

April 20, 2004 Emergency Management, First Responder, & Meteorologist Accounts

“While I was not the EMA Director at the time, I was a Red Cross Disaster Services Volunteer and was one of four Red Cross Volunteers on scene right after it happened at the top of the hill. As my first large scale disaster locally, it was quite overwhelming at first, but the overall experience drove me to be better prepared personally and to educate others on the benefits of it. I was also driven to personally make a difference in my own community to help others in times of disaster.

Out of the lessons learned from the Granville/Utica Tornado, various agencies have implemented:

- Use of agency photo identifications for its people
- Forming and enhancing partnerships & professional relationships BEFORE a disaster happens
- Training and exercising emergency plans more often
- Collaboration, communication, & cooperation among response partner agencies

We've been able to test some of these things in the last 10 years with the various other disasters we've had in LaSalle County like the Streator & Dana tornadoes and historic floods.

Connie Brooks, LaSalle County Emergency Management Agency Director

“What a day. I was a rescue worker that day digging through some of the debris and searching the canal and creeks also going door to door checking on people. Those days are hard on fire rescue workers also. I was there for a few days helping.”

Jason Ruff

This event sparked my interest in meteorology. Before the tornado passed through Utica, IL, it formed from a parent low-topped supercell forming in a field southwest of Granville, IL. The tornado ripped through Granville, destroying several homes and impacting Putnam County Elementary School (also just missed Putnam County High School to the north).

I vividly remember the events unfolding and the cleanup process to this day. Post event, I decided to focus on meteorology as a career and I haven't looked back since! I now have a Ph.D. in meteorology and teach classes as an Assistant Professor at College of DuPage!

All forecasters can learn something from this event. As for Utica, residents unfortunately learned that tornadoes can (and do!) cross rivers.

Victor Gensini, Ph.D.

“I worked the evening shift 4/20/04 starting in the mid-afternoon. No significant severe risk was anticipated through the evening. Within a few hours however, storms initiated over western IL, and rapidly evolved into discrete supercells. It was evident that the warm front was surging north and we were going to have a problem. I acted as event coordinator that evening, calling back day shift people and any other staff I could get to come in

and work. Thankfully, we were able to get folks into work, and the storms remained largely discrete and somewhat straightforward to warn for.

The remainder of the shift was busy, to say the least, but organized and well-handled. I don't recall exactly how or when we became aware of the fatalities in Utica, but I recall how disheartening that news was to hear. Many meteorologists enjoy the challenge of working severe weather events. Severe thunderstorms, while inherently dangerous, are often considered beautiful by many. Hearing of significant damage or injuries, however, and especially fatalities while working such an event creates a very somber mood on the operations floor. And on that evening, there were more storms to monitor and more warnings to be issued. It was my first 'outbreak' and one of the most significant severe weather events in my nearly 20 year career.

Of course, our job does not end with the warning process. Late that evening we were making plans to send out survey teams to cover the damaged areas. In all, 12 separate tornadoes were identified in our area.

I returned to the office early the next morning, and drove out to Utica with two colleagues. We surveyed within the town itself, where considerable damage had occurred. A couple of things stand out to me ten years later – first, we passed a metal pre-fab type garage which had collapsed with a fire ambulance inside. It struck me that the ambulance was unable to respond to the disaster, and that seemed incongruous and odd to me. Another was seeing the front of a business caved in and noting a clock on the back wall which was stopped at 5:53 – the approximate time of the tornado. A few minutes later, we arrived at the corner of Church St. and Mill St., the site of the Milestone Tavern where the eight fatalities occurred. Fire personnel were still digging through the rubble into the basement. I could not help but feel profound sadness at the loss of life and the considerable damage to the town. These people's lives (those who survived) would never be the same. It's easy to be detached from this sort of reality when working radar as a warning meteorologist back at the office.

After our work was done in Utica, we drove our 4-wheel drive SUV down into the flat flood plain southwest of town, scouting the surrounding tree tops for signs of damage. We came across some large high tension power lines that had been bent over where they crossed the Illinois River east of Oglesby. We eventually ended up working into the NWS Quad Cities' territory near Granville, IL in Putnam County.

One of the interesting parts of this survey, was that my colleague that day Al Pietrycha used mapping software and a GPS card in a laptop to locate our positions along the survey path. He made some very nice maps (prior to this, this work was done by keeping hand written notes and then making a map from those notes). Using the mapping software and the GPS location made it easy to make tornado track maps once we got back to the office. It was a long day, as I seem to recall we arrived in Utica by around 8-8:30 am, and got back to the office perhaps around 5-5:30 pm."

Mark Ratzer, NWS Chicago Lead Forecaster

"The night of the event we coordinated four survey teams to go out the next day. I was in the team that had gone to Utica and we first had to get passes from IL State Police to be allowed into town. As impressive as the damage was in Utica, the aerial survey revealed that the tornado became much wider above the bluff, northeast of Utica. The aerial survey helped us find the narrow path of a satellite tornado (which was later confirmed by an eyewitness) and also evidence of intense suction vortices. This was probably the second worst tornado outbreak I had in my area of responsibility within my career after June 2, 1990 at Indianapolis."

Jim Allsopp, NWS Chicago Warning Coordination Meteorologist (ret. 2013)