

On Friday night (Aug. 26), some of us boarded up our houses. Others in town were saying that they didn't want to "overreact" to the hurricane forecasts. But I was running around like crazy, yelling, "This is a (category) four!"

Saturday, I evacuated to my friend's house with my 81-year-old mother, my 28-year-old niece and my sister-in-law. We packed clothes, food and water – plus axes, an extension ladder and flares. That way we could cut our way out through the roof if necessary. As a reporter, I'd covered too many hurricanes where people drowned in their attics because they couldn't escape the rising water.

On Sunday, the news showed the eye of the hurricane heading toward our exact location. That night, before the TV went out, a report said, "It's looking better for New Orleans, and the very worst for the Gulfport area." After hearing that, I said to everyone, "I want you to forgive me now, because I think I made a mistake. I'm afraid we're all going to have to fight very hard not to die."

But everyone was calm. They all went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. At 1 a.m., wind started pummeling the house. I woke everyone up and we listened to the radio. We learned that all three of the emergency operation centers were washed away. That's when I knew we were in big trouble. Then we lost the radio.

All night I'd been watching a giant pine tree in a neighbor's yard. It had been bending mightily, but had stayed rooted. Suddenly I heard a deafening crack, and I yelled, "Run!" Seconds later the

tree smashed through the house. We had escaped to the master bedroom closet in the center of the house. My sister-in-law hauled a mattress off the bed and leaned it on top of my mother and my niece. Then we noticed that the walls were heaving, so we raced around the house, opening windows to relieve the pressure build-up.

Looking outside, we watched in horror as the house behind us turned into what looked like a living, breathing monster. The roof would lift, the house would expand, and then the roof would fall. Finally, the house exploded.

The next day, we drove out to see what had happened. The wind was still strong enough to buffet my little Ford Escape. We drove through the center of town, where downed power lines were strewn about. When we turned toward my street, all I saw was a big lake where there once had been houses, trees and roads. So we tried to enter from the other end, but there were too many fallen trees. A man with a chainsaw helped us get through.

Finally, about three miles from my property, we were stopped by debris: the remains of what had once been beautiful homes, with tattered curtains blowing from shattered windows and overturned furniture covered in mud. We walked through the debris, which was sometimes head-high.

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