

Interview conducted by Shane Pendleton (National Weather Service Volunteer)

Responses below are to the following questions:

*Tell me a little about that day and the events leading up to the tornado. What were you busy with that day? Do you remember what the weather was like in the morning and early afternoon?

*Where were you when you received the news about the tornado? What did everyone do? What did you do?

*Where were you during the passage of the tornado? Did you ever see or hear it?

*What did you do immediately after the storm cleared?

*Briefly describe the days that followed. What was the weather like? What did that region of Huntsville look like? How long did recovery efforts take?

Interviewee: Mary Beth and Terry Koelbl:

The day of the November 15, 1989 tornadoes, I was at work at NASA. As I remember, the forecast that day was for a chance of severe storms/tornadoes and the weather steadily worsened as the day progressed.

The building where I worked had a tunnel that connected it to the building across the street. For tornado warnings, we were supposed to go to the tunnel as our safe area. These were old, sixties-era government buildings and the tunnel was not the nicest place. So as the weather forecast worsened in the late afternoon, and I anticipated that a tornado warning might be coming, I made the decision to head for home a bit early.

I was really more worried about getting sent to the tunnel for an extended period of time than I was about the weather. I probably left work around 3:30 or so. Terry left around the same time; he had a test for one of his graduate classes at UAH and really was not worried about the weather either.

I lived about 10 minutes from work, in some apartments off of Golf Road in Huntsville. The apartments were near the top of the Golf Road hill, overlooking the Municipal Golf Course and Huntsville Police Dog Training Park (2021 High Ridge Rd). As I drove up the hill to my apartment, I remember noticing the lightning was unusual. The color of the lightning was green and yellow and very different than anything I had seen before. I hurried into my second story apartment and I called my sister in Iowa to tell her about the weird lightning. As I stood looking out my balcony, describing the lightning and commenting to her how eerie it looked outside, the rain intensified and it was hard to see anything past the road into my apartment complex. I went to the bathtub for shelter. I described to my sister how it appeared to be a wall of rain between me and the golf course. It was nothing like any storm I had seen before and although it was alarming and scary, it was also intriguing and I couldn't help being on the phone sharing it with someone. I had no idea at the time that I was seeing a tornado, but in reality I was probably about two hundred yards or so from where the tornado first touched down.

I remember the power going out in my apartment and then shortly thereafter seeing the flashing lights of emergency vehicles coming from the west towards the golf course. There were many lights, and it appeared they were trying to make their way towards the Parkway. I knew something was wrong, just not quite sure what it was. The rain had subsided some, but it was dark outside and I had no way to find out what was going on without power. I tried to make a phone call but kept getting a message saying that all circuits were busy, please try my call again later. After probably a half hour or so, it may have been longer; I finally remembered that I had a headphone radio with working batteries. I tuned in to a radio station and hearing the broadcast was when I finally understood that a tornado had hit Huntsville. At that point, I am still not sure that I fully understood that the wall of rain and the colorful lightning that I had witnessed was the tornado itself, not just part of the storm.

Later that evening, I finally got a dial tone and called Terry (we were engaged, but not yet married). He said that when he was taking the test, UAH made some sort of announcement about a tornado maybe

touching down, but that was it. No one did anything else, they just continued class. He had not been worried about me, I don't think we quite realized even later that evening how devastating the damage was on Airport Road.

The next day at work, I remember hearing about fellow employees that had died or were injured in the storm. There was a co-worker who I sort of knew that was one of the fatalities. Several people I knew lived in the apartments just south of Airport Road and had damage to their homes. People at work began to collect money and supplies to help those in need. I was a parishioner at Holy Spirit Church and heard that it was badly damaged as well. I was anxious to see what Airport Road looked like, but authorities urged people to stay away until the area was safe. After probably at least a week, Terry and I drove over and surveyed the damage. It was unbelievable, it looked a like a war zone. Wrecked cars and debris everywhere, I remember a car perched up in a tree at the intersection of Airport and Whitesburg. It was quite traumatic knowing how many people died or were injured so close to where I lived. Recovery efforts took quite a while, I can't remember for sure but it seems like over a year.

Pictures Below from Mary Beth and Terry Koelbl:





