

CLEANUP CONTINUES IN APALACHICOLA

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Written By TaMaryn Waters

Linda Elsea spent her weekend trying to piece what's left of her home back together.

The tornado touched down Friday evening and knocked out power to more than 1,600 homes and businesses. Although most of the power has been restored in Apalachicola, four families' homes were destroyed, nine others suffered significant damage and 26 homes had minor damage.

Friday's tornado, which lasted about five minutes, showed no mercy on Elsea's two-bedroom bungalow on 16th Street. The tornado first touched down on Highway 98 near 26th Street and carved a mile-long path through town.

"My house is literally twisted," said 57-year-old Elsea, while staring at her home. "You walk in and it's like a freak show. The floors are bowed and the walls are twisted."

Elsea, a retired teacher who works part time at Grady Market, said she was taking a bath when the harrowing wind sent shivers through her body. She said the sound of the storm was the most terrifying part.

"I'm feeling the bathroom literally fall apart," Elsea said as she remembered climbing out of the tub and wrapping herself in a towel. "I was screaming out of control. I wasn't screaming for anyone. I was just screaming, 'Oh my God! Oh my God!' "

Maj. Chester Creamer of the Franklin County Sheriff's Office said electricity was restored to half of the 1,600 homes and businesses by late Saturday and most of the remainder had power by Sunday afternoon. However, power was not restored to some homes where safety issues were detected, Creamer said.

The scene after the storm was less than serene as volunteers and emergency workers removed thousands of fallen trees. Many rooftops were blown completely off sagging homes.

Chris Floyd, Emergency Services Director for the Capital Area Chapter of the American Red Cross, said disaster volunteers were pulled back from the area by Sunday evening once things died down.

Twenty-seven volunteers were deployed to Apalachicola and provided counseling and referrals. Floyd said more than \$3,000 and 300 meals were used in the recovery effort, along with tarps to cover gaping rooftops.

"The city as a whole is on its way to recovery," said Floyd, an Apalachicola native.

"It was a noteworthy tornado, especially since it moved through where people lived," said Bob Goree, a meteorologist with the Tallahassee office of the National Weather Service.

The tornado was categorized as an F-1 on the Fujita scale, which ranks the strength of a tornado on a five-point scale. Goree said the last major tornado in Franklin County hit East Point in June 1989, causing three deaths and major structural damage.

Floyd said Florida has had a quiet hurricane season this year, but that doesn't mean people can let their guard down.

"This is one of those incidents where, in Florida, we have to constantly be vigilant," Floyd said. "Last Friday was a good example of the need to stay prepared."

When Elsea moved from Georgia, she wanted her retirement home to be protected by homeowners insurance. But she didn't factor tornadoes into that plan.

"The thought of a tornado never crossed my mind," Elsea said. "Never. Never."