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“No Water, No Way Out”

After a violent tornado, Dawn South uses CrossFit training to aid stranded relatives.

By Dawn South Trinity CrossFit

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All images courtesy of Dawn and Mike South

On April 27, 2011, one of the nation's worst natural disasters struck Alabama. Over 38 tornadoes tore through my state, with a powerful EF4 going right through the city where my in-laws lived.

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In April, a powerful tornado made Pleasant Grove, Ala., anything but pleasant for its residents.

We had no idea how bad it was until the next morning. On Facebook, my cousin was sending out messages:

"We are OK, but people are trapped here in Pleasant Grove."

"No rescue, no news, nobody knows we've been hit!"

"No water, no way out."

The Rescuers

My husband Mike and I were worried and desperate to get out there. His 90-year-old grandfather, we discovered, had lost his home, but thankfully he and the rest of our family were OK. Now it was time to get them out!

Finally, the news started giving reports that no one could enter or leave Pleasant Grove. Because of downed power lines, they were not allowing cars, four-wheelers or trucks into the town. Despite what the news was saying, we hit the road. We were getting into that city, damn it, and getting water to his family.

They stopped us at the city-limit sign, about 10 miles from granddaddy's house. We were stuck in a long line of cars trying to get in, thinking the whole time, "We have to get to granddaddy now!" I was on the phone with my father-in-law, explaining the situation, and he asked me, "What are you going to do—just walk to his house from there?"

I was a bit surprised, "Well, yeah! We're pulling over now."

He asked, "Are you carrying water in, too?"

"Of course!" I said.

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It wasn't until later that it occurred to me that walking 10 miles with a cooler of water is not something a lot of people can do. But my husband and I never thought twice. Thankfully, we didn't have to walk the 10 miles. Once inside city limits, one of the residents gave us and many others a ride and cut our walk in half. We were so ready to get there and help granddaddy.

Again, we could only ride in so far. Trees, power lines and house debris were everywhere. As we walked down granddaddy's street, I was honestly amazed to see people alive. It was absolute devastation. Walking over debris and climbing over downed trees, around live downed power lines, glass, destroyed cars, refrigerators ... it was chaos

As we walked up to granddaddy's house, my husband was convinced it was three more houses down. "No", I said, "there's your uncle and granddaddy right there." Mike had

been looking for the house next door to granddaddy's as a point of reference, but that house was completely gone—just a slab!

Robbie, Mike's uncle and granddaddy were just standing there among all the debris, still in shock. It was something I never want to see again. Only two walls, a hallway and a closet remained of his home (yes, the pictures were still hung in the hall!). If Robbie had not gotten granddaddy at the last minute before the tornado hit, he wouldn't be standing there in front of us.

After a lot of hugs and tears were shed, Mike and I started getting busy. We needed to help granddaddy salvage whatever was possible. We had just come with water—no gloves, no tools. Just our able bodies.



Her granddaddy's house was only barely standing when the author arrived.



The view from what used to be the back bedroom.

My immediate goal was to find granddaddy's medicine, but the cabinet that held the medicine and the wall it was connected to were lying face down on top of the kitchen counter. It took three of us, but we got that wall up. As I was standing on the countertops lifting that wall, it occurred to me, "This is like flipping a heavy tire!"

Here it is," I thought, "CrossFit translated into real life.

Over the next days, everything I had done at our box aided me in doing as much as possible to help. I was able to really see how CrossFit can prepare you for the unknown.

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Lowering a tree limb that had been cut down and holding onto the other end of the rope with Robbie, I thought, "This is like tug of war with a falling 500-lb. log on the other end, but if we lose, somebody could get hurt."

Hauling debris to the road, deadlifting and flipping huge tree stumps and rolling them out of the yard, picking up logs like Atlas stones and carrying them to the debris pile—having Mike's uncle say, "Dawn, you can lift ... wow!" This is why I'm a CrossFitter: so I can be ready for anything life throws at me.

I have always told my athletes the best thing about CrossFit is we perform movements that happen in real life, movements we use every day. Today, I am more grateful than ever for my training. Why work out five days a week if it doesn't help you when it is most important?



About the Author

Dawn South, 39, lives in Alabaster, Ala., and is a wife and mother to three CrossFitting boys: Taylor, 14; Brendan, 11; and Jordan, 7. Her oldest son has high-function autism, and CrossFit has been great for him. Dawn is a graphic designer and artist and earned her Level 1 Trainer Certificate a year ago. She trains at [Trinity CrossFit](#) in Pelham, Ala., a small box with about 40 members, all of whom Dawn considers extensions of her family.