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Flood rescue stories: Teen wonders how she lived when others didn't

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Andrea Silvia and Jamey Howell clung to the roof rack of a Jeep Cherokee, the furious waters of Lower Station Camp Creek pulling at their shoes.

It started as a trip to church, stalled by a flooded road near Station Camp High School that Howell hoped his Jeep could handle. As the water rushed inside, they called 911 and their parents.

"I talked to her about survival. To fight with everything she ever had," said Silvia's mother, Angie Silvia. "I threw myself on the floor of the house and cried, begged and prayed to God nonstop."

For more than an hour, the couple clung to the Cherokee and each other, screaming for help and praying. Their relatives looked on in terror from 200 yards away.

Then Silvia, 19, and Howell, 18, had an idea. They'd release a backpack and see which way the current carried it. If it veered into power lines, they'd know they couldn't let go.

It went the other way.

"People think we were taken by the current, but we decided to jump on the count of three," Silvia said. "I am so confused on how we lived and other people didn't. We never talked about dying."

They swam with the current for about a mile, making for the shore at a clearing. They dragged themselves out of the water, and Silvia began crying. A lady in a nearby apartment complex let them use her phone. Family was there with towels in less than five minutes.

— CHRIS ECHEGARAY

Saint Thomas executives lead seven sisters to safety

The seven Daughters of Charity peered out from a

second-story window, watching floodwaters moving from the yard of their house, up the first step, up the second step, into the living room.

They called the police, but nobody came. Then they called neighboring Saint Thomas Hospital and got a CEO and two vice presidents.

The sisters' jobs range from Spanish translator to chairman of the board of Saint Thomas Health Services. But their combined experience proved worthless against swiftly moving water from nearby Richland Creek.

"We were panicking, to tell the truth," said Sister Mary Frances Loftin, the board chairman.

Wes Littrell, CEO for Saint Thomas Affiliates, knew the sisters wouldn't be safe much longer and beckoned some other executives. One vice president tied a 50-foot rope to a rail and then around his waist, wading through chest-high water to the front door. Another lead the sisters, ranging in age from their 50s to their 80s, one by one to safety.

"When we got the last sister out, here comes the fire truck," Littrell said. "We said, 'No, thank you.'"

The women waited out the storm at The Wine Chap liquor store next door — which Loftin calls "The Wine Chapel" — with nothing more than the toothbrushes and combs they'd been instructed to take.

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When the rains stopped, the sisters' refrigerator was floating in more than 4 feet of water. Nearly everything they owned was ruined. Littrell wonders if the house may have to be razed.

While that's being sorted out, they're deciding between digs with the Sisters of Mercy or at St. Cecelia Academy.

— HEIDI HALL

Quest to save animals ends with rescue of professor

Professor Richard Browning Jr. was trying to save his animals' life — and it nearly cost him his own.

Browning, a Tennessee State University researcher, went to the school's 90-acre farm on Ed Temple Boulevard to save the goats and dogs there. He'd also moved them to higher ground and believed they'd be safe, until forecasts for the Cumberland's flooding changed dramatically. Around 9 a.m. Sunday, Browning and a crew went to retrieve 200 goats and several dogs.

Within minutes of beginning the rescue efforts, the water was above 6 feet. Browning began paddling in the freezing water, snakes slithering by.

Mozells Byars Jr. and Roy Avery, university employees who help him on the farm, watched in horror from high ground. They yelled for him to head for the bales of hay. Browning climbed to the top, shivering with the onset of hypothermia.

They called TSU police, who notified university President Melvin Johnson.

Johnson arrived at the scene. What happened next, Byars called heroic.

"He told me, 'Son, you can't go back out,'" Byars said. "I have to go for you."

Johnson and others got into a small boat and grabbed Browning as medical staff arrived.

"I don't remember what happened and who took me

out of the boat at that point," Browning said.

Browning was back on the farm Tuesday, using a paddleboat to get to the goats and feed them in a dry area.

— CHRIS ECHEGARAY

Police officer in tree yelled for assistance

Norm Shelton's job on Sunday was to use his Belle Meade Police patrol car as a barrier to redirect traffic on Harding Road.

Easy enough. Until the water started rising.

The engine stalled. Shelton called for a wrecker. His car started floating before sinking with a thud.

"I bailed out just before that," Shelton said. A swift current carried him to Richland Creek, behind the Belle Meade Kroger.

"I was lucky to get to a tree, and I hugged it for an hour and 15 minutes," Shelton said.

Shelton's radio was waterlogged, and so was his cell phone.

"I had no other way to communicate but to scream, 'Help me,'" he said. "I was in a spot that I couldn't be seen from the intersection, and finally somebody heard me and they came as fast they could."

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Metro Rescue Squad made its way on a boat and plucked Shelton out of the water. He doesn't remember his rescuers' names, but he thanked them.

"It worked out good for me," he said. "A lot of people weren't that lucky."

— CHRIS ECHEGARAY



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TSU professor Richard Browning, shown here with his grandson Alexander York, 6, was stranded in high water and rescued by the university president and others on Sunday. (DIPTI VAIDYA / THE TENNESSEAN)



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Andrea Silvia and Jamey Howell talk about how they survived the floodwaters after they were photographed by Rick Murray while clinging to the top of their swamped jeep. (Photo below) (MANDY LUNN / THE TENNESSEAN)



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everything, they may not be thinking about baby clothes now, but we know it will be coming soon.”

Metro Fire Department Special Operations rescued Belle Meade police officer Norm Shelton near Harding Road on Sunday. Shelton had been clinging to a tree for more than an hour. (SHELLEY MAYS / THE TENNESSEAN)

MOMENTS OF KINDNESS IN MIDST OF TRAGEDY

Neighborly

For two days 22-year-old emergency telecommunicator Rachel Mure responded to 911 calls without knowing the state of her own home or whether her dog was still alive inside.

Monday afternoon, her next-door neighbors took a canoe to her house on Penn Meade Way near Opryland — skipping their own — to rescue her dog and salvage a few of her floating belongings.

“It’s unbelievable the way these people have pulled together and are taking care of each other,” she said.

Tight hug

When Heather Peters of Franklin helped with rescue boats in Fieldstone Farms on Sunday, she saw a teenage girl carrying her cat and crying. All Peters could offer was a tight hug.

“I just remember feeling overwhelmed for them with how they were going to get back on their feet,” Peters said. “I am hoping I was able to be a rainbow for that girl.”

Thinking ahead

Carrie Brock’s house was not in danger, but she knew others’ were.

Brock and other Otter Creek Church of Christ volunteers spent the greater part of Tuesday organizing and distributing donated clothing, bundles of dishes and sack lunches to flood victims in Bellevue and downtown Nashville. “If someone has lost

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