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## Tuscaloosa tornado experience shared in harrowing account by University of Alabama student

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The following story originally appeared on [Randy Robbins' Facebook page](#). It is reprinted here with permission.

TUSCALOOSA, Alabama -- This is my experience during the tornado that swept through Alberta and Tuscaloosa in as much detail as I can muster with the medication I am on. I need to put this down for therapeutic reasons and for others to read because I can't keep re-telling this story.

If you are to take anything away from this story it is two things: 1) God saved so many people that day including me; and 2) disasters bring out the absolute best in some people...and the absolute worst in others.

I am going to write down the events exactly as I remember them while I still can. I will add details that I have gathered from accounts by my neighbor and judging from materials stuck inside my body. I would also like to point out that any person I don't reference by name (such as neighbor) I had not really met before. Here goes:

At roughly 4 p.m. on April 27, 2011, I was sitting in Finance 414 class listening to a presentation on industries, and the severe weather alarms went off and the University canceled classes for the rest of the day. I considered staying on campus, but I saw everyone else leaving and decided I would be fine going to my apartment (*face palm*). This is probably my biggest regret of my life purely for the fact that I let the actions of others sway my opinion and nearly kill me.

I walked to my truck that was parked roughly a mile away near the Coliseum. I knew we were in for a storm when the wind knocked my backpack off my shoulder halfway there. I made it to my truck and drove to my apartment that was located at the intersection of University Blvd. and 25th Avenue East in Alberta City, AL. During my drive, I received several texts from both my older and younger sisters warning me that some severe storms were heading to my area. Naturally, I discounted them as hysteria and paranoia and continued on my merry way.

I got to my apartment at roughly 4:30 p.m. and popped a frozen pizza in the oven for dinner. I turned on my computer and pulled up my assignments for the night. As I began working through my homework, I got some more texts from friends warning me of the weather. I assured them all that I would be perfectly safe in my *sturdy* apartment. The timer for the pizza went off so I got it out of the oven and took two slices to my room. I hadn't eaten much for lunch so I was ravenous. I ate nearly the entire pizza. This small detail probably saved my life. More on that later.

The power in my apartment went out at roughly 5 p.m., so I opened the shades on my window to read and look outside. I noticed the trees behind my apartment swaying at a steep angle. Then I decided I should probably close all windows and doors. I did so.



University of Alabama student Randy Robbins shares his tale of survival through the EF-4 tornado that struck Tuscaloosa, Alabama on April 27, 2011.

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Just then my buddy Sean Philips texted me that I should find cover. I was coming up with a clever retort about how paranoid he is being when my ears popped really hard and I heard what sounded like a train outside my window. I had watched enough news to know this meant a tornado.

I jumped into my closet and slammed the door shut. I felt the whole building shaking, so I grabbed the door knob and held it shut with all my strength. Then I heard tearing and ripping noises which had to be my back wall tearing away.

At this point, I wanna point out that if any of these events had occurred slightly differently or in a different order, I would have been buried.

Anyway, the back wall tore away from the building, and the door to my closet began shaking open and I kept pulling it back closed. After a couple seconds of this struggle, the door and I were sucked out of the closet and through the back wall.

I never rose more than a couple feet off the ground, but judging from memories of where things were, I flew about 40 feet total. The winds flung me from the back wall into the chain link fence 10-15 feet behind my apartment with enough force to leave bruises of the chain links in my side. It then flung me back into some piles of rubble where I was then rolled around on the ground for about 15 seconds before it subsided slightly.

I looked up from my prone position and I was lying on tile floor and I could see my neighbor lying on top of her baby trying to shield her. I also heard myself screaming and realized I had been screaming the entire time but hadn't noticed.

The winds were beginning to pick up again so I ran over to my neighbor and threw myself on top of them to try and shield them. Somewhere along the way I stepped on a piece of wood with enough force to shove a 3-inch piece through the bottom of my foot.

Please take note, this was not an act of heroism, but desperation. As far as my concussed mind could think, I truly believed during that split second that we three were the only beings left in a world that had dissolved around us. I acted to try and preserve the only other people left in this Hell so I wouldn't be alone if I survived.

I laid on top of my neighbor and immediately the winds picked up again. I was bombarded with (judging from wounds and what is still embedded in my back at the time of this writing) glass, roofing shingles, pieces of wood, and a Bic pen. LOL. I know this for sure because I pulled it out of my side when I stood up.



Randy Robbins counts himself blessed to have survived, having crawled from the rubble of a scene similar to this one in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, after an EF-4 tornado plowed through the city on April 27, 2011. (Izzy Gould/Tuscaloosa Bureau)

The storm finally dissipated after roughly 10-20 seconds, and I slowly stood up. Due to adrenaline and shock, I did not notice any of the injuries I suffered. However, I did notice that I could barely hear anything and my ears were bleeding from the pressure of the storm (the earlier popping that alerted me of the tornado). Everyone's ears were. The poor baby's ears were pouring blood.

At this point, I surveyed my body. My jeans, watch, glasses, and shirt had been ripped from my body. Somehow, I was still holding my iPhone in my right hand. Just then a call came through. It was my older sister, Christina. I could only stare at the phone in disbelief before answering. I don't remember our conversation, but

she later relayed it to me. Here it is as she remembers it:

*Christy: Randy??? Randy???*

*Me: Kiki! My apartment; it's gone. The baby is bleeding. I lost my glasses. My foot is bleeding bad. There are people stuck. I have to go.*

I then hung up the phone because people were screaming from within piles of rubble.

I limped over to the nearest pile where one of my neighbor's head was sticking out from beneath a section of roof. I pulled off a couple small pieces of wood before collapsing. I think I blacked out for a couple seconds.

Next thing I remember, he is digging himself out. He comes to check on me and almost slips in the puddle of blood and water at my feet. He tears off his shirt and ties it around my foot (I had no shoes or socks on before it hit). He helps me stand and we look around at the damage.

I see my childhood friend Austin and his girlfriend Mary and their dog that live six doors down

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from me. They are standing in their bathroom. I yell to them and then begin trying to crawl out.

At some point I believe a neighbor (maybe Mary) throws me a woman's loafer which I put on my left foot to protect it. It was a left shoe that was about 2 sizes too small but I barely noticed. I can't walk because of my foot so I throw some sections of my couch across the short wall of sharp debris between me and what's left of the parking lot and begin crawling on my hands and knees across. Due to the composition and layout of the debris, I am forced to crawl on my belly under my truck to get out (it was then parked in my living room and totaled).

I finally reach the parking lot covered in blood, dirt, oil, and sheetrock dust. I lend a neighbor my phone and then I spot my friend and neighbor, Brandon and hobble to him to check him out. Amazingly, he is unhurt. We both hear someone yelling that another storm is about to touch down in the area so we immediately take off to find shelter.

I lose track of everyone else. Austin and Mary help dig out some neighbors. Brandon lends me his shoulder and we begin walking (me hopping) to the Piggly Wiggly down the street. We hear that they are not letting people in so we detour to the local Save-A-Lot and ask the manager if he is letting people in. He lets us in. I sit on the nearest checkout station while Brandon runs to find first aid supplies. He finds peroxide, paper towels, and scotch tape. I use what little Spanish I know to try to cheer up a small Hispanic child that was crying near me.

I begin to feel very faint from blood loss so I start chugging as much Gatorade as possible to keep blood sugar up so I don't pass out. The pizza I ate earlier also probably kept me awake and alive. Brandon begins cleaning and wrapping my foot. We then see that there is still wood sticking out. We wrap paper towels and tape over it to try to stop the blood loss.

I then begin to feel a slight itchy, burning sensation on my back so I asked him to take a look. He says that I have a few cuts on my back. I'm glad he didn't tell me the extent to which it was messed up.

We stay in the store and wait for the next tornado to touch down. I sit on a rolling cart so that Brandon could quickly wheel me to the back if it came. We were all getting ready to run to the back and lock ourselves inside the freezer. I tell Brandon to gather some food and water in case we are trapped inside the store. I feel prepared, so I try to slow breathing and heart rate to slow blood flow.

Some time later (I began losing track of time and events) we see people run into the bank to steal money, and cops arrest them. This pisses us all off for obvious reasons.

Brandon and I walk (and hop) up to the Texaco because we hear they have set up a triage center there. We get there and they turn us away, so we go back to the store. I am exhausted from blood loss and hopping everywhere.

I should point out that I am hopping down the street wearing only my silver cross necklace and boxers and the homemade bandages on my foot. It's funny now, not so much then.

We stay in the store for a while. A woman who was in the store earlier comes running back and leads a cop to where I'm lying. I owe her and Brandon both my life. I would have bled out within a couple hours if that cop hadn't found me. He calls in a truck and I jump in the back and they drive me to the hospital. I ask for pen in the bed of the truck so I can write my name and medical info and mom's phone number on my body in case I pass out again and can't talk to nurses.

We get to the hospital and I am assigned a randomized name for legal reasons (Raja Ed Downtime). I ask over and over again for them to call my mom to check on Jessica because she is home alone in Homewood and I heard a storm passed by there.

I will never forget the nurse who helped me, Nurse Jackie. She checked up on me throughout my X-Rays and CT scans and stitches over the next 6-8 hours. I felt like I was her only patient although she likely had scores of them at this time. I plan on thanking her personally as soon as I can travel.

This is where the story ends. I am just one person among hundreds, possibly thousands of people hurt in a city where neighbors and strangers alike risked their own lives to save each other. I tried to help who I could any way I could, and I owe my life to many others.

Thank you, Nurse Jackie, for consoling me while I was alone for those many hours. Thank you, Brandon, for lending me a friendly shoulder and thinking only of others. Thank you, Lady from Save-A-Lot, for finding me a ride to the hospital. Thank you, Mom, for forcing Delta airlines to let you off of a plane preparing to take off. Thank you, Jimmy and Jessica, for looking throughout hospitals (and morgue) for me for hours before finding me. Thank you to the men and women of the National Guard, fire departments, and police departments around the state. Many of us wouldn't have made it without y'all. And, of course, thank you, GOD. Even as the clothes and material possessions were ripped from my body, your symbol stayed firmly around my neck and in my heart.

It is long, but I can already feel a massive weight lifted from my chest. This note has done its job. If you are reading this, you are my friend and share the honor of calling me "pal." ;)

*Randy Robbins is a student at the University of Alabama and a native of Homewood.*

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