

Community Continues to Enjoy Benefits of Safe Room Investment

Calumet, OK – It took a small community a year and a half to come up with its share of the money to fund a much-needed safe room, but they are still counting the years of benefit it continues to bring.

When community officials in the rural town of Calumet in Canadian County applied through the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management (OEM) for a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant to build a safe room at Maple School, they were aware of their 25 percent match for the cost of the mitigation project.

The question was – How to raise the money?
The answer – community fundraisers.

“We got the safe room in 2003,” said Maple School Principal Art Eccard. “Since I’ve been here, we have had to use it around four to five times.”

Serving double duty as the school’s library and safe room, the 1,080-square-foot reinforced concrete building is the designated place of refuge for Maple School’s 160 students and 20 staff as well as local residents looking for a safe place to go during storms. The shelter’s capacity is 212, which means that even with the entire student body and staff inside, there is still room left over for others trying to take shelter.

“We had people from the community working on the building,” said Eccard. “That’s why we feel that it belongs to the community. Of course, the school does too.”

Four or five keys for the safe room were distributed to leaders in the community. “That’s what we said we would do,” Eccard continued. “We’d put the keys out there so that even if school is closed, the community would have access. Everybody knows everybody, so issuing or deciding on who gets a key wasn’t an issue.”

As the school’s administrator, Eccard considers himself lucky. “So far, each time tornado warnings have been issued, school has not been in session. But folks in the community occupied it.”

While some trips to the safe room resulted in false alarms, Eccard vividly recalls an incident where the room’s value was clearly evident – a tornado on May 24, 2011 caused extensive damage to the community including Maple School.

“I was at home and some of the people in the community called me and said they were headed toward the safe room,” Eccard recalled. “So I came out just to be a representative of the school. Things got rough. My truck was in the [school] bus barn. The barn and my truck were totaled.”



Existing safe room.



That tornado also lifted the roof off the school's cafeteria, blew out some of the windows and ripped the siding off a section of the main building. It destroyed the maintenance building and blew the door completely off the school mailbox. "But 13 of us were safe inside the safe room," said Eccard.

Nelaine Monroe, an administrative assistant at the school, said the safe room proved its worth again on May 31, 2013, when another tornado hit Calumet.

"You could see the clouds swirling. They looked angry," Monroe recalled of that day. With a dozen others, she took shelter in the school's safe room for three hours as debris flew all around. "Cattle feeders and trailers were being picked up by the wind," she said.

Both Eccard and Monroe said they feel the safe room has continued to prove its worth.

"I love the safe room," said Monroe. "Even as a member of the community, I love it. It's a good size and it makes me feel safe. And it's also the library. Kids are accustomed to coming in here, so they don't feel threatened. That helps. It's kind of a scary thing for kids to have to take tornado precautions."

"Before we got the safe room, our students and staff were bussed to nearby homes that had storm cellars," Eccard added. "That was a great risk.

Now our students and staff, as well as parents, can feel at ease."

For more information on safe rooms, log onto www.fema.gov, www.NSSA.cc, and www.ok.gov/oem/.



Damage to the safe room from the tornado.