

Victims of the April 27 tornadoes

A week ago, a tornado up to three-quarters of a mile wide took the lives of 15 people in central Arkansas. In the hours and days since, their families have gathered keepsakes — favorite cars and photos, handwritten notes and stuffed animals that offer some comfort. This is how loved ones remember the storm's victims:

Paula Blakemore

Paula Blakemore of El Paso loved her family and its history. As an architectural designer, Paula spent most of her hours designing and redesigning plans for clients' homes, but every spare minute went to her family, especially her grandchildren.



Paula Blakemore

Even her belongings reflected that devotion: the 55-year-old collected family heirlooms.

In an antique room, Paula kept the light-green-enamel, metal-frame bed of her great-great-grandfather, with whom she shared a birthday — April 9 — 100 years apart. She also had her grandmother's treadle sewing machine and pressure cooker.

"I think it was instilled in all of us to honor our heritage," said her sister, Donna Adkins. "I mean, I just keep thinking of things that she had that were important to her because they had been important to somebody else."

As her family and friends searched through what was left of her home, one of Paula's prized possessions was discovered near her 2 1/2-acre lot — a quilt her grandmother made that was zipped up in a plastic bag labeled "Ma 1991." Many photographs — all of family — have turned up miles away.

And while the family mourns Paula, it has a bigger purpose to focus on — Paula's grandson.

"He lost his pawpaw to cancer, and his dad in a car wreck. His nana was it for him," Adkins said. "As a family, we're going to have to help him through this."

Mark Bradley

Mark Bradley of Mayflower had a big heart and a soft spot for people who had less than he did or animals that needed his help.



Mark Bradley

"He found this puppy at one of the fields we were working at a couple years ago, and he raised it. He loved that dog, Sheiba. ... They found them together after the storm," said Kevin Page, a friend who worked with Mark at the Little Rock Parks and Recreation Department.

"He was so kindhearted. If he was eating lunch and any of my other guys didn't have anything, he'd give them what he had. Mark was a great guy."

Page said Mark, 51, had just moved to Mayflower three weeks before the tornado, after finding a place that would accept his beloved dog.

Mark was also an avid Razorback fan. Regardless of whether it was baseball, basketball or football, friends said he would call the Hogs louder than anyone else. For his funeral, his family told mourners to forgo suits and "dress like a Hog."

"His sister told me that they found this Razorback blanket that Mark had hung up over the fireplace when he moved in," Page said. "He said he didn't need a fireplace, he needed a place to show his support for the team. She was excited to find that."

Mark's daughter, Christina, was able to collect her father's things from his work locker, mementos like a Razorback coffee mug and some photos.

"I'm glad we could get those to her. He loved his family a lot," Page said.

Jayne Collins

In the early 1990s, devout Razorback fan Jayme Collins was horrified when other fans booed her football team.



Jayne Collins

"She made a pact that year," recalled longtime friend Paula Crump Winn. "She said, 'I will never leave a game early, and my team will know I'm here to support them, no matter what.'"

She kept that promise. For 15 years, the 50-year-old Vilonia resident was a season ticket-holder. Players knew her by sight. If they bumped into her outside, most recognized her, gave her a hug and thanked her for her unwavering support.

That was Jayme. Loyal. Steadfast. Always ready to listen.

"If you were lucky enough to have Jayme as a friend, you had a friend for life," Crump Winn said, recalling her best friend's popularity on the Southeastern Conference's Smack website.

Jayne's father, hurt in the tornado, remained hospitalized and was unable to attend his daughter's funeral Friday. But she didn't lack for mourners. Former Razorback football players showed up. So did her former co-workers from the SAS shoe factory in Conway, until she worked for more than 20 years, until the plant closed.

Former Razorback Anthony Lucas grieved hard, Crump Winn said. So did the many other former players who remembered Collins' smiling face and encouraging words — whether the team had won or lost. And SEC Smack friends across the nation sent flowers.



Chris Lavergne (left) and his brother, Travis, look at a photo found near the home where their parents, Dennis and Glenna Lavergne, were killed.



A makeshift cross sits on a concrete block on Fortner Road in Mayflower, near the site where Mark Bradley was killed.



A car that belonged to Jeff Hunter sits outside his mother's Vilonia home. His mother survived by taking shelter in the bathtub.

Jayne, 50, was just as devoted to her family, doting on her nieces and reveling in their accomplishments. She attended the girls' swim meets and gymnastic performances. She was also a member of Landmark Missionary Baptist Church in Vilonia, where she served as church clerk, taught Sunday School and participated in the youth program.

Helen Greer

Whether she was serving lunch or dinner, Helen Marie Greer, 72, of Mayflower always included her homemade bread. She also made her own pasta sauce and noodles. And if she decided to bake, she didn't scrimp on the sugar or butter.



Helen Greer

"Four cups wasn't much sugar by her estimation," son-in-law Shawn Stane recalled with a laugh. "There was no low-carb diet going on over there."

Helen and her husband of 41 years, Donald Greer Sr., also ran their construction business, D.G. Builders Co.

Donald, 80, was hurt in the tornado and was still hospitalized Friday.

"She was glued to his hip," Stane said. "She was his wingman."

Known by her four grandchildren as "Gammie," Helen stayed true to her farm-life upbringing. She grew up milking cows and churning butter. Because of her industrious childhood, she liked to stay busy, even as a senior citizen.

Donald and Helen spent a lot of time working in their Mayflower yard. They also often played with their two schnauzers, Harley and Sahja. Helen never could pronounce the second dog's name, so she referred to her as "Sausage."

In recent days, family members searching the rubble of the Greers' home have stumbled across several sentimental treasures.

"One of the coolest things I found — under an exterior wall — was her dutch oven," Stane said. "I also found a 2-foot stack of cookbooks that she had all her notecards in. Those were Better Homes and Gardens from 20 years ago. There are all sorts of pages marked in them."

Relatives and friends also have found a lot of photographs. If Helen happens to appear in any of them, she's often covering her face with her hands. "She didn't like pictures of herself. She just wasn't a vain

person — although her hair always had to be just right," Stane recalled.

The best photo found thus far is one of the couple's children — back when the girls were young — standing next to two Playboy Bunnies. Donald and Helen had decided to eat at the first-ever Playboy Club in Chicago, Stane explained.

"I took that one to the hospital, and my father-in-law just started laughing," he added.

Jeffrey Hunter

His laptop computers, iPhone and gaming systems were immaculate — not a speck of dust on them — but 22-year-old Jeffrey Hunter's car was another story.



Jeffrey Hunter

"That's just where his mind was. He was a computer nerd. He cared more about computers than he did his car," said Fred Hunter, his great-uncle. "He could do anything on those computers."

Once-introverted Jeffrey was a computer science engineering major at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway and lived in Vilonia.

"He could be in a crowd, but you would never know he was there," his great-uncle said of Jeffrey's youth.

That changed, however, when Jeffrey started working at the Fred's store in Vilonia.

"He just came out of his shell. He was so good with people — that's what was so special about him. He loved meeting and greeting people, helping them out," his great-uncle said.

His reputation for prowess with computers was widely known throughout the community, along with his compassion and ever-present smile.

"The world needs a lot more like him. He didn't have a temper and just had a tremendous heart. He was very intelligent," Fred said. "I guess the good really do die young because he was the best."

Dennis and Glenna Lavergne

Dennis and Glenna Lavergne "were the kinds of parents everybody wanted," said their son, Chris, 26.

Chris and his brother Travis, 23, grew up in a close-knit family. Chris still lived with his parents, and Travis lived just down the same street in Vilonia. They called one

another several times a day to check in, and last Sunday was no exception.

"My mom called me and told us to be careful and take cover. That's who they were. Anything we needed, they would do it or help us. We didn't always get along, but they supported us in just about everything we did," Chris said.

The Laverignes moved to Vilonia in 1998 from Louisiana. Dennis, 52, managed an auto-parts store in Conway, and Glenna, 53, worked as a secretary at a day-care center. The couple had been married 32 years.

"They worked for everything they had. We didn't have everything, but what they had, they worked hard for. They went out of their way to help anybody who needed it, regardless," Chris said.

The day after the tornado destroyed the Laverignes' home, Chris said he couldn't bring himself to look through the debris. On Tuesday, friends and neighbors who had always treated the Laverignes like family began looking for their keepsakes.

"We found more stuff than I thought we were going to. There's probably about seven or eight boxes we need to go through — photos, papers, things my mom liked to collect," he said.

"One of our friends found my dad's wedding ring and this bracelet he wore," Chris said. "We thought they had been lost, and we would never find them."

"He got this gold bracelet the day he left Simple Simon in Louisiana when we moved here. My dad loved that bracelet. His name was inscribed in one side, and he'd wear it anytime he could put it on his wrist."

Chris said he will stay with his brother for now.

"They were people I was proud of, and I knew they were proud of us," he said.

David Mallory

David Mallory, 58, of Vilonia built strong houses. His skilled hands molded wooden beams into beautiful trim. He worked with his older brother, Don, for nearly 40 years.

"I saw him every day," Don said. "He'd come in and sweep the shop floor and see

what we had going on that day. I drove through the subdivision that we have going. He's trimmed all the houses in there. There's just so many memories."



David Mallory

David helped build Don's business, Mallory Construction. There, he made many friends. Nearly all knew about David's other passion — his '55 Chevrolet.

"Gosh, he had that thing for 20 years," Don recalled. "He loved working on his car. He liked antique cars. He loved to watch NASCAR."

In the aftermath of the storm, Don stood among the ruin of David's home, looking for that brown-and-white automobile that his brother adored.

The car was found mangled. If he hadn't "told you it was a car, you wouldn't know it," Don said.

But, though the car was mangled, another of David's antique finds, a '55 pickup, wasn't. It was at the shop during the storm. His relatives still have it. And they have the stories about him that have poured in constantly from friends.

"People remember good things about David, and they call," Don said. "It's just been overwhelming with the friends that he has had."

Robert Oliver

Robert Oliver, 82, walked like a man decades younger, taking quick, steady steps with his shoulders back, his U.S. Army garrison cap perched atop a head held high.



Robert Oliver

"When I heard his name, I thought it had to be a different Robert Oliver. It just can't be the one we know," said Julie Goodnight, owner of Julie's Sweet Shoppe & Bakery in Conway.

The Korean War veteran often met with others at the coffee shop to visit and reminisce.

"He was just a big part of our veterans coffee gang here. He had so much spunk and life in him," Goodnight said. "He would go out dancing with his girlfriend all the time. He was always so lively."

A lifelong Mayflower resident and a graduate of Mayflower High School, Robert had his hand in almost everything since his retirement in 1986 from the General Services Administration.

When he wasn't hunting or fishing, he was in his woodworking shop or helping to build homes.

"They called him the 'Mayor of Mayflower,'" Goodnight said, laughing. "He was very informative and knew something about everything. He was so precious. He was just one of those fun-loving guys who didn't act his age."

Cameron and Tyler Smith

Cameron and Tyler Smith were hard-playing boys. They loved baseball, fishing and playing outside in Vilonia with their friends. Tyler, 7, was the fearless one. Cameron, 9, was the responsible one, family friends recall.



Cameron Smith

"Tyler, I don't want to call him a wild child, but he had spunk," said Chris Johannes, whose 7-year-old son, Aiden, was a close friend of both boys. "Cameron was laid-back. You never really had to worry about him."



Tyler Smith

"Being two opposite personalities, they really blended. They were great together," he added.

The boys loved playing with their Skylanders figurines and romping around in Nerf-gun wars. They made up games and donned helmets to dress up as "underwear heroes."

Tyler once got caught trying to climb into a kitchen cabinet during hide-and-seek. He also had a notorious Chuck E. Cheese's outing that ended with the mascot missing its head.

Cameron was a talented baseball player. He went hunting with his dad for the first time this year. He could be found one minute complaining that his little brother wouldn't leave him alone and then the next he'd be outside riding his scooter, his brother right behind on his bike.

Just a few weeks ago, they both took turns exploding confetti Easter eggs with golf clubs.

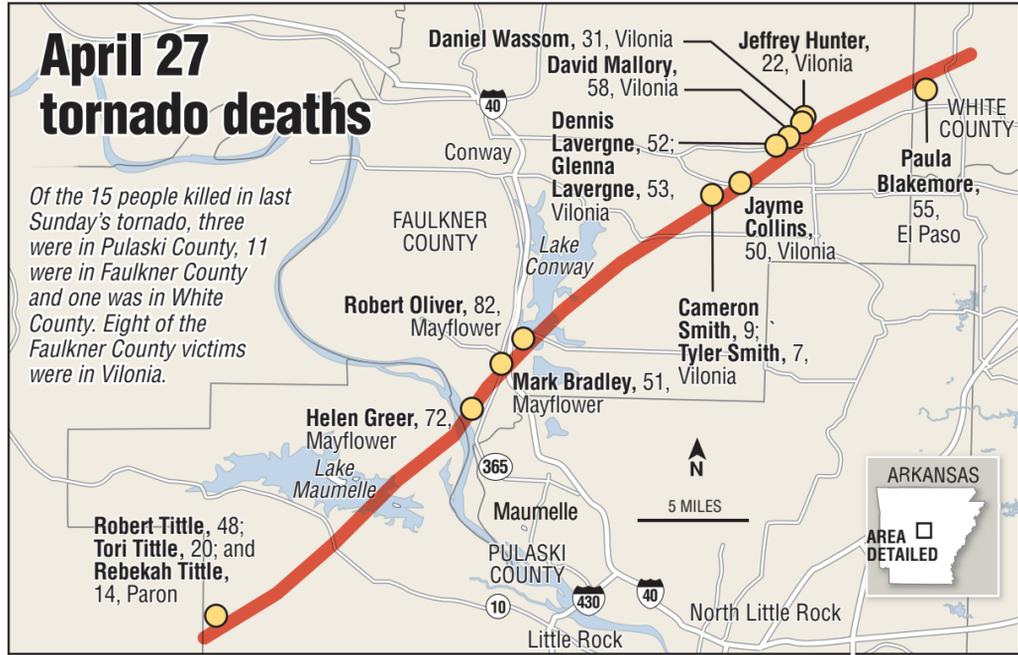
Family friends Jeremiah and Jessica Sowards said the boys put their frenetic energy to good use in their church.

"They got God more than most adults do," Jeremiah Sowards said.

The boys were both Christians and attended church with their parents, Daniel and April, who were injured in the tornado and still hospitalized Friday. Cameron often prayed aloud for others. Tyler nightly prayed that God would restore the hearing of his grandmother, who is deaf.

Johannes and his wife, Leah, said they last saw the boys at church on Sunday.

"I got to hug them. I always just walked up and gave them a hug, say 'Love you buddy,' and walk out," Johannes said. "It wasn't anything out of the ordinary. ... I expected to see them at the house. I tell myself at least I got to say goodbye, whether I knew it or not."



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/KIRK MONTGOMERY

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE