

# Missing after Helene

## Torn apart by landslides and floods, families frantic for news

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John Norwood last saw Julie le Roux around 10 a.m. Friday morning.

In Helene's chaos, Norwood and his fiancée took refuge at a neighbor's mountain home in Marion. As they watched water rise around them, a wave of debris and dirt roared into the home, crumbling a chimney beside them.

Norwood stepped to one side. Le Roux stepped to the other. Then the roof collapsed, crashing down on them.

"It happened so fast," said Norwood, 32. "All I remember is a bunch of crashing noises, and then I was under-water, and that was it."

Norwood is one of so many — no one has an exact count — waiting for word on whether missing loved ones survived Helene. With cell phone and internet service still dark in many hardest-hit locations, connecting in the usual ways has been impossible.

More than 55 have been confirmed dead by the state, but an untold many remain unaccounted for. Local officials have been deluged with requests for help finding the missing.

Bulletin boards with notes seeking assistance have cropped up in mountain towns. People are posting cries from the heart on social media and calling into radio stations.

And as each day passes after Helene's historic assault, the worry grows more frantic.

"I'm praying for a miracle," Norwood said in a telephone interview from a hospital room in Morganton.

**FACEBOOK GROUPS AT WORK**

On Wednesday, pleas for help continue to roll in on social media, including in the newly created Hurricane Helene Missing People group.

There, a mother looks for a daughter who was living on the streets of Asheville during the storm. A woman wants someone to find her sister in the Candler area. A man knows of an elderly couple in Lenoir that someone must check on.

"They need help! Food, water and oxygen. I've posted in multiple areas, but no response," he wrote.

The waiting is torture, said Jasmin Colon, 36, who lives in Cape Coral, Fla. She is looking for her Uncle Billy, a 79-year-old longtime Spruce Pine resident.

"My biggest fear is that he stayed in his camper and that it got either crushed by a tree or the landslides took it out," she said Wednesday.

Family last spoke with William "Bill" Smith, a retired parachute instructor on Wednesday. He told Colon's dad by phone that he was keeping an eye on Helene.

But when they followed up after that, Smith did not answer or respond to texts.

They reported him missing to the state and the American Red Cross. And Colon joined a local Facebook community named Let's Talk Spruce Pine. She added his name to a spreadsheet she found online of missing people, and

checked community lists of people who have been found, including those who were seen getting meals at a local church.

Jeffrey Kupiec, 35, also searched Facebook for anything about his 84-year-old grandfather Brent Pitman and his 56-year-old aunt Cheryl Pitman, also residents of Spruce Pine. Their home was Sunny Hill Senior Living Apartments.

"It just seems like a lot of what you're seeing now is just unknown," said Kupiec, who is a K-9 trainer working on a job in Indiana, on Wednesday.

**'WE NEED TO GO'**

Norwood, a blacksmith originally from Pittsboro, and le Roux, a 33-year-old artist from Georgia, had dated for three years before he proposed last summer.

Norwood woke up around 6 a.m. Friday and saw a nearby creek creeping close to his place, nestled with about a dozen other homes on the side of a mountain by Pisgah National Forest in McDowell County.

"We need to go," he told le Roux, who helped round up their cats, Ginger and Lily, in a crate. Carrying the bags they packed the night before, they loaded up their Subaru Outback.

First they drove up the mountain. As they rounded a corner, mud and rocks, deposited by a slide, blocked the road. Then they drove down, but were stopped again, by fallen trees laying flat.

Norwood pulled out his chainsaw and tried to clear a path.

"It was so windy and rainy that more and more trees just kept falling all around us, and we just agreed that it was too dangerous to be out here," said Norwood.

The couple drove back to the house in the dark rainfall.

**REFUGE TURNED DANGEROUS**

Around 8:30 a.m., they walked to a neighbor's with a generator and a Starlink satellite phone.

Norwood texted his mother and his sister to let them know they were OK. As they sat and watched the water rise, they saw it push cars around and knock more trees down.



Courtesy of John Norwood

John Norwood and Julie le Roux were separated in the storm.



Courtesy of Jasmin Colon

Jasmin Colon, left, with her Uncle Bill Smith in a photo taken in Spruce Pine 15 years ago.

### How to report a missing person

To report a missing person or request non-emergency support, call NC 211 or 1-888-892-1162 if calling from out-of-state.

Then, through a window, he saw a wave of water, tree limbs and rocks sweeping down the mountain. It soon hit them.

"We looked up and there was this wall of water and debris coming towards us, and a split-second later, the whole house was coming down," Norwood said.

And they were swept into a rushing river of mud and debris.

Norwood struggled to keep his head above water as branches, rocks and pieces of houses hit him in the face and pulled him under, pulling off his sandals and shirt.

"I fully kind of accepted that I was going to die there," he said.

In no time, the water took Norwood about a quarter-mile, where he found himself stuck on a growing pile of tangled houses and debris atop something snagged below.

His arms were free and his head was above water, but two large pieces of wood had crushed his legs under the surface. A big log pushed at his back.

Norwood heard his neighbor yelling. But he didn't hear his fiancée.

"I was just screaming, 'hey, I'm here.

Help. Please. Help.' " Norwood said.

As Norwood's neighbor dug him out, pain in his legs set in. He started screaming for le Roux.

"Julie, Julie, Julie," he yelled, he said, for 20 minutes.

But she never answered.

"I kind of just went into shock and panic after that," he said.

### 'PLEASE, GOD, LET HER BE SOMEWHERE SAFE'

Unable to walk, Norwood crawled barefoot about 100 feet up the top mountain on his hands and knees, getting a birds eye view of the destruction.

"I see nothing. There's no road anymore. There's no way out of there," he said.

He leaned up against a tree and passed out for an unknown amount of time before the cold woke him up and sent him searching for shelter.

He shimmied down the mountain on his rear and found a woodshed, he said, where he waited for a few hours before seeing a cabin with a hand-made sign that said "Alive inside."

He opened the door and found his neighbors, but not le Roux.

"Please, God, let her be somewhere safe. Let her be okay somewhere," Norwood said he kept saying to himself.

Eventually, they saw people nearby but on the other side of rushing water, which muffled their yells as they tried to communicate.

Rescue teams strung a thick rope across the creek, and pulled Norwood and his neighbors across in metal baskets.

Firefighters carried them to vehicles that drove them about four miles to land clear enough for ambulances to reach those rescued from the mountain, Norwood said.

They took him to the hospital, where he remains, with muscle damage and a staph infection.

His biggest concern remains the same. He hasn't heard from le Roux.

*Update: Brent and Cheryl Pitman, Jeffrey Kupiec's grandfather and aunt, were found safe on Thursday, Oct. 3.*

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A member of a search and rescue team wades into the Catawba River near Old Fort searching for victims on Oct. 2.



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Two people and a dog are escorted to a rescue boat in Chimney Rock on Sept. 29. Much of the town has been demolished by flooding.