

“I Just Never Thought it Would Hit Us”: Tornado Survivor Evonne Richards on How Being Prepared Saved Her Family, Helped Her Community

While 60 percent of Americans say preparation for natural or man-made disasters is very important to them, only a staggering 17 percent of Americans claim to be very prepared for an emergency situation, according to a new survey commissioned by the Ad Council. Apison, Tennessee, native Evonne Richards lived in the area uneventfully for more than 30 years. Like many others, her thoughts about potential disasters were, “it always happens to somebody else.” She said, “I figured we lived in a corner of Tennessee where we didn’t have to worry about earthquakes or tornadoes. I felt sorry for the people that I’d see on TV, but I just never thought it would hit us.”

But on April 27, 2011, all that changed. A tornado tore through the town of Apison and demolished the Richards’ property. Fortunately, before disaster struck Evonne and her family had visited Ready.gov and learned about the steps for preparedness. They were ready with the essentials, including food and water, which allowed them to stay safe at home until the roads were cleared and rescue crews could help them out of the demolished area.

September is National Preparedness Month, sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)’s *Ready* Campaign in partnership with Citizen Corps and the Ad Council. In honor of this observance, Evonne shared her story and reminds all others to take the steps toward preparedness:

1. [Be informed](#) about the types of emergencies that can happen in your area and their appropriate responses.
2. Make a family [emergency plan](#).
3. Build an [emergency supply kit](#).
4. [Get involved](#) by finding opportunities to support community preparedness.

Read our interview with Evonne Richards to hear and learn from her story. Preparing for a disaster—long before it happened—helped her and her family survive one of life’s greatest challenges. Her inspirational story shows us the importance of being prepared.

FEMA: What inspired you to prepare your home and your family for a disaster?

Evonne Richards: With all of the increasing natural disasters throughout the country, I just realized I needed to be doing some preparation. That kind of spurred me to see what I could do to take care of my family at least for a short amount of time until help could get to us in case something happened.

On the way to town one day, I saw a billboard that was put out by Ready.gov. So when I came home, I went to their website, and they have an amazing set of lists that tell you everything that you need to do for each type of natural disaster. I knew that I didn’t need to worry about floods because I live up on a hill, but I did figure that tornadoes could be a possibility and even earthquakes could be a possibility, so I just started following their lists.

FEMA: What steps did you take to prepare?

Evonne Richards: After reading up on Ready.gov, I knew that the most important thing for my family would be water, and the next would be food, and so I started taking steps to get those supplies together.

FEMA: What happened when the tornado hit your home?

Evonne Richards: My son had been to school in town that morning, and he came home talking about how there were stoplights hanging in the middle of the road and some even down on the pavement. We thought that was strange, but we didn't stop to think there might be tornadoes going through the area. The weather here looked good. I wasn't really concerned.

Then the lights flickered and went out. I came back by the kitchen window and I leaned out and I turned to my husband and I said, "Something sounds weird." He yelled, "Run!"

I didn't have time to question him. We all ran down the stairway, and my husband kept pushing us back under the stairs and saying, "get back, get back." Pretty soon we just heard this boom, boom, boom—big crashes—and my husband said, "I think we're losing some trees." My son grabbed his ears and said, "Oh mom, my ears hurt."

It happened so fast that I didn't have time to think. After a moment, we went up the stairs and my husband started to open the stairway door and he turned around to me and said, "You realize we may not have a house." From the time he yelled run until we opened that door and came back up was 30 seconds, and so your mind doesn't even have time to process what's going on.

But, we were safe.

Of course, everything was trashed—there was a big hole in the roof. We had trees all over the house. We tried to clean it up some but by 2 a.m. we were exhausted, so shook the insulation out of our bedding and just crawled in. We were so exhausted.

FEMA: What thoughts were going through your mind as you experienced the tornado?

Evonne Richards: Your first thought is survival. Then you call everybody and you tell them you're okay. If we hadn't have called and said we're okay, people could have spent a lot of time in the dark of the night trying to find our house, not knowing that we were way up on a hill a quarter mile away. It was very difficult to reach our family. I had to call about seven times before any call would get through because the lines were so busy. Now our cell phone plan allows texting, which can easily go through when we need help.

It's been a very traumatic time. It's something you never, ever get over, and it's still a shock. We live in what looks like a war zone because we lost 20 acres of trees.

We have so much to be grateful for, though. I've learned a lot of compassion and I'm anxious to help other people because I now understand what it feels like and the shock and the trauma that you go through. Even if there are no medical injuries, there's still a lot there, and there's a lot that we can do to help somebody else.

FEMA: How did the steps you took to prepare help you and your family to get through the tornado and its aftermath?

Evonne Richards: My husband predicted it would take him probably two weeks with his chainsaw to get our driveway clear. By us being prepared enough to take care of ourselves, not only was I comfortable, we could stay in the house.

What I had been doing was just collecting plastic jugs to store water. I had about 60 gallons. That gave us water to drink. It gave us something to flush toilets with—because we have old toilets and it takes five gallons, we had to carry five jugs into the house to flush toilets.

I also stashed a few things in the way of food— oatmeal, boxes of raisins, cans of beans and some rice. That's not a fantastic meal, but it is a complete meal that can help you get through until you can get out and buy food. So we had the basics of what we needed. We also had a camp stove and fuel so we could cook.

FEMA: How do you think that preparation helped your community as well?

Evonne Richards: By us being okay, the rescue crews could go on to help other people like our closest neighbors that needed help. That was a blessing because it may have saved our neighbors' lives. The rescue people walked along the road, and whenever they found some indication that there was a driveway, they would start to try to find people. It would have been hours before they got to us, but since we had called friends, they were able to alert the crews that we were okay. Our friend's son came by to help us and he heard our neighbors calling for help—they had been blown out of the top of their house, which was just disintegrated. He was able to go get an EMT to help and eventually they got them to the hospital, and they're fine.

Since then I have been collecting addresses and names of all our neighbors and talking to them one by one so that if something should hit again, I can call different neighbors and ask what we can do to help or how we can help.

FEMA: What advice would you give to other families who may think that something like this would never happen to them?

Evonne Richards: I would definitely say do some preparation. Just because you're prepared doesn't mean it's going to happen to you, but it's awfully nice to be able to stay in your own home if you can. We knew the structure was safe. It was nice to know that I could take care of my family and free up rescue workers to go help somebody else instead of trying to bring us water.

Having enough supplies to get you through until the roads clear—it's just kind of comforting. When you've been through trauma, you need at least food and water and a place to sleep. We were overwhelmed with the volunteers and what they did to help people, but I want to be able to basically take care of myself and my family. Preferably, I'd like to be the one out there helping

my neighbors instead of having to worry about myself and that preparation gave us the peace of mind to do that, eventually.

I would encourage people to go to Ready.gov because they have a list for every [type of emergency](#). Have a [plan](#). It's not expensive to do a little bit of preparation, and it's a lot of security to know that you don't have to worry.