

A Henryville school bus lies within the wreckage of a diner.

OUT OF THE

TORNADO

DONT MISS THE VIDEO!
SEE MORE ABOUT THE TORNADO!

Every week, I receive dozens of letters and e-mails from readers of “I Survived,” my book series about disasters and other dramatic events from history. But never had I gotten an e-mail like the one that appeared in my in-box on April 29.

It was from three fifth-grade girls named Shelby, Dayna, and Lyric. They were writing to tell me about a massive tornado that had struck their small town of Henryville, Indiana.

“We have so many stories to tell you about that crazy day when the tornado destroyed

Phillip Scott Andrews/AP

DO

**A STORY OF
DISASTER
AND
MIRACLES**

our school and our town,” they wrote. “We want you to write our story, and we want to help you.”

Four days later, I flew to Louisville, Kentucky, and then drove 20 miles north into the beautiful green hills of southern Indiana. I met Shelby, Lyric, and Dayna along

with dozens of other students and teachers who survived the tornado. What follows is their inspiring story. I am honored to be a small part of it.

Lauren Tarshis
Editor, Storyworks



Storyworks editor Lauren Tarshis with Henryville's Lyric, Dayna, and Shelby

“We want you to write our story, and we want to help you.”

Photo courtesy of Lauren Tarshis



Causes and Effects As you read, look for causes of tornadoes and their effects on people, nature, and property.



LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S
10 WORDS IN BOLD

The morning of March 2, 2012, was a busy one for the fifth-grade students in Mrs. Goodknight's class at Henryville Elementary School.

There was morning meeting with poems to read, jokes to share, and tests to prepare for. Students sang "You're a Grand Old Flag" using sign language and talked about Dr. Seuss, whose birthday was being celebrated throughout the school.

"It was just an ordinary day," says student Lyric Darling, 12.

Except something extraordinary was happening in the skies to the west of Henryville. Two **masses** of air, one warm, one cold, had collided. Normally, the meeting of two extreme weather **fronts** will cause a thunderstorm. But in rare cases, thunderstorms explode into larger and more savage storms known as **supercells**. These immense storms can move more quickly

than a speeding car. With columns of swirling clouds that rise into the **atmosphere** more than 60,000 feet—twice as high as Mount Everest—supercells can unleash flooding rains, destructive winds, and softball-size **hailstones**. Supercells can also produce the most intensely powerful force in nature: a **tornado**.

At noon, as Mrs. Goodknight's students were eating lunch, a line of supercells was racing toward Henryville. By recess, while students played basketball and practiced cartwheels under a sunny sky, a huge tornado was forming 50 miles away. It would soon close in on Henryville, a friendly town of 2,000 people, with horse farms, businesses, and homes set amid rolling green hills.

By the end of the school day, much of Henryville would be shattered. And the lives of the 700 students of Henryville Elementary would be changed forever.

Whirlwinds and Twisters

Tornadoes can—and do—strike anywhere on Earth except Antarctica. But 80 percent of the world's tornadoes happen in the U.S., many on the **plains** of the Midwest between Texas and North Dakota. This region, nicknamed Tornado Alley, provides a perfect environment for the supercells that give birth to tornadoes. Cold, dry air blasts east from the Rocky Mountains and collides with moist, warm air traveling north from the Gulf of Mexico. The fierce storms of the plains have been terrorizing humans for centuries. Native Americans told stories of "whirlwinds" created by an angry goddess. American pioneers wrote horrific accounts of "twisters" that killed people, destroyed homes, and stripped feathers from chickens.

Henryville is hundreds of miles from Tornado Alley. But powerful storms often





Malachy, Blaine, Aden, and Joshua

"The whole time, I kept saying to myself, 'No, this can't be happening.'"

-Aden



Emma, Erin, Sydney, and Olivia

"We hid in the bathtub, and the whole time, we had no idea what was happening."

-Sydney



Jacob, Austin, Eli, and Wyatt

"We had to get the kittens and dogs into the basement with us."

-Austin



Jeremiah, Isaiah (front), Noah, MaKaila, and Haylee

"Nobody was home at my house, so I went to a stranger's house. My mom had no idea where I was."

-Isaiah

sweep through this region. Henryville students practice tornado drills every year. Just a few weeks before March 2, the threat of a tornado had forced students to evacuate their classrooms and head to **refuge** areas. As they had practiced in their tornado drills, Mrs. Goodknight's students sat in an interior hallway near the first-grade classrooms—thought to be a safe spot—until the danger had passed.

On March 2, the National Weather Service had warned that **severe** storms were heading for the Henryville region. "I heard on the news that there would be high winds," says Shelby Fluhr, 11.

Dayna Wilson, 11, had heard the warning too, before she went to school.

But Dayna, like most students, forgot about the weather as she enjoyed her busy day at school. "There are always warnings, but nothing bad ever happens."

Devastating Hit

Around 2:25 that afternoon, 20 minutes before school was supposed to let out at Henryville Elementary, a massive tornado touched down in the town of Fredericksburg, 20 miles away. As word spread, panicked parents rushed to the school. Many people assumed that the school's principal, Dr. Glenn

Riggs, would keep the students at school and have them hunker down with their teachers in the interior hallways and other refuge areas. Instead, Dr. Riggs decided that the children would be safer at home. He announced that all students were being dismissed immediately. Teachers hurried to get students onto buses or into waiting cars.

By 2:45 the skies were darkening. The air felt strange, "both hot and cold,"

Dayna remembers. Bus drivers raced through their routes.

“I was crying,” says Lyric. “All around me, kids were crying.”

As students arrived home, families rushed for shelter, grabbing pets and blankets and flashlights and other supplies. Shelby went into the storm shelter under the porch at her mother’s house, cramming into the small, hot room with 10 other people. Dayna’s mother wasn’t home, so she got off the bus with a friend whose mother hurried them into the basement of a nearby church. Lyric and her mother went to a firehouse.

Meanwhile, the tornado was ripping a path of destruction toward Henryville. It devoured a forest, turning trees into splinters. It demolished a sturdy factory, sweeping it off its foundation and sucking much of the building into the sky. It smashed houses, snapped telephone poles, and pulled chunks of asphalt off the highway.

Two buses returned to the school with students whose parents had not been home. Staff members brought them to the office, where they all took cover under desks. Teachers followed the track of the tornado using their cell phones. But suddenly the power went out. The phones died.

“It got very dark,” recalls Sally Riggs, the school’s media specialist and wife of Dr. Riggs. “We were all very quiet.”

And then the tornado slammed into the school—a grinding **funnel cloud** half a mile wide, filled with wood and trees and glass, swirling furiously at 170 mph. All around were the sounds of shattering windows, crashing walls, and objects slamming into the school. Teachers held tight to students.

“The building sounded like it was coming down around us,” says Mrs. Riggs. “I didn’t know if we could survive.”



Principal Glenn Riggs

“Somehow, Dr. Riggs knew we needed to get out of the school. He saved us.”
—Shelby



“My house was picked up into the sky and thrown while my family hid in the closet.”
—Collin

Morgan, Jack, Collin (front), Emily, and Timmy



MaKaila, Mrs. Goodknight, Joshua, and Dillon

“When I stepped outside afterwards, my first thought was, ‘Where is everything?’”
—Mrs. Goodknight

Pounding From the Sky

The tornado was over the school for less than one minute. In that time, it almost completely destroyed the school. The second floor collapsed. Hallways crumbled and were filled with shards of glass, splintered wood, and tiles. But miraculously, none of the students or teachers were injured. Dr. Riggs led the group

out of the office into a scene of devastation. An overwhelming smell of gas signaled the danger of an explosion. But before the group could leave the building, sirens began to blare and there was a new noise “like bowling balls were being thrown at us,” Mrs. Riggs says.

A second tornado was upon them. It wasn't nearly as strong as the first. But it was packed with enormous hailstones, which were now falling like cannonballs shot from the sky. They crashed through windows, windshields, and walls. When this latest attack from the sky finally ended, the dazed group made its way out of the building. They found safety in the nearby community center.

All around town, people emerged from cellars and closets and bathrooms into a world of ruin—land swept clean of buildings and trees, homes flattened, cars smashed. The roof of the high school had been torn off, the school destroyed. A school bus had been picked up and thrown through the school's front windows.

Over the next few hours, parents arrived, overjoyed to find their children. The community braced itself for tragic news. Word came that one man had died. Many lost their homes and

businesses. But by the next day, it was clear: All of Henryville's children and families were safe.

Lessons From a Disaster

It was almost two months after the tornado that Dayna, Lyric, and Shelby invited me to Henryville. I went to their temporary school, housed in a cheerful and roomy church building south of Henryville. I met Mrs. Goodknight and Dr. and Mrs. Riggs and spoke to dozens of students about their experiences on March 2. There were so many sad and frightening stories. Some students saw the tornado. Many were separated from their parents. Some students in Mrs. Goodknight's class lost their homes. A few children cried after they'd told their stories. But there were also some laughs, like when Erin

told how she found her guinea pig, alive and well, in the wreckage of her home, or when Lyric described the hailstone that's still in her freezer. Many told how the community came together to help and support each other. “You learn what's important,” Mrs. Goodknight says.

Each of the 700 children of Henryville has his or her story, and each is unique and unforgettable.

But every one of their stories ends the same way: with the miraculous fact that they all survived. 🐾

“I have never felt such an outpouring of generosity from people around the world.”

—Mrs. Riggs



Les, Mrs. Riggs, Trenton, and Shelby

WRITE TO HELP HENRYVILLE!

We want to help Mrs. Riggs rebuild her library, which was destroyed by the tornado. Write a letter to Henryville students, and for every entry we receive, we will make a donation to Henryville Elementary School in the name of *Storyworks* readers. Send entries to “*Storyworks*/Henryville.” See page 2 for details.

GO ONLINE
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HENRYVILLE