Kayla Carmona saw the tornado from the back door of the Joplin, Missouri, church before her parents and four sisters did. The sky was black and spinning violently. There were houses and cars being lifted up and spun like tops in the distance. Kayla, then 12, was running back to the chapel to tell her parents, quickly grabbing the hands of two of her little sisters along the way, when the lights went out.

Kayla woke up moments later with wood shards in her mouth and cement pressing down on her chest. The church had collapsed on them. Kayla’s mom, Kari, began yelling out the names of her daughters, and each one answered, except Kayla’s youngest sister, Arriyinnah. An hour later, after Kayla found out that her father had died, things got worse. Kayla held her dead 8-year-old sister in her arms while rescuers pulled more people out of the wreckage.

Even if you never come face-to-face with a killer tornado, life is filled with challenges. Maybe you or someone you love will get sick, survive an accident, or experience a painful loss. You may feel blindsided, uncertain how to move forward, and find yourself wondering: “Why me?” But there is a bright side. While no one goes searching for pain, experts say hard times can make you stronger—they help you develop a skill called resilience, which gives you the power to spring back from even the worst trauma.

“Resilient kids will say, ‘What happened didn’t just take something from me. It gave me something too,’” says Adriana Molina, a family therapist who has counseled hundreds of teen trauma survivors. Just look at Kayla—who found the strength to counsel other tornado victims who lost family members, despite her own grief—and the three other amazing teens whose stories you’re about to read. They all experienced a life-altering tragedy and fought their way back, only to find themselves stronger than ever.

How did they push through? They didn’t identify as victims—they thought of themselves as survivors.

“Being resilient means being able to see beyond the awful,” says Jana Martin, who specializes in working with young trauma victims in Maryland. “You’re able to take a step back and say: I need to make this a moment in my life, not the defining moment in my life.”
**THE SURVIVOR:**

**Kayla Carmona, 16**

**THE TRAGEDY:**
She lost her father and sister to a tornado that tore through their church.

**THE TRIUMPH:**
Kayla is now counseling other tornado survivors on how to deal with grief.

Kayla, then 14, and her mother saw the destruction on the news. A deadly EF5 tornado had touched down in Moore, Oklahoma. The scene was eerily familiar: The powerful storm had collapsed homes into piles of rubble, just like the tornado that killed her father and sister two years earlier. Seeing other people suffer gnawed at her. “We have to go, Mom,” she said.

Within a week, Kayla was in Moore volunteering with a group called Hope Station, which was helping tornado survivors share their stories by writing them on the backs of T-shirts. “Sometimes I’d stand on a chair in the middle of the tent where 50 to 100 people were gathered and I’d yell out my story,” says Kayla. “It got everyone else talking, and it helped that I could share my feelings, my anger, and no one would think I was a bad person.” Kayla, now 16, still gets anxious when it starts to rain. She obsessively checks for tornado warnings, but she’s trying to move past that. “I need to learn how to trust that I’ll be OK,” she says.

For a long time, Kayla wrestled with the question, “Why would God do this to my family?” Today, she sees the tornado differently. She draws strength from the realization that her family wasn’t being punished. “We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” she says. “It could have been anyone.” And whenever Kayla is stressing about a test or a problem she’s having with a friend, her mother will remind her: You had a building fall on you. Says Kayla: “It helps put things in perspective. If I survived that, I can survive anything.”

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**THE SURVIVOR:**

**Nick Ventura, 17**

**THE TRAGEDY:**
A snowboarding accident left him unable to talk or walk.

**THE TRIUMPH:**
Now back in high school, he started an organization that educates kids about the importance of wearing helmets.

Nick Ventura, 13, was thinking of only one thing as he cruised down the mountain on his snowboard: Speed. He loved the rush of flying down a hill, listening to his favorite song, “Kryptonite” by Three Doors Down. But that day in 2011, things went terribly wrong: First, the edge of his board got tripped up in the snow, knocking him unconscious. Then he slid backward, slamming his back into a tree.

The next thing Nick remembers is waking up in the hospital months later, after multiple surgeries to repair his fractured skull. His mom tried to explain what happened—Nick had suffered a traumatic brain injury. He couldn’t walk or talk. He couldn’t even remember the name of his best friend. Over the next several months, Nick had to relearn everything from how to get dressed, to how to speak or move around. “Being in the hospital was torture,” says Nick. “There were days where I refused to get up.” He’d lock the wheels on his wheelchair to protest going to rehab. He’d roar in frustration if he wasn’t making progress fast enough. “This was not the life I wanted to live,” he says.

But then he found a reason to fight, and once he found that, he pushed harder than ever: “I want to snowboard again,” he told his parents. As he worked on one goal, he started on another. He founded the 11 Foundation to support other survivors of traumatic brain injury and educate the general public on the importance of wearing helmets. “If I wasn’t wearing a helmet that day, I’d probably be dead,” he says.

Exactly one year after his accident, Nick went snowboarding again for the first time. “I felt like I’d conquered the world,” he says. “All that pain and hard work had paid off.” Now when he’s snowboarding, Nick doesn’t focus on speed. “It used to be about feeling adventurous—now being on the slopes makes me feel at peace.”

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**Open Up**

It doesn’t matter if it’s with a trusted grown-up or a friend—sharing your emotions and opinions will show you that you’re not alone, which is a crucial step in moving forward. (You can even find support online!)
It was an early spring day, and Sydney Corcoran and her mom, Celeste, were near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, cheering on the runners, when they heard a deafening explosion. Then everything went black. Sydney woke up moments later, a hole blown through her foot, a metal shard lodged in her thigh. There was blood everywhere. People were screaming, Sydney couldn’t see her mom, only strangers. “I knew I was dying,” she says.

Later, in the hospital, she’d learn there’d been a terrorist bombing. Her mother was alive, but doctors had amputated both her legs. Sydney was in bad shape herself: To survive, she’d need multiple surgeries.

Since that terrifying day, the two have shown a fighting spirit. Sydney’s mother has been fitted with prosthetic legs, while Sydney, now 19, is a sophomore in college. Still, healing hasn’t come quickly. To cope with her feelings, Sydney writes in a journal. “Often, I think I’m upset about one thing, but as I spill my problems on the page, I see so many things I didn’t even realize were bugging me.”

On the toughest days, Sydney says, she’s learned to look at the big picture. “I’ve found that if you focus on this one bad thing, you can lose yourself in it,” she says. Instead, she tries to remind herself: “This isn’t going to be my life every single day. It’s just one bad day.”

Lately, Sydney has had a lot of good days too. Her college is allowing her to create her own major: marine biology therapy, which combines her interest in aquatic life and occupational therapy. Even better, she’s been invited to swim with Winter, the dolphin with a prosthetic tail featured in the film, *Dolphin Tale*. Sydney says, “It’s definitely my silver lining.”

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**THE SURVIVOR: Sydney Corcoran, 19**

**THE TRAGEDY:** She and her mother suffered serious injuries in the 2013 Boston Marathon terrorist bombings.

**THE TRIUMPH:** Sydney is in college and planning for a meaningful career.

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**THE SURVIVOR: JaQue Billingsley, 18**

**THE TRAGEDY:** He had to have his leg amputated after a wrestling injury.

**THE TRIUMPH:** He’s now playing college football with a prosthetic leg.

JaQue Billingsley, 18, used to think he was Superman. No surprise since the star wrestler and football player at Northside High School in Warner Robins, Georgia, could bench-press 400 pounds in the gym. But JaQue learned he wasn’t invincible freshman year, when a serious wrestling accident—his knee snapped backward while sparring—severed an artery. Doctors said his leg couldn’t be saved. They would have to amputate it.

Four months after the accident, JaQue was fitted for a prosthetic leg. “I felt like a baby again because I had learned how to walk,” he says. Still, he was determined to get back onto the football field. In the hospital, his coach reassured him that he’d save his place on the team.

A football coach can stop you from doing what you want to do.” He’s now playing college football with a prosthetic leg. JaQue learned he wasn’t invincible freshman year, when a serious wrestling accident—his knee snapped backward while sparring—severed an artery. Doctors said his leg couldn’t be saved. They would have to amputate it.

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JaQue’s inner determination wore out. For the last two years of high school, he was back on his team, often even forgetting he had a prosthetic leg at all. In fact, JaQue played so well in those two years that Pasadena City College offered him a spot on their football team; he started last fall.

When JaQue first lost his leg, he was self-conscious about people staring at him, and he’d try to make jokes to put others at ease. Today, he’s comfortable just as he is. “I’m learning never to make excuses about stuff—there’s nothing that can stop you from doing what you want to do.” And maybe that’s what makes him Superman after all.

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Don’t let your misfortune define you. You’re not just someone who survived a car accident; for example—you’re also someone who likes soccer and is determined to be a doctor someday!