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Family home before and after tornado  
photo provided by Mike Owens



## Devastation, Loss and Renewal

By Emily Foshee

A **WHITE GAZEBO** surrounded by rolling hills has replaced the home in Van Alstyne where Mike Owens and his family lived for three and a half years. The gazebo is the focal point of a newly created memorial garden built to honor his son, and Mr. Owens hopes those who visit this special place will find peace, solace and comfort.

Colson Owens, the 14-year-old son of Susan and Mike Owens, was killed in May by a deadly tornado that swept through rural North Texas. "Our home was completely destroyed, and we decided to turn our former home site into a memorial garden for families that have also lost children," Mr. Owens explained.

The Owens' former home, built around 1870, was once owned by one of the founders of Texas, William D. Travis. Mr. Travis is also known for his death in the battle of the Alamo.

Before that fateful day in May, the Owens were an ordinary family enjoying a relaxed, slow-paced rural lifestyle. Life as they knew it came to a screeching halt at 10:30 p.m. on May 9th.

"My wife and I, our 14-year-old son

Colson, one of our grandchildren and a nephew were at home getting ready to turn in for the night," said Mr. Owens. "A friend of ours from Denton called and said she'd been listening to the weather reports on Channel 8 and Channel 11. The weather forecasters were saying, 'if you know anyone in the area of FM 3133 and FM 2862, call them to tell them a tornado is coming straight for them and to head for safety.' Everyone in our house was saved because of that phone call. Everyone but Colson."

Mr. and Mrs. Owens quickly gathered the children together and ran to safety. Mrs. Owens took Colson and their nephew to a storage area under the stairs. Mr. Owens took his two-and-a-half year-old grandson into the laundry room. The tornado hit their home just seconds after they took shelter.

"We felt totally at the mercy of the storm," said Mrs. Owens. "All we could do was stay in our safe areas, pray and wait for it to pass." For a reason she will never know, Colson stepped out into the hallway just as the tornado was ripping their house apart. The second floor came crashing down onto the first, and

part of the second floor fell on Colson, killing him instantly.

Because all electric power was out, there was no way for the Owens to call for help. They were trapped in the rubble for 30 to 45 minutes before a neighbor discovered them. He immediately called for help. One hour later, Mrs. Owens was freed from the wreckage. While the paramedics were helping Mrs. Owens, others were searching for Colson. "It was very dark, and there were nails everywhere," said Mr. Owens. Finally, Colson was found just two feet from his mom. No one had the necessary equipment to remove the debris that had crushed him. A Collin County sheriff deputy had a jack in his truck, and after an hour of painstaking work, Colson was freed from the debris.

After Colson had been found, Mr. and Mrs. Owens took stock of the pile of rubble that used to be their home. A brick fireplace had crushed the master bedroom, where they had been when they received the telephone call warning them of the tornado. The kitchen and den, where the children had been, was also completely destroyed.

*Mike Owens surveys his damaged property  
photo by Chris Fritchie*

By the time the family left the site at 5:00 a.m. the next morning, there were already 75 to 100 people clearing away lumber, bricks, and other debris.

Mr. and Mrs. Owens' daughter lived just five minutes away, and the family planned to stay there while the refuse was cleared.

"My wife and I tried to rest, but that was impossible," said Mr. Owens. "Susan went back to where our home used to be, and immediately called me and told me to join her there. I had no idea why she wanted me to come back to the farm. When I got there, I was completely blown away by the generosity and love given to us by total strangers."

Mr. Owens believes many more lives would have been lost if friends hadn't been prompted by meteorologists to call and warn people.

When Mr. Owens returned to the farm early in the morning of May 10th, he saw approximately 100 pickup trucks filled with equipment. Volunteers, many from the Baptist Men's Association, brought their own equipment and had organized themselves into a clean-up crew and were attacking trees and debris with tractors and saws, putting some of the Owens' personal belongings into boxes and bags and retrieving personal photos that were strewn up to a mile from their home. The Home Depot provided saws and the Red Cross brought food and drinks for several days for the volunteers, who worked from sun up to sun down for many days.

"We were completely amazed and grateful for all of the people that volunteered their time to help us clean up the wreckage that used to be our home," said Mr. Owens, "and we experienced,



first hand, how a community and organizations like the Red Cross can mobilize and come together during a crisis."

An elderly couple was also killed in the storm, and Mr. Owens believes many more lives would have been lost if friends hadn't been prompted by meteorologists Troy Dungan and Kristine Kahanek to call and warn unsuspecting people they were directly in the tornado's path.

Eye witnesses saw three tornadoes sweep through the area that night. The F5 tornado that hit the Owens' home carried 200 mph winds and also completely destroyed 25 other homes and everything else in its path along a 10-mile stretch between north Collin and southeast Grayson counties. It actually touched down near Anna and Westminster, which is approximately 20 miles north of Frisco near I-75.

"There is currently some debate

about how to rate a tornado," said Mr. Owens. "The tornado that destroyed our house, for example, was an F5 in its center and an F3 on its perimeter. Tornadoes are always more powerful in the center. Unless someone has actually lived through a tornado, they don't realize how powerful these storms really are," Mr. Owens continued. "The other homes around us that were destroyed were free standing brick homes. Many of them were completely removed from their foundations."

When rural areas such as Van Alstyne, Westminster and Anna experience bad weather, it is not unusual for the television service to go out. Without access to weather reports, residents have no way of learning about dangerous weather conditions. Westminster has no storm sirens, and the storm hit too fast for an emergency storm calling system to respond, according to area officials.

Mike Owens in his family's memorial garden  
photo by Chris Fritchie



warnings are sounded.

Mr. Owens hopes their experience will help educate others about the importance of constructing an underground tornado shelter and learning about the new Reverse 911 technology. He also hopes weather men throughout the area will continue to warn people during their broadcasts of potentially deadly storms heading in their direction.

"It is very tempting to play the 'what if' game," added

Mr. Owens. "As Christians, we believe God has His hand in everything, and can't doubt his word. Colson had accepted Jesus Christ as his savior, and I know that I'll see him again in heaven. We take great comfort in remembering what a wonderful boy Colson was, and we know he's in heaven waiting for us to get there so we can all be together again."

Colson was the youngest of five children. The Van Alstyne high school freshman was a tremendous artist, very thoughtful, always grateful for what he had, and was the one that always made everyone laugh.

"When Colson was about five or six years old, we started a game that we continued until he died," said Mr. Owens. "I'd take a piece of paper, a napkin, or anything I could get my hands on, and I'd hand Colson a pencil, and he would make a

masterpiece out of it. He had tremendous insight and an uncanny ability to see things in a unique way. Colson had won several art awards in Van Alstyne and was earning a reputation as a talented young artist. One of his art teachers even told me that there were already art scholarships coming his way."

But Colson has left a much more important legacy. The Owens family has been told by many people that they've been dramatically changed by Colson's death.

"We've heard about several people that have become Christians after learning about Colson's tragic death," said Mrs. Owens. "We know Colson has received eternal life through his belief in Jesus."

"Others have seen the strong sense of peace, comfort and hope our belief gives us, and they want to have that same assurance of being with their loved ones in heaven that we do. I'm so proud that Colson has given people this gift of understanding how Jesus can not only change your life here, but can give you eternal life as well," added Mr. Owens.

After the memorial garden was built, Mr. Owens extended an open invitation to other families to come to the garden and plant a tree in memory of their deceased child. The Owens family is planning to place marble markers engraved with the names of each child at the base of the tree that has been planted in their honor.

The Owens family continues to heal. Their new home, being constructed 300 yards from the one that was destroyed by the tornado, will be complete in December or January. The beautiful white gazebo, the focal point of the memorial garden, memorializes where Colson died in their former home. The garden, however, is not meant to be a place of sadness. Instead, the Owens family hopes that everyone that visits will sense the peace and continuity of life beyond this one they believe is available to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

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Emily Foshee is a freelance writer living in Frisco.

After the tornado, Mr. Owens spoke with Troy Dungan about ways people can be more prepared in case a tornado strikes their area. Mr. Dungan recommended purchasing a Noah Weather Radio and, if possible, monitoring the storm's path via the Internet.

A new technology, Reverse 911, is another warning method that can be used. It is currently available in parts of Anna, and Mr. Owens hopes this technology will soon be available nationally.

"City managers and mayors must take the lead and make this service available to their communities," said Mr. Owens. Communities (large or small) must register their telephone, both land and mobile telephone numbers with Reverse 911. This enables the system's computer to dial up to 100,000 home and mobile telephone numbers simultaneously during a five-minute period when tornado