



ONE YEAR LATER: Recovery continues but pain lingers from Alabama's April 27 tornadoes

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A house in ruins south of Hackleburg damaged by an April 27, 2011, tornado still has a spray-painted message: 'In Memory of Those Lost 4-27-11.' (The Birmingham News/Joe Songer)

For Alabama, this will be a week for remembering.

Official ceremonies marking the **April 27 anniversary** will pay respects to the 248 people who lost their lives in the tornado outbreak. They'll pay homage also to those who helped residents laid low by the storms. And they'll pay tribute to communities that have refused to stay down.

For some people personally affected by the storms -- 62 tornadoes that badly damaged or destroyed almost 14,000

homes -- the milestone will be an opportunity for further reflection and healing, mental health experts say. But for many, the renewed focus on last year's storms also will be a challenge, jarring loose painful memories and triggering new spasms of grief.

"The anniversary's going to be a tough time," said Lisa Turley, director of Project Rebound, a state crisis-counseling program activated after the tornado outbreak.

Some tornado survivors will find anniversary observances helpful. Others won't want any part of the formal commemorations. And Turley said that's OK.

"There's no right way or wrong way," she said.

In northeast Alabama, Perry Michaels said he's keenly aware it's been almost a year since tornadoes struck DeKalb County, killing both his parents and three other relatives. He said his goal is to get through Friday as if it were any other day. He doesn't plan to attend public events related to the anniversary.

"I will remember it anyway," Michaels said. "I'd rather not be around a lot of other people remembering it, too."

In Concord, Ben Hamm will join his neighbors a week on Sunday, April 29, in remembering seven people who died in the community. He'll also help raise a new welcome sign -- a tangible reflection of the stronger identity the community has forged since the storms.

Hamm, whose home was among the casualties of a tornado, is president of the Concord Community Association, which grew out of the devastation of last year's storms. But while the community is trying to move forward, residents don't have to look far to find something that recalls April 27.

Jefferson County Commissioner Jimmie Stephens has been working with the community to try to address wreckage that remains untouched on about a half-dozen properties. "It has really been a challenge to get this last little bit done," Stephens said.

While there's been much progress, the lingering damage and debris are "a constant reminder of ... how much your life can change in a split second," Hamm said.

"It is hard on people. I think getting all of these houses down is part of the healing process and being able to move forward."

Even where cleanup has occurred, the empty expanses and vacant lots offer relentless reminders of the storm. "The trees are gone; the land is just decimated," Turley said. "You have very much the visible signs of the tornadoes coming through."

Rick Cato, pastor of **Bethel Baptist Church in Pleasant Grove**, said the

ALABAMA TORNAOES



ONE YEAR LATER

It started in the morning of April 27, 2011 and lasted all day - a lashing string of tornadoes that tore through Alabama smashing buildings, snapping trees and ending lives. It was, in the end, among the state's worst days.

The Birmingham News continuing through April 29 is presenting **ONE YEAR LATER**, an anniversary series of stories reviewing some of what happened, what has been accomplished and what still lies ahead.

Today's stories:

- **Recovery continues but pain lingers from Alabama's April 27 tornadoes**
- **Heroes of the storm**
- **Alabama tornadoes: April 27 anniversary event calendar**
- **TOM SCARRITT: In times of trouble, people are special**
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visual impact is disconcerting even for those whose property wasn't affected. "It's still disorienting to drive in the community," he said. "It looks so radically different."

- Tornado diaries -- final installments in the stories of Annie Muse of Walker County and of Shawn and Jamie Burchfield of Pleasant Grove

The scrubbed parcels also can trigger frustration about the pace of recovery. "Downtown, ain't nothing been built back. Not one thing," Pete Bush, a former high school coach, said about Cordova.

In both Cordova and Hackleburg, the loss of a grocery store was considered a serious community setback -- an example of the way blank spots in the landscape represent losses that go beyond buildings: Here, what had been a grocery store that served as a hub for the neighborhood. There, what had been the home of a beloved neighbor, who chose not to return.

"There's a lot of people in my neighborhood not rebuilding. They're gone," said Jessie Calhoun, who said she is one of the few returning to her street in Birmingham's South Hampton area.

Which is not to say everyone is depressed by the new landscapes. Beverly Coleman, who was able to repair her home on Cherry Avenue, said she likes the new look and the new life she sees now in Pratt City. "Every day I walk outside and look at a new home going up, it just gives me joy," she said.

Remember the good

As the anniversary approaches, some mental health experts say it's not bad to look for the good that came from the tornadoes.

"Some of the point of the ceremonies is celebrating our resilience and our ability to come together," said Dr. Cheryl McCullumsmith, a psychiatry professor and director of hospital psychiatry and psychiatric emergency services at UAB. "The flipside to a tragedy is seeing the good in other people. That's some of what we're remembering, too."

Regardless, those who went through the tornadoes shouldn't be surprised this week to find themselves sidetracked by unhappy thoughts of April 27, she said. Survivors may feel sad, anxious or edgy. Some may have nightmares or problems sleeping.

Survivors can find constructive ways to help cope with any issues related to the one-year milestone, McCullumsmith said. She encourages survivors to get extra rest, keep their normal routines and talk about their feelings. Those who don't want to attend organized events shouldn't think they have to.

"I think what is important is to reach out and connect to people, and not isolate yourself," she said.

She advises survivors to limit the anniversary media coverage they see and especially the coverage their children see.

"There's bound to be some sadness on an anniversary," she said. "But you can make sure you're not turning on the Weather Channel and watching it 24 hours a day. ... That can really re-traumatize you."

Even after the anniversary has come and gone, Turley said, Alabamians will still be living through the storm.

"You don't get better just because it's 2012, and the blue tarp's off the roof," she said. "But the citizens are recovering. They're recovering in a very healthy way. The resilience of the people is just so amazing.

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