase a used three-bedroom manufactured home, delivered May 3. Liz and the children have been painting and cleaning it. Elvis, a retired building contractor, put in a new front door and erected a new power pole to run electricity to the house. He's also installing new wiring and a water connection. He plans to build porches as well as upgrade the shelter.

Until the home is livable in a month or so, the Doyles are staying in a nephew's small travel trailer, running a generator for power. That isn't how the couple imagined their retirement. Elvis and Liz had thought they'd travel, drive down Route 66 to Arizona with the kids, whose parents are unable to support them. The children are back in school now, the grandparents busily driving them to their baseball games, trying to keep the young minds off their losses.



Elvis and Liz say they haven't recovered yet. How will they know they've recovered? "When we feel normal again," said Liz. For now, they are reckoning how to afford new mattresses and bedding, but still thinking about that drive to Arizona.



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