

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

## Woman dies in Kennywood collapse as fierce storms tear through region

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A murderous line of thunderstorms that stretched from Illinois to the Atlantic Ocean pummeled Western Pennsylvania yesterday, snapping trees, shredding power lines, smashing buildings and causing a ride pavilion to collapse at Kennywood Park in West Mifflin, killing a woman and injuring at least 54 other people.



Firefighters confer next to the collapsed roof that covered the Whip in the Lost Kennywood section of the amusement park. Visible in the background are parts of the Pittsburg Plunge, left, and the Phantom's Revenge ride.

The storm, packing wind gusts up to 80 mph, buckled the roof over the Whip, a historic 84-year-old attraction at the amusement park, which was jammed with visitors on what had been a sunny, balmy spring evening.

Elsewhere, it uprooted hundreds of trees in Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville, at the Pittsburgh Zoo and Aquarium in Highland Park and throughout the city's East End and damaged buildings in Lawrenceville, Bloomfield, Wilkinsburg and Homestead.

"I haven't seen anything like this in my life," said Guy Costa, veteran director of Pittsburgh's Public Works Department, who speculated that the damage came from a tornado or microburst, a strong downward blast of wind.

National Weather Service meteorologist Brad Rehak said as the storm moved toward Pittsburgh shortly before 7 p.m., it began to take on characteristics of a tornado. But weather service experts were still sifting data last night to determine if a tornado occurred.

He said a team would inspect the areas of greatest damage today. Patterns of destruction may allow the weather service experts to make a final determination.

The weather service received numerous reports of funnel cloud sightings, none of which had been confirmed. A tornado warning was issued for Allegheny County at 6:57 p.m. and extended to Westmoreland County three minutes later.

Firefighters confer next to the collapsed roof that covered the Whip in the Lost Kennywood section of the amusement park. Visible in the background are parts of the Pittsburg Plunge, left, and the Phantom's Revenge ride.

While storms littered the Western Pennsylvania landscape with trees, limbs, utility poles and lines, pieces of roofs and facades and miscellaneous other bits of infrastructure, there were few immediate reports of serious injuries aside from those at Kennywood.

Authorities identified the woman killed in the Kennywood collapse as Stephanie Wilkerson, 30, of Monroeville.

One person was critically injured in Arsenal Park in Lawrenceville after being hit by a falling tree or limb, according to Margaret Philbin, Allegheny County communications director. No other details were available last night.

Allegheny County activated its Emergency Operations Center and reported significant damage in East McKeesport, Homestead, Munhall, West Mifflin, Whitaker and Pittsburgh.

Duquesne Light spokesman Derek C. Riley said the storm damaged or severed a half-dozen of the utility's power lines around Kennywood Park. In all, 60,000 customers in Allegheny and Beaver counties were still without power as of 9 p.m.

"All of our field personnel have been mobilized. They are expected to work through the night and the weekend to restore service," Riley said.

Costa said city crews also would work through the night to clear streets of trees, limbs and debris. He said neighborhoods of Squirrel Hill, Shadyside, Morningside, Stanton Heights, Point Breeze and Regent Square were hard-hit.

"There are a lot of downed utility lines. We had some light poles come down at the tennis courts in Schenley Park. A lot of catch basins are clogged up. Hundreds of trees are down in the eastern part of the city," Costa said. Neighborhoods in the northern, western and southern parts of the city appeared to be relatively unscathed.

At Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville, hundreds of trees, some of them 150 or more years old, were snapped off and littered about.

"We've never experienced anything like this," said Tom Roberts, the cemetery's president, who was worked there for 28 years.

Roberts was still assessing damage last night, but said trees up to four feet in diameter were snapped off at their bases. There were few people visiting the cemetery when the storm hit, and security personnel combed the site to ensure no one was hurt.

On McCandless Avenue in Lawrenceville, part of the facade of a former church building was peeled off, littering the ground with thousands of bricks. Two vehicles were damaged but no one injured. The building was being renovated into a loft apartment and art studio.

Elsewhere in Lawrenceville, streets were dark and littered with pieces of roofs and porches.

Highland Park was closed last night, according to Mike Gable, the director of Citiparks. Large trees blocked Reservoir Drive, the park's main road. Trees also fell on the Super Playground and across several picnic shelters.

Gable also closed portions of Schenley Park.

At the Pittsburgh Zoo and Aquarium, a large white tent used for outdoor events remained intact. But Allegheny River Boulevard, which becomes Butler Street just one block beyond One Wild Place, one of the zoo's entrances, was closed. Zoo officials said no buildings were damaged or animals hurt.

Near the zoo, at Butler and Baker streets, a woman was trapped when a tree fell on her car. Emergency workers freed her, but her condition was not known last night.

Parts of Heberton and Bryant streets in Highland Park were blocked by downed trees and utility wires.

Several streets in Squirrel Hill were barricaded. Several trees were reported down along Browns Hill Road.

The Shadyside business district and surrounding residential streets were without power.

In Garfield, the roof of Calabria's Italian Restaurant, 4911 Penn Ave., was blown off. Nearby, a downed power line threw sparks like a firecracker fuse.

Detectives from the city's Major Crimes headquarters in East Liberty were summoned to assist patrol officers with directing traffic because nearly all traffic signals in the East End were out.

Police had at least 60 reports of wires down in Zone 5, which covers much of the East End.

At 10 p.m., city police officials authorized officers to go to the city garage and put several new police cars into service ahead of schedule to get more police and vehicles to impassable areas. And officials shifted fire trucks and personnel to East End stations and locations because of the huge volume of calls.

Witnesses said at least 50 trees were uprooted along Stanton Avenue and more were torn down on side streets.

In Downtown Pittsburgh, temporary detour signs and newspaper boxes were scattered about, and streets were strewn with litter.

Munhall Mayor Ray Bodnar said he declared a state of emergency after the winds swept through his community, not far from the worst damage at Kennywood. He said that while damage to his town was extensive, he was grateful that by late in the evening there were still no reports of severe injuries.

"We have major damage throughout the whole town. Power is out in at least 40 percent of town. Trees are uprooted, on top of cars. Trees a foot and a half thick snapped. We had one car in a creek," Bodnar said.

A block of Homestead's business district on East Eighth Avenue was blocked off because of a damaged building. From the Homestead Hi-Level Bridge, flashing emergency lights could be seen all across the hillside above the river town.

In Edgewood, a tree blew down atop a house at Locust and Beech streets. Part of a building came down on Wood Street in Wilkinsburg.

Workers from the American Red Cross southwestern Pennsylvania chapter were working last night to find emergency shelter for more than 200 residents of a senior citizens high-rise apartment complex in Wilkinsburg, which had no electric power. They had not received any immediate requests for housing from other victims of storm damage.

"We have been canvassing all over the county to find out if anyone needs a place to stay," said spokeswoman Jill Berardi. "So far, we have found no needs like that."

In North Versailles, trees were uprooted and nearly hurled into an apartment building and the Hallmark Senior Communities nursing home along U.S. Route 30.

"There are tree trunks all over the place," said Charley Feeney, retired Post-Gazette sports writer. "You've got to see it to believe it. It's amazing that it didn't hit that nursing home."

Power was out in many portions of North Huntingdon in Westmoreland County, police there reported.

In Washington County, oak trees fell across roads and power lines were felled in Nottingham, Finleyville, Monongahela and other municipalities.

In southern Beaver County, trees were down and power out in Hanover, Independence and Raccoon Township, Duquesne Light spokesman John Laudenslager said.

He also reported power outages in the Hill District, Oakland, Friendship, Plum, Monroeville, Turtle Creek and McKeesport.

The severe weather was as typical as it was ominous for this time of year.

"May 31 is pretty much an infamous date for us," said the National Weather Service's Rehak.

"The Johnstown flood was May 31, 1889. A lot of people will remember the tornadoes that came through [Beaver and Lawrence counties] on May 31, 1985, and the next year, on May 30, the Etna floods. ... This is pretty much our peak for severe weather."

On May 31, 1985, Western Pennsylvania suffered through as many "maxi-tornadoes" -- those capable of leveling a house -- as usually hit the entire nation in a year, according to a meteorological study done at the time. One tornado, in Wheatland, Mercer County, packed winds of 300 mph, and people died despite taking every possible precaution.

The storms left 65 dead, destroyed 1,009 homes and caused an estimated \$375 million in damage in the western part of the state.

They injured 707 people in Pennsylvania, 450 in Ontario, 300 in Ohio and caused another \$250 million in damage in Ohio, Ontario and New York.

Sixteen people were injured in Mount Washington when a tornado touched down around 5:50 p.m. on June 2, 1998. The tornado was one of 14 reported in Beaver, Allegheny, Westmoreland, Fayette and Somerset counties as severe storms swept through the region.

Eight people were killed when 3.5 inches of rain fell in an hour on May 30, 1986. Pleasant Hills and nine municipalities in northern Allegheny County were the most severely affected by the flooding, which caused an estimated \$20 million in damage.

Rehak and his colleagues were watching the radar at about 5:30 p.m. yesterday when they noticed two storms about to converge over Beaver County. "Usually, when storms merge like that, you have to be particularly concerned about damage," he said.

The combined storm moved through Sewickley, the North Hills, and crossed into the City of Pittsburgh, moving along a line from Lawrenceville and Bloomfield to Shadyside before crossing the Monongahela River near West Mifflin.

Radar data showed the storm was dropping as much as an inch and a half of rain in just about 20 minutes.

Dave Ondrejik, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's State College office said the winds that battered the region were part of a much larger storm that stretched from Illinois to southern Maine.

"Trees and power lines were down all though Central Pennsylvania. Potter, Tioga, Clinton, Clearfield and Lycoming counties were all hit pretty hard. There was a lot of big hail in northern Pennsylvania, baseball-sized in parts. As you move toward the center of the state it became more of a wind event."

Press secretary April Hutcheson said the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency monitored damage reports from across Western Pennsylvania. She said that while reports of downed trees and power lines were widespread, initial reports suggested that no other section of the state had been hit as severely as Allegheny County.