

What I remember about April 3, 1974

--By Blair David Terry (Weston's dad.)

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Hello, my name is Blair David Terry. I am Weston's dad. I would like to tell you about the storms we had in Moulton. ...Especially the tornadoes of 1974. This was 14 years before most of you were born.

We had some unusual weather in Lawrence County even before the tornadoes of 1974. We lived in a small community called Mount Moriah, located northwest of Moulton. In the winter of 1972, I was 11 years old. I remember we had a big ice storm. I recall going outside the house, into the back yard, (our house was built in the middle of a pine thicket) and hearing limbs snap and fall off the pine trees. It looked like a "winter wonderland," at the time, but later in the spring, we had to gather up all the pine limbs and burn them. I remember the pile of limbs were higher than I was tall. I even remember having a marsh-mellow roast when we burned them. We had fun, but it was a lot of work too!

We had a big flood in the Spring of 1973. According to the National Weather Service, we had an El Nino that year too! I was only 12, so I don't remember watching the weather too closely back then. But I do remember it raining a lot. A cousin of mine lost most of his cows because the water got so high in his pasture they drown. His pasture was located southwest of our house in Mount Moriah, and we could see the water from our front porch. It looked like an ocean to me. But I was only 12! Even after it was summertime, and I was out of school, my dad (Weston's grandfather) and I would go to Wheeler Dam or Mallard Creek fishing. Going through South Pike and into Courtland was impossible because the water was still backed up. There would be people on the side of the highway fishing in what used to be cotton fields! Imagine that.

Weather has always been fascinating to me, mostly because of my experiences with it. In 1974 I was 13 years old, and in the 8th grade. I cannot remember the winter season, but I do recall the spring of that year. It must have been an unusually warm winter because by the end of February, we were already getting ripe strawberries from our patch.

On the morning of Wednesday, April 3, 1974, my older brother (Weston's uncle Tony) and sister (Weston's aunt Sissy), myself, and my little brother (Weston's uncle Daryl) dressed, ate breakfast with our mom, and walked to our cousin's house to wait on the bus. Our dad worked second shift at Monsanto, so we did not see him before we left for school.

Our cousins, the Owens family, lived on the opposite side of the gravel road, but their house was much closer to the road than ours, so it was easier to watch, and "run for the school bus," from there.

Here I need to stop and introduce our cousins, plus my brothers and sisters. Phillip Owens was my first cousin. (This would make him Weston's second cousin.) His mom and my dad are brother and sister. Phillip's wife, Alpha, was a 'stay-at-home' mom, like mine was, so she was always there when we arrived at her house every morning before school.

Phillip and Alpha had 4 children. They were my second cousins, and Weston's third. Phyllis, the oldest was 15 years old, and in the 10th grade. Linda was 14 years old, and in the 9th grade, same as my sister. Thomas, or "Buddy" as we called him, was 13, and in the 7th grade. We were only 3 months apart in age, but I was a grade ahead of him. The last cousin, Teri, age 11, was in the 6th grade. Also, my oldest brother, and Weston's uncle, Tony, was 17, and in the 11th grade. My sister, Sissy was 15, and in the 10th. I, like I said earlier, was 13, and in the 8th. And my little brother, Daryl, was 8, and in the 3rd grade. So, as you can see, we were all like "stair-steps" in age. Living out in the country, and them being our closest neighbors, we were a lot like brothers and sisters, even though we were only second cousins.

I don't remember much about the bus ride to school that day, but I do remember my oldest brother, Tony had begun to drive to school, but he didn't let us ride with him. I believe it was because it would have been "uncool" to be seen with your little brothers or sisters in the car with you!

The wind was blowing very hard that Wednesday morning. In fact, it blew hard all day long! It also got really hot. I believe the temperature reached 80 degrees. This was too hot for April, but everyone was joking about the weather feeling like July. During P. E. class, our teacher decided we should stay in the gym and play basketball because he didn't want us getting dirt or sand blown in our eyes. Funny how I can remember certain details, but not others. But, in my defense, that was almost 24 years ago.

That day after school, I, my sister, and my oldest brother stayed after school. (I would have to tell my brother I was riding with him, but I wasn't looking forward to it!) My sister was in the band, and my older brother was on the football team. I had called my mom from school earlier that day to make sure it was okay for me to stay afterwards and watch them both practice. I also had a "girlfriend" in the band, but I don't think I mentioned it to my mom! This decision, along with others I made that day, probably helped to save my life that day.

I watched my brother practice awhile, then I went over to the baseball field to watch the band. I should mention, that I did get sand or dirt in my eyes because the wind was still blowing hard. After band practice was over, I talked to my girlfriend until her dad picked her up. Then my sister, Phyllis, Linda, and I stood against the band hall, out of the wind, until Phillip picked them up. After they had left, Sissy and I went back to the football field to wait for Tony to finish practice.

I don't remember much about the ride back to our house, but I do remember my brother saying he was going to drop us off, and then go over to a friend's house for awhile.

After we got home, which must have been between 5:00-5:30pm, we had chores to do. Mine was to gather the hen eggs. This was a tough job with the wind blowing, but I don't think I dropped any on the way back to the house. Later, they would all be broke, but no one would care!

Earlier, I mentioned decisions I made that day, call it luck or fate, which probably saved my life. The first one was staying after school. If I hadn't, I would have probably came off the school bus, got my chores done, and then gone to my cousin's house to play before they left for church. A decision they made that evening was not to attend church because the weather was so bad. But we wouldn't know this until later in the evening.

After I got back from gathering eggs, my dad called to check on the weather at home. He talked to mom and told her it looked like a dark cloud was covering Moulton. Then, not long after mom got off the phone with dad, it began to hail. My little brother, Daryl, and I got a quart-size freezer box and went into the backyard to gather up some of it to put into the freezer so dad could see how big it was when he got home that night. Sounds pretty dumb now, but I guess that's how a 13 year old thinks, huh? At any rate, it was another 'right' decision I made that day.

While Daryl and I was picking up hail, my dog, Blackie, began to bark loud. He was somewhere around the front of our house, and the pine trees were so thick, you couldn't see him from where we were. My little brother took the hail into the house while I walked around front to see what Blackie was "barking at." He was standing in the front looking across the field toward the southwest, and when I looked in that direction, I saw a tornado on the ground. I couldn't hear a roaring sound, but I could see that it was behind my cousin's house and appeared to be throwing trees into the air. Other trees looked like they were bending and almost touching the ground! It also appeared to be standing still. Later, I would learn a tornado standing still usually means it is heading toward you!

I went into the house to find my mom, and took her to our front door. The power went off around that time, and I looked at my watch, it was 6:20pm. Mom suggested we raise some windows, so she and I went through the house raising them. I don't remember how many we actually raised, or even how long this took, but everything seemed to be going in slow motion. I have a "black-out" as to what my little brother was doing or even where he was during our window-raising. I do remember knocking on my sister's bedroom door and telling her to come out because a tornado was coming.

My mom wanted to call our cousin's to warn them, so she gave me her lighter to hold by the telephone while she dialed their number. It was so quiet, I could hear most of the 'other side' of the conversation. Phyllis answered, and mom told her to look behind their house because a tornado was there. Phyllis was crying, and said "Aunt Sarah, we know. What are we going to do?" I can't remember mom hanging up the phone, or what I did with her lighter, but after mom turned back to me, she said that Phillip had yelled at Phyllis to tell her that they were going to get in their hallway (center of their

house) and for Sarah to get us lay down in front of our couch in the den. (This was the center of our house.)

Sissy, Daryl, and I lay down 'long-ways' in front of our den couch, and then mom laid on top of us. I remember thinking how ridiculous this was! Especially if I was wrong and a tornado wasn't going to hit. But before I decided to get back up to look outside, I could hear glass breaking and wood splitting. The front door in the living room where I had taken my mom earlier, was propped open. I don't recall leaving it open when we began raising windows, but we must have. I do remember that I could see it because there was a door from the den leading into the living room, and I was almost in a direct line to it. I still cannot remember hearing a roar like everyone says accompanies a tornado, but what I do remember is something coming through the den door and I held up my right arm to shield myself. Later, I would learn my right arm was broken, but I'm not sure if whatever I was dodging then is what actually broke my arm. For some reason, I think it was the storm door or the wood door that flew past me. It doesn't matter, what matters most to me, is that it didn't hit me in the head!

After shielding my head from the debris, I couldn't breathe. I don't know how long it lasted, but it felt like all the air was gone, and I just couldn't breathe! Later, when we all talked about what we experienced, we all told each other the same thing. I do believe your mind can block out particularly bad traumatic experiences, so that may explain why none of us remember a roar. Mom and my sister remembers a death-like odor, but that is not something I can be sure I experienced, maybe a dirt and mud smell, but nothing too unpleasant.

After the tornado had passed, I remember asking my mom, "Where are we going to live?" I think she ignored that question, and asked my sister and little brother if they were okay. My sister said she was fine, (She had lost one shoe and her glasses were broken in half.) but my little brother's first words were: "Get off of me! I'm bleeding to death!" It's funny now, and maybe it was a little funny then, but in reality, he was bleeding. He had a pretty bad cut on his right shoulder. The way we were positioned, he was actually laying on top of me, and blood was running down his arm and dripping onto me. I told mom my right arm was broken, but I could move my fingers. My left hand was caught between the floor and a wall that had fell on top of us. My body was laying on the ground, off the wooden floor. Only my left arm and hand was still on the den floor. It was "caught" because I used to wear my watch on my left wrist. Since then, I have always worn it on my right arm, and toward my palm. I believe it's because of being helpless to move that night. I couldn't get loose by myself because remember, my right arm was broken, (between my elbow and shoulder) so I couldn't use it as leverage.

Mom and my sister were under the couch (it had turned over and helped to protect them), and my little brother was laying on the floor with part of his upper body hanging off the den floor. I could see most of him, (and especially the blood that was dripping on me!) but could only hear mom and my sister. Mom and Sissy worked together to raise the couch (a wall was lying on top of it) so Sissy could get free. My mom's legs were

cut badly from a glass bookcase in the den, but she either ignored the pain or wasn't aware of it because she was trying to protect her kids. She may have cut them worse trying to help my sister get out.

At any rate, when Sissy got free, mom asked her to go for help. Right away she noticed that the Owens house was gone. It must have been a sight to see Sissy half walking and half running over trees and debris with only one shoe on, and no glasses! Sissy came back with help (an Aunt, an Uncle, and cousin from a mile away.) Pretty soon, the rescue squad arrived and took us to Lawrence County Hospital. I'm not sure how far they had to carry us, but it must have been a half-mile because of all the trees that were down on the road and in our driveway. (Our driveway was a tenth of a mile long!) I do remember having to get on a stretcher and being bounced around for what seemed like forever. I think I could have walked, but looking back, I'm not sure they wanted me to see what our house and property looked like. And unknown at the time, (at least to a 13 year old) I'm sure they were also looking for our cousins.

After we arrived at Lawrence County Hospital in Moulton, (known now as Lawrence Baptist) they decided I needed x-rays and since the power was off, and their generators were already in use for surgery, they put me in an ambulance (with a bunch of strangers!) and sent us to Decatur General. I remember that there was this really old lady crying, and then her mother. The elder of the two was screaming, and it began to scare me really bad. I think an EMT realized I was getting scared, so he told me I could climb into the front cab with him and the driver if I wanted to. You can believe I did! I think it was bucket seats, so I had to sit in his lap, but I didn't care. I just wanted to be away from those screaming ladies!

Before we reached Decatur, they radioed our ambulance and said "Decatur General Hospital is full, take them to Hartselle." I was really scared now. I had never been in an ambulance in my life, and now I was going to another town, and my family wouldn't be able to find me! We had not heard from my dad since before the storm, and my older brother was over at a friend's house. Mom was having surgery to remove glass from her leg, and I wasn't even sure where Sissy and Daryl was. It was a scary time for me, plus the radio in the ambulance continued to tell of other tornadoes touching down in North Alabama.

I forgot all about my cousins and their house being gone, and was worried that no one would find me in Hartselle. I met Dr. Duncan, who's son played football for the University of Alabama. He was real nice, told me about his boy playing for Bear Bryant, and how I could come to a ball game in the fall to meet him. I know he was trying to keep me from being scared, but it didn't help much. He told me he was going to put a heavy cast on my arm to try to make the bones align, but he also said I would have to have surgery the next day. He said they would have to put a pin in my arm to make it well again. I cried and told him that I wanted to talk to my mom or dad. He said he would have someone find my parents as soon as they could, but in the meantime, he put the cast on. It was heavy and went from the top of my shoulder to my hand. After

he did this, a nurse came into the room to ask me some questions. Imagine a 13 year old being interviewed by a grown-up!

She knew what she was doing though, because she finally got the information out of me that I had an Aunt and Uncle in Hartselle. She even looked up the phone number for me and called them. My Aunt knew a tornado had touched down close to where we lived, and she had been trying to call mom, but that was all she knew. After I told them we were okay, she came over to see me. I felt much better then! If she learned or even knew about my cousins, she didn't mention it. After she left, which must have been after 11:00pm, I was scared again. My arm was hurting and the semi-private-room I was in had a stranger in it! He talked to me, and I found out he was from Moulton too. His name was Namon Terry and he knew my dad. The tornado that had hit our house had hit his soon afterwards. The nurse must have given me some pain medicine because I went to sleep.

Around 12:30am, my dad walked in and woke me up. He told me that everyone (Mom, Sissy, and Daryl) were okay. He also said he had found my brother and he was staying at his friend's house, but he was aware of what had happened. I don't know if he just came out and told me, or if I asked, but I learned that my cousins had been found. All of them but their dad, Phillip. I then asked him if they were alive, and he said no, they had all been killed. I guess that's when I realized how bad it really must have been. Dad said he was going back to Moulton, but that he would come back later that day and transfer me back to Lawrence County Hospital so we would be closer. I told him about the surgery Dr. Duncan had mentioned, and he said it would be okay, that they knew what they were doing, but he also said he'd be back before they did anything.

After dad left, I went to sleep, but had nightmares. Later that next morning, Thursday, they x-rayed my arm and told me everything looked good! I wouldn't need the pin, that the bones had set themselves while I was sleeping. Talking to people that have had broken bones, I'm sure glad it done this in my sleep because everyone says it's really painful.

Then around noon, dad checked me out and we went back to Lawrence County Hospital. On the way, he told me the rescue squad had found Phillip, and that he was also dead. I couldn't believe it. He said there were more than just our cousins killed in Lawrence County, but he didn't know the exact total. I later found out that 16 had lost their lives. When we got back to Moulton, I was put in the room with my mom, and she was glad to see me. But probably not as glad as I was to see her!

Phillip, Alpha, Phyllis, Linda, Thomas "Buddy," and Teri Owens were buried at Loosier Church of Christ. I'm not even sure what day that was. I do know that Lawrence County Schools were out Thursday and Friday after the tornadoes. I think I missed about 2 weeks of school because of my arm, and being so sore. (If you have ever been in a wreck, then you know how sore you are afterwards!) Mom and dad made the decision that I shouldn't attend my cousin's funeral. I wanted to go, but didn't at the same time. Looking back, I wish I had went. That way, I could have told them goodbye.

For several years after the tornadoes of April 3, 1974, I would have nightmares. No one really understood the need for counseling back then, but I know if it had been available, it may have helped to ease the pain of losing 6 cousins all at once. The guilt of surviving while they perished is unbelievable sometimes. But I do believe everything happens for a reason. It's not our place to question the "whens" or "whys" of it.

Since that night of 1974, everyone has a better awareness of storms and what they can do. The National Weather Service has gotten better at warning people when tornadoes are in our area too. And for the record, the Weather Service did try to warn people, but their instruments were not as accurate as today, and sometimes the warnings came to late. Back in 1974, everyone knew what a tornado warning was, but few people I knew actually took shelter. We didn't have the television nor radio on, so we didn't know we were in any danger. Today, we have a weather alert to warn us. It doesn't matter if we aren't listening to a radio, or watching television. It will alarm if there is any bad weather heading for our area.