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Alumna's Home Spared in Oklahoma Tornado's Devastation

June 10, 2013

Kathy Young '06

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – When a tornado touched down on May 20 in Newcastle, Okla., 20 miles west of her home in the town of Moore, Illinois Wesleyan University alumna Kathy Young wasn't too worried.

After all, twisters don't normally stay on the ground too long. But as the storm sped through one neighborhood after another, reaching the western edge of Moore, Young '06, her fiancé David Burge and his parents — in town for Burge's graduation from law school the previous day — decided it was time to take cover.

"We all crammed in a closet, but the weatherman on the radio continued to emphasize that an above-ground bathtub or closet wouldn't cut it in this type of storm," said Young. "These were words I had never heard before. Moore residents were instructed to either get underground immediately, or get in their vehicles and get out of town any way they could."

Young reached for her cell phone and messaged a neighbor, who advised Young and her family to run to her home to take cover in the storm shelter. The four decided that was their best chance and ran through an eerie calm to the neighbor's home. Just before the five people entered the shelter, Young looked in the storm's direction.

"It was massive," she said. "If I hadn't known it was a tornado, I would have guessed it was some sort of weird fog or smoke from a massive fire." Young had just enough time to snap a picture on her cell phone before they all piled into an underground steel-walled rectangular shelter Young estimates was four feet wide and eight feet long.

Once inside the shelter, they felt the ground shake and heard a low-pitched rumble — a sound Young describes as a cross between a train and an earthquake. When the rumble subsided, they peeked out and learned they had been spared. About a mile south of their street, others were not so fortunate. The National Weather Service later classified the storm as a top-of-the-scale EF5. The storm left a 17-mile path of destruction, damaged or destroyed about 4,000 homes, and killed 24 people.

Young said Moore residents were urged to stay clear of the areas that were hit, so her first views of the destruction were seen on TV. Those weather reporters on the afternoon of May 20 were right — in this storm, closets and bathtubs provided no protection whatsoever, Young said. Many of the businesses she frequented are completely gone. Most of her good friends in Moore were also spared, although she has acquaintances that have lost nearly all their possessions. The families of these acquaintances, thankfully, are safe.



The Wesleyan alumna has lived in Moore just over a year, moving to the community to be with Burge after completing her Ph.D. research in biology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Young continues writing her dissertation from her home in Moore, and plans to graduate from Baylor later this year. She and Burge would ideally like to move west, but that will depend on the job market for both of them.

Young snapped a cell phone photo of the EF5 tornado as it approached her neighborhood in Moore, Okla.



A native of Houston, Young said she was familiar with tornado warnings, but confesses she has not adjusted to what seems to be weekly threats of potentially deadly springtime storms in Oklahoma.

“Outside of the tornado threats, I love living in Moore,” she said. “The people, so down-to-earth, remind me of those I grew up around in Texas. And Moore is the type of town where, if you were born here, you tend to stay. As such, many, if not most, of these residents have been through at least one serious twister before, and they were not nearly as surprised by the destruction of this one as I was.”

Most amazing to Young, however, is not only the sheer destruction one strong storm cell can bring, but the outpouring of support from across Oklahoma and the nation.

“Local universities and apartment complexes are offering free units to families who lost their homes,” Young said. “Car dealerships are providing free month-long rentals. Those in need can get free prescription glasses, roof patches, window replacements, cell phone charging, wi-fi, laundry done, warm meals, clothes, baby formula, diapers....almost anything you can think of, a local company is offering for free here.”

In addition, Young said many of these same local companies are offering large percentages of their profits to the American Red Cross for relief efforts.

She noted local hardware stores immediately sold out of work gloves, due in part to the amazing influx of volunteers. “There were never any true shortages to my knowledge because of the overwhelming amount of relief the town enjoyed from neighbors near and far,” said Young. “As soon as the dust settles and hardware stores restock, I will be out there, too, and there will be opportunities for months to come.”

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