

Interviews conducted by the Huntsville Times

Interviewee: Julie Garrett:

I remember the “extra severe” warnings that the weather service was giving the day before the event- basically that something really bad was going to happen Somewhere, with the clashing hot and cold air masses on track for our area. I was working as an X-ray technologist at Humana and had stayed over my usual quitting time by about an hour. I got out to the parking garage, and got soaked from the waist down just getting in my car...the rain was coming in completely sideways. Unknown to me at the time, some part of the storm was passing very close by, and the tornado caused tree damage across Monte Sano and U.S. 431, which was my usual route home. Security guards posted at the exit gave word that there was a tornado on the ground and several of us reparked our cars and went back inside to await any injured patients who might need our care.

Because it took some time to locate and extricate a lot of the injured, there was a period of about an hour before we saw our first ER patients brought in. During that time, the hospital phone system would take incoming calls only. Worried parents had no way to find out how their children were until someone made a call to the hospital and gave updates (pre-cell-phone days). I don't have children, and my husband worked on the south part of the arsenal (and saw the storm in the distance as he drove home on Hobbs Island Road), so I spent that initial “down time” doing my best to calm an anxious mom/co-worker.

Patients then started to come through our ER doors. Several of them were very severely injured- all the hospital staff dropped into the “emergency mode” and got as much done in as quickly a time as possible. I recall handing out a lot of blankets – most of our patients were soaking wet from the rains, and it had turned cold outside, with some snow flurries even. My first patient was an injured police officer with a very badly broken ankle and broken collar bone. Later in the evening, I shifted from ER work to taking X-rays in the operating room, where several of the most critically injured had been taken for emergency surgeries. It was getting late, and those of us who had eaten lunch at 11 a.m. were running out of fuel.

While waiting a few minutes between cases, I found a loaf of bread and some peanut butter in the OR break room. I only got one bite in before they needed me back to take some films. I took the films (and the sandwich) to the darkroom to develop. My supervisor confiscated half of the sandwich there, as she was starving as well! Not long afterward, the cafeteria workers brought up a cartful of sandwiches, chips, drinks, etc., and we all fell on it like we'd not eaten for weeks. By 11 p.m., most of the tornado victims had been located, extricated from debris and brought to the various hospitals in Huntsville, and our ER was quieting down significantly. Some extra staff stayed for the midnight shift, and most of us who'd just worked 16 hours headed home to sleep for a couple hours.

I had to be back at 7 a.m. the next day, and it was again a very busy day – all the regular patients still needed care, we had lots of new critical patients, and the ER stayed full with new patients who'd been bruised by debris but hadn't felt seriously enough injured to come the night before. I finally got to see the tornado damage from the Monte Sano overlook that afternoon, and to see news reports at home on TV (my cable had been out). I had seen all the injured patients, but none of the massive building destruction until then.

