

Twenty Survive in Neighbor's Safe Room

Moore, OK – When Jerry and Linda Woods bought a home with a safe room, they made their neighbors aware that they were also welcome to use it.

That's exactly what happened on May 20, 2013. When the warning sirens sounded, 20 people from the neighborhood crammed shoulder to shoulder into the Woods' safe room as a violent tornado ripped through Moore.

Now the neighbors are calling them angels. Among the signs and messages they have placed on the crumpled bricks of the Woods home is one that says, "Thank You, Jerry. U Saved Our Lives."



Arrow points to the safe room entrance.

"Without the Woods, we would have died," said Penny Phillips. "If they hadn't been there for us, we would have gone to the middle of the house under the stairs." The Phillips' house – including the stairs – was completely destroyed by the tornado.

The safe room, an old style, underground unit, is located about 12 feet from the back of the Woods' house. It measures eight-by-ten feet and was designed to hold 12 people. During the storm, it accommodated nearly twice that many people and three dogs. The Woods made sure it was registered with the fire department and that neighbors, including those new to the community, were aware of its presence.

"We've been in the safe room many times because we don't believe in dithering around when the sirens go off," said Woods, a retired minister and disabled veteran.

Secured underground, they could hear the tornado churn through the neighborhood, tossing bricks and other debris against the safe room door. "It made a horrendous noise," he recalled.

When everything quieted down, Woods checked the safe room vent to make sure he could still see light on the other side – a sign they were not trapped inside. That was good news to everyone. He also told his neighbors to be prepared for the damage they would see outside.

When everyone emerged, they could smell gas and see debris scattered everywhere. Many of the homes had been destroyed and others significantly damaged. Everyone realized that the only place they could have survived or escaped injury was in the Woods' safe room. The Woods have already purchased a new home. It doesn't have a safe room, but the Woods says they are going to install one as soon as possible. It too will be outside the house so that the neighbors will have access.

For more information on safe rooms, log onto: www.fema.gov/safe-rooms.