

Storms

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In Concord, a small town outside Birmingham that was ravaged by a tornado, Randy Guyton's family got a phone call from a friend warning them to take cover. They rushed to the basement garage, piled into a Honda Ridgeline and listened to the roar as the twister devoured the house in seconds. Afterward, they could see outside through the shards of their home and scrambled out.

"The whole house caved in on

top of that car," he said. "Other than my boy screaming to the Lord to save us, being in that car is what saved us."

Son Justin remembers the dingy white cloud moving quickly toward the house.

"To me it sounded like destruction," the 22-year-old said. "It was a mean, mean roar. It was awful."

At least three people died in a Pleasant Grove subdivision southwest of Birmingham, where residents trickled back Thursday to survey the damage. Greg Harrison's neighborhood was somewhat unscathed, but he remains haunted by the wind, thunder and lightning as they built to a

crescendo, then suddenly stopped.

"Sick is what I feel," he said. "This is what you see in Oklahoma and Kansas. Not here. Not in the South."

Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley said his state had confirmed 204 deaths. There were 33 deaths in Mississippi, 33 in Tennessee, 14 in Georgia, five in Virginia and one in Kentucky. Hundreds if not thousands of people were injured — nearly 800 in Tuscaloosa alone.

Some of the worst damage was about 50 miles southwest of Pleasant Grove in Tuscaloosa, a city of more than 83,000 that is home to the University of Ala-

bama. The storms destroyed the city's emergency management center, so the school's Bryant-Denny Stadium was turned into a makeshift one. School officials said two students were killed, though they did not say how they died. Finals were canceled and commencement was postponed.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walter Maddox told reporters that police and the National Guard will impose a curfew at 10 p.m. Thursday, and 8 p.m. the next night.

Authorities have been searching for survivors so far, but Maddox said they will begin using cadaver dogs on Friday.

A tower-mounted news camera in Tuscaloosa captured images of an astonishingly thick, powerful tornado flinging debris as it leveled neighborhoods.

That twister and others Wednesday were several times more severe than a typical tornado, which is hundreds of yards wide, has winds around 100 mph and stays on the ground for a few miles, said research meteorologist Harold Brooks at the Storm Prediction Center.

"There's a pretty good chance some of these were a mile wide, on the ground for tens of miles and had wind speeds over 200 mph," he said.

The loss of life is the greatest

from an outbreak of U.S. tornadoes since April 1974, when the weather service said 315 people were killed by a storm that swept across 13 Southern and Midwestern states.

Brooks said the tornado that struck Tuscaloosa could be an EF5 — the strongest category of tornado, with winds of more than 200 mph — and was at least the second-highest category, an EF4.

Search and rescue teams fanned out to dig through the rubble of devastated communities that bore eerie similarities to the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when town after town lay flattened for nearly 90 miles.

Hoffman

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Once in Nicaragua, for the first six days before the filming of the show started, contestants were not allowed to talk to anyone, and there were cameras everywhere.

"We were taken out to the campground straight from the airport," she explained. "We were walked in a straight line and put in blacked-out vans, where for three hours we were driven to the location. After the first six days, we were taken to our camps and just left. That was the first time I had talked to any of the other contestants."

Hoffman said life in camp was almost unbearable.

"We didn't have soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, toilet paper — we used a dug-out and leaves," she said. "They gave us our buffs, rice and water containers and that was it. ... Our shelter fell apart three times in the first three days."

In her first three days of the contest, Hoffman said she didn't sleep and was living on a quarter-cup of rice per day.

"I started feeling guilty that I was out there playing a game when my family needed me at home," she said. "All guilt is, is anger directed at yourself. I thought of my family all the time — and in reality this was the best thing I ever did for them."

Hoffman said she was ready to quit when longtime NFL coach Jimmy Johnson, who was one of her team members, pulled her aside and asked what her family would think if she quit.

"I realized that even if I fell, I needed to find the strength to rise, because if I put my mind to it, I can accomplish anything," Hoffman said. "From then on, I started trying."

Hoffman said she learned many life lessons while playing the game of "Survivor," but perhaps the most important one is that she was stronger than she thought she was.

"I accomplished things I never thought I would," she said.

When Hoffman made it to Day 11 the teams were mixed up; instead of being a follower, she had the opportunity to be a captain.

On Day 19, she made it to "the merge" where both teams were joined. She continued to grow in mental strength even as her physical strength was failing.

"We had been eating two shells full of rice per day," Hoffman said. "It became about finding the ability to survive to the end, finding the ability inside yourself, to draw from within. Quitting is easy. Why quit? ... I had to find the mental willpower and desire to go on."

Hoffman made it to day 38 in the 39-day game, finishing in fourth place.

"As we were getting ready to go to the final tribal council, I pulled the other three (contestants remaining) together and I told them, 'If it is my time to go, it's my time to go. I won't be angry or bitter,'" she said. "I was one day away from winning 'Survivor.' But I don't say I came up one day short, I say I lasted 38 days long."

In all, Hoffman was gone from her family for nearly two months; she lost 22 pounds but she gained something much more valuable.

"When I got off the plane, all of my family was there. My son came up to me and gave me a hug and whispered in my ear that he was proud of me," she said. "It was all worth it to hear one of my children say they were proud of me. I also learned I am not the same person I was when I left. I now appreciate the little things like a bed, a light, a shower."

Hoffman said if each person would begin to appreciate what they have and work to change the things they don't like, they can accomplish anything.

"Find the desire and determination to do it," she said. "Make a new ending for yourself. Leave the baggage behind in the past. Live life 'Survivor' style."

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