

Safe Room Provides Double Coverage in El Reno

El Reno, OK – A clear sky was hard to come by in El Reno, Oklahoma, on May 31, 2013. It was foggy and raining when Kelly Gatz, her husband, and four dogs had to take refuge, not once, but twice, in their safe room, when a violent EF-5 tornado left a devastating path of destruction. The record-breaking tornado damaged the Gatz's home but the family was not injured.

“Growing up in the El Reno area, it seems that tornadoes develop all the time. There are a lot of storms out here. One day I saw one hit the nearby airport,” said Gatz.

Knowing the history of tornadoes in the area, and remembering the damage caused by a 1999 tornado, the couple decided to include a safe room in the construction of their new 3,100 square foot home, completed in 2004, with an underground safe room installed in the garage. The decision to include the \$2,500 safe room proved to be a wise one.

The day the tornadoes hit, Gatz was standing on the patio watching the weather deteriorate. When she noticed storm chasers in the area, she knew it was time for her, her husband and their four dogs to go into the safe room.

As they listened to the tornado make the most bizarre sounds, Gatz said they knew that their home was sustaining a lot of damage.

When everything was quiet, the family emerged from the safe room only to discover that they were about to get hit again. As winds started blowing, and while heading back into the safe room, Gatz was lifted up by the powerful winds. She was saved by her husband when he quickly grabbed onto her and pulled her into the safe room.

Before they closed the safe room door, a passing by truck driver ran from his vehicle and jumped in as well. He barely made it before the tornado hit the house the second time.

“They say the tornadoes that hit us were a rare multi-vortex,” said Gatz.



The Gatz's home after the tornado.



Entrance to the Gatz's safe room.



After the tornadoes finally passed, the family tried to get out of their safe room but they were trapped inside by debris blocking their exit. The roof over the garage had fallen on top of the safe room door. Luckily a next door neighbor came by after several minutes and freed them.

When they finally emerged, the Gatz family, dogs included, was shocked to see their home's extensive damage. Their home had been reduced to rubble, a livestock trailer was in the middle of what was the living room and items were scattered everywhere. The only room that was not damaged was the hall closet.

Although the house was a total loss, Gatz explained, "I am just glad our lives were spared and we have the opportunity to be surrounded by family. The house can be rebuilt." She was also thankful that she had the foresight to collect important documents and her husband's business papers and put them in the safe room ahead before the storm. "He has used all of them since the tornadoes," said Gatz.

The safe room measures 6 by 5 feet and consists of a steel shell encased in concrete on the garage floor. Air is provided through the door rail system.

"This one is built to accommodate only six people and we were crowded inside. I like the style but I want a larger safe room when we build the next time," said Gatz.

For additional information on safe rooms, visit: www.fema.gov/safe-rooms.