

April 20, 2004 Accounts

The following are accounts from April 20, 2004 shared with the NWS Chicago office verbally, through social media, or through e-mail in the days prior to the ten year anniversary of the event. We sincerely thank everyone for contributing their heartfelt stories.

“I was working for the local radio station when the tornado passed right by the station and moved down the canal to Utica. A gentleman was across the road and he came over and I pulled him on the air to tell what he saw. The phones were going crazy and I started putting people on the air to give us eyewitness accounts of what was going on. Then we started to get calls from Utica and reports of the damage. We were told there were people trapped in the basement of a local bar and grill...”

Lou Anne Lenzie

“I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting on the couch watching the bad weather through the picture window and back and forth to the back of the house and on my last visit to the back door, the clouds were so black. I grabbed the dog and a flashlight and ran for the basement. I hadn't even got the door shut when the sirens went off. I grabbed an 8' x 12' piece of carpet I had from a year before and laid over Vinnie and covered us...” **Adrienne Rosanova**

“I was working at Starved Rock, got off about 5 minutes before it hit. Standing at the back of the lodge, the sound was the first thing I noticed. Silence. No birds, squirrels, nothing. We heard it before we saw it. It sounded like a train barreling past. I watched it come down the hill with tears in my eyes and saw things being tossed through the air like toys. I will never forget the fear I felt watching what I knew was going to change the people of Utica for the rest of their lives.”

Heather Miller

“That day will never be forgotten. I love and miss my brother so much. It feels like it just happened being down in that building. I love you Michael and everyone else down there will always be in my heart.”

Jennifer Miller

“I was home that day. We live 20+ miles directly north of Utica. I remember running for the basement as we got hit by the storm. Very quickly it cleared up as it passed and there was that eerie calm. I went outside on our porch and it was dead quiet, but looking south I could see the storm raging over Utica. I remember it looking very dark and seeing lightning flash from within. I was thinking "Wow that's bad, I hope everyone is ok". The weather radio and news stations confirmed a tornado had hit Utica...”

John Yocum

“I was called for help on recovery and clean up, watching children look for their toys the day after, it was heartbreaking...”

Michael Curran

“I worked with a lady that passed away in that building. I was down at school but had worked on the main street during high school. I'd like to say thank you to Freddie Edmond for being such a great strength for that community. He was a great mayor, man, father, and friend. May he rest in peace.”

Rebekah Holder

“The Utica tornado has had a profound impact on me in a number of ways. I lost a co-worker, Jay Vezain in the Milestone collapse. My employer, Utica Elevator Co. was severely damaged and I was involved in the initial assessment and cleanup. And I was a newly qualified Amateur Radio operator who was tasked with shadowing Red Cross personnel, specifically Connie Filz Brooks, who is now LaSalle County EMA Director. During the course of the evening of the 20th, Connie took resources and personnel from the four corners Rt 6 and Rt 178 intersection area down into town to set up a shelter. There wasn't enough room for me to go along, so I remained in the staging area. Over the course of several hours, a number of people approached me asking if I was "the Red Cross guy." I had my handheld radio, and was still in my work clothes: bib, overalls and a work shirt. These people were so desperate for information concerning the disposition of their loved ones that they were willing to look for it from any source at all. I was asked a number of times if I couldn't just "call someone" and check on somebody's mother, grandmother, neighbor, etc. I was unable to make any welfare checks, everyone was busy with the initial phases of assessing the extent of the disaster. It was the most helpless feeling in the world. People were literally begging me for information on their loved ones, and I couldn't give them a shred of encouragement or news. I have continued with my Amateur Radio activities and storm spotting, and think of my friend Jay regularly.”

Kevin Nelson

“I will never forget that day. I had just drove through Utica downtown and I heard on the radio that a tornado was heading towards Utica, I looked out west and it was very dark. I stepped on the gas to get out of town and I got as far as a farmer's driveway just past Loves' gas station. Another car pulled in the same driveway in front of me and you couldn't see a thing with all the rain, hail and fog. I grabbed a blanket that I had in the car and put it over me...”

Paulette Morgan

“R.I.P Michael Miller. That was a heartbreaking memory that could never be forgotten. We all still miss your brother very much Jen. I never knew the moment my companion and I, when we saw the funnel forming in Granville, it would end so tragic. All I knew is, I was pregnant, and needed to get to safety, just in case. And then as soon as I found out about the damage, there was only one thing I was worried about. I will never forget sitting in the hospital seeing almost everyone from the Miller family, hurt and pained, not just physical but also emotionally, and trying to keep hope for the best. And still to this day, that day brings tears for you all, and I try my best to help be strong for my best friends and their family, and to always be there as much as I can, when this day gets closer and closer every year.”

Katherine Turner

“I was a senior in high school and had just dropped my boyfriend off at IVCC. We had just picked his tuxedo up in Ottawa for prom. I was headed into Peru, talking on the phone with my mom when my radio cut to only static and I noticed every car in front of me had stopped. I slammed on my brakes as the tornado cut through the trees and onto the road about 50 feet in front of me. I had my head under the steering wheel while crying to my mom. After it had passed, the radio came back on and they said Granville had been hit...”

Tara Perry

“I was driving home from work on 80 that day. I just stayed with the semis and prayed I'd get home, in Peru, okay. Sadly, a dear friend lost his fiancée that day. He was almost taken from us too, but made a last minute decision that saved his life.”

Christine Actipes Ceresa

"I will never forget that day when God saved my son, a survivor of the Milestone disaster. At the time he was 13 years old and we lived in Utica. Him, his friend and his father were going to the Milestone Tavern to take shelter because his friend's mother worked there. Jarad wanted to go with them so I said okay thinking it was just like any other of the hundred tornado warnings we've seen in our county. I soon heard the wild motion of the tornado outside it sounded like a train tearing through a house.

After the noise subsided I proceeded to head down the street to the Milestone Tavern or at least where it should've been. I saw a pile of rubble with cars on top and my heart dropped. I ran to the pile not knowing what I would do when I heard familiar voices of the fire chief and a family friend. I shouted to them to go get backhoes and tractors from the quarry to dig up the site and that my son and others were trapped under the rubble.

Soon enough half the town was there helping remove rocks and clear the debris. The entire time I prayed as hard as I could for everybody's safe rescue. I saw my friend run from the pile shouting 'WE FOUND HIM!' I was so relieved to see my son alive it brought me to tears. His knee was unfortunately crushed in the debris but is much stronger today. I was still extremely concerned for the rest of the people trapped inside. I worked for 10 years in Utica and never would have thought that something as such could happen."

Patti Stillwell

“I knew a few people that the tornado devastated that day. A friend of mine's parent's two story house was made into a one story and they were home! No one was injured. I remember after it passed I went to my friend's parent's to check on them and then went driving around to see if anyone needed help. The damage and destruction that the tornado left behind is forever emblazoned in my memory. The small town of Utica will never be the same!”

Kristin Glorioso

"I remember seeing mammatus clouds like never before overhead in Romeoville and thinking, 'This might mean trouble for somewhere towards the other end.'"

Ted Kruczek

“I had just started working at JC Whitney in the call center. I remember I was on a call and they told us we needed to disconnect our calls to take cover and the guy I was talking to said "May God be with you all". I still remember that. The clouds were absolutely crazy and the sky was green. I had friends both in Utica and at Starved Rock and we were all in panic not being able to call anyone. One of the scariest days to date.”

Amanda Kurtz

“My birthday...I was supposed to get my driver’s license since I turned 16 and they had just shut the testing down because of the storm. I remember my aunt calling later saying a tornado ripped through Utica and buildings were leveled.”

Leslie Nicole

"I'm from Ottawa, approximately 7 miles east of Utica. We were closing our office for the day at 5pm and as we all walked outside the humidity was unbelievable and I mentioned that something was going to happen weather wise but didn't think much after I had said it and went home. When getting home I was able to see the remnants of the Utica tornado as it passed through Wallace Township. There were 3 funnels hanging from the storm cloud and they looked like ropes that were tattered, like a dog had chewed on them.

The next day I went over to Utica to check on our (insurance) customers. What struck me was that all of the trees had their leaves stripped off, one house was half gone but all of the items in the kitchen were right where they had been left. I was in Utica recently and you'd never think a tornado came through except for the plaques and memorials that are reminders of how a life can change in a matter of minutes and seconds."

Jack Feehan, Ottawa, IL

"I was at IVCC and we had just got there and we were sent down to the tunnels for almost an hour until it stopped. When we came up the courtyard was awful. There were trees down and light posts and everything all over. When I got home I had heard that Utica had been hit. I will never forget that feeling I had when I heard the names of the people, my friends, who had died."

Mary Pini

“I'll never forget this day. It took my childhood home and 2 of my children went through this with my now ex-husband. I was at work and he couldn't get through to me because the tornado had knocked out our phone lines so he sent his parents to my job. The minute they told me the house had been hit I feared the worst. Driving down I-80 doing 90 mph trying to get to my children. Got to Utica and they wouldn't let me in. My kids had nightmares for the longest time. They were 9 & 3 at the time.”

Buffy Ough

“I remember this day as well. I was 12 and living in Mendota at the time. My dad played pool in a league at the bar that was leveled and was actually on his way there when he decided to turn around and come home. I thank God that he made it home safely. I later met a girl who's family was killed in the disaster and saw firsthand how it could affect someone's life. May all of the people who passed from this be remembered and rest in peace.”

Ariel Raymer

“My friend Mike Miller Jr. was the 18 year old they found on the stairs of the bar that was leveled. My grandfather was out in the cow pasture trying to get the cattle in when he saw it heading straight for the farm then turn towards town. He doesn't even remember walking back to the house, and it scared one of our horses so bad she went into labor and had her colt, which we named Ribbons Tornado Surprise (Tornado for short).

I also remember my dad telling me that they weren't letting people into town, so he along with some of his friends took some four wheelers down the towpath and came into town that way to help. My brother also came in the back way to my grandfather's on the towpath. I came over a few days later, they tried to not let me through until I told them that my grandparents lived on the farm on the towpath and I didn't care what they said I was going to their place. The people of Utica never stop amazing me. Nothing stops them, floods, tornadoes, they always pull together and get through the roughest of moments.”

Nicole Marie Wilcox

“That tornado went right over the top of my dad's house in north Utica and we were home. Scariest thing I've ever been in. Took around 80 trees, a large garage with boats and collectable cars, broke the chimney off the house and couldn't believe we made it out alive. We literally went through the middle of the tornado and after the first half went through we thought it was over until we opened the door to see that we were in the middle of it ran and back downstairs until the second half passed , ran upstairs to find a tree laying where we just opened the door! All I can say is it was the biggest blackest most destructive thing I hope to ever see again. Couldn't believe some of the things we found after the tornado like a 60 foot metal I-beam bent in the shape of a U and things like a piece of paper still lying on a garage shelf untouched. We managed to get a picture of it just before it hit us thanks to my sister giving us a phone call that probably saved our lives but that will be a day I will never forget!”

Johnny Barsztaitis

“It was actually a pretty nice day up until that point. I had gotten home from work and my sister called me from Granville telling me she believed a tornado had just gone over her house! It started hailing and raining very hard in La Salle! After the storm I was getting reports that Utica had been hit! I grabbed my chainsaw, got the wife and the kids in the car and drove to Granville. My parents and grandparents lived there. I got to my grandma's house and she was sitting in her chair in the living room because she wasn't able to get to the basement. The tornado had hit the house about 1/10 of a mile to her west and jumped over her house, then hitting downtown Granville. We counted our blessings that day! Especially later when hearing of the tragedy in Utica. My wife and I moved to La Salle from Utica just 5 years earlier. It was also my parents 36 wedding anniversary. We will always remember!!”

Jeff Giuliani

“My ex-husband was outside watching the storm as the kids and I were in the basement. I went out to see if it was clear and he told me it hit Granville, as we saw the emergency crews leave town...”

Cathy Dubberstine Wertz

“I remember getting the page. We had just sent a crew to Granville when my Chief said let's go and then we were on our way to Utica with Miss Kitty, a lighting unit to help provide light for the scene. I remember walking up by Duffy's kicking and moving debris so we could make it to the old ambulance building to set up the lights. The events that occurred during the first 24 hours will always be with me: from the devastation to the support of the numerous fire departments to the local support of many businesses as well as the surrounding communities. To all that helped in some way, your contribution will never be forgotten and will always be remembered.”

Jeffery Walter Riggs

“I remember seeing the tornado at JC Whitney while picking up my mom from work and the security officer grabbing my son out of the car seat and telling me to get inside! We were in the storm shelter panicking. Living in Utica I left my home to pick up my mom just in time! When I returned home, I had to clear trees and sheds off my street to get to my house. Thankfully my house was untouched but I found \$24 in change in my yard and a birth certificate from a resident who lived by the school. I walked downtown, video camera in hand, in absolute shock! We later found out that I had lost some friends in the Milestone Tavern. Things have never been the same since.”

Melissa Marie Taylor

“I used to bartend at the place that was leveled. I went to help with the rescue effort and couldn't believe everything was gone. Such a sad and terrible time. The memorial there is very nice.”

Franco Ocampo

“My 14 year old daughter waited in my minivan outside Hy-Vee while me and my other 2 went inside to get a few things. I verbally noted the weird clouds on our way in to my daughter's. Minutes later, while standing in checkout line the lights flickered, I looked outside and it was "green", hailing, and windy, and I yelled oh my god... Courtney! We threw stuff in the van and sped towards home in Cedar Point. I looked south and thought "I don't like those clouds...we're going to grandma's in Peru. We ran inside to the basement I believe. After we went outside we could hear sirens and knew something bad happened. On our way home on Route 251, we noticed trees that to this day are still lying down on the east side. Gives me chills to think we'd have driven right into it! I grew up with a guy, Chuck Ball, whose father, and sister (if I remember right) were taken that day. Amongst the others.”

Jill Kallerine Piecha

“We lived in Princeton at the time. April 20 was my due date with my second baby. I was supposed to go to IVCH at midnight that night for an induction. I remember being terrified that more storms would come through and I had to leave my 2yr old at home with my brother. I remember arriving at the hospital where most of the victims had been taken. It was pretty chaotic there having just been under tornado warning. My daughter was born at 5:22am on the 21st, carrying on the tradition, as my mom was also born during a tornado. It was definitely emotional knowing I was bringing a new life into the world as others had just lost their lives too soon. Hard to believe it's already been 10 years.”

Laraina Lenihan Wempe

“A couple of WEEKS after the tornado, we found a report card from a Utica elementary school outside while doing some yard clean up. We found it in Aurora! Crazy how far that flew!!!”

Kelly Hayden Haymond

“Ten years ago was hell --- it was hot, then the temperature dropped, and there was a tornado warning --- the 1st time my grandma EVER went to the basement for a warning. We were listening on the scanner and knew it was heading for us. We huddled in the basement and as the loud, deafening, train sound went over our house, my grandma squeezed me so hard she about broke my arm. It was over in about 30 seconds and we went out to observe the damage. Our neighbor’s tree was uprooted, we had sticks literally sticking straight out of the house, garbage, shingles, and toys that didn’t belong to us were scattered everywhere. Then I could hear my aunt SCREAMING from a block and a half away -- there were people trapped uptown ... the bar had collapsed. My ex-husband and I ran the few blocks up there without hesitation and starting hurling bricks, sandstone, and debris off the screams below. The crowd quickly got bigger and there were dozens of ordinary town people frantically throwing rubble.... then as the emergency responders started showing up, we all started backing off -- - the words "they flat-lined" will forever be stuck with me and the blood-curling screams of the random people I knew and didn't will always haunt me. But then seeing the two young kids getting pulled out brought hope. The town stood there passing debris from one person to another for hours, waiting on people to come out alive or dead. Slowly the news choppers and reporters filled the air and streets. I was interviewed for a couple different papers, I don't remember what I said or who I talked to -- I was in shock for the most part.

I randomly walked the streets that night, no power --- just looking around at the town that I have lived in my entire life get destroyed in a matter of minutes. Random things still stood, a bookshelf with no house around it, just a toilet where a house used to be, the bell that had been in front of the school for years was knocked over.

As the nighttime cleared the kindness of our area showed. Food, cleaning supplies, shelter, help to clear the mess, a friendly face, and anything else you would need-was brought. Local volunteers distributed it throughout the town in wagons. Days later, the power and water were restored, messes were cleaned, and healing had started --- but no one will ever forget.

Stacy (resident of Utica for 30 years)