

Hills mayor recounts killer tornado

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

JODY SORONEN still remembers the eerie darkness and the howling winds. "It was scary," the Farmington Hills mayor said, reflecting back on March 21, 1976, when the tornado destined for West Bloomfield Township touched down briefly in northern Farmington Hills.

"Only afterward did we realize how frightened we should have been," said Soronen, who, with her husband, Rusty, and three children were in their house on Springvale in Woodbrook subdivision, near 14 Mile and Drake, that night.

As a result of the touchdown near Orchard Lake and Maple roads in West Bloomfield Township, a 15-year-old girl was killed, more than 30 were injured and property damage topped \$5 million.

To help stimulate public awareness and interest in tornado safety, Gov. James Blanchard and Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy have designated March 20-26 as Michigan Tornado Safety Week.

"WHILE HER husband was frying fish for dinner, Soronen remembers looking to the south, through the open garage door, into the darkness when all of a sudden 'the wind took the door right out of my hand.'"

"It looked at the time like a bad storm," Soronen said. "It didn't occur to us it was a tornado. We didn't take shelter."

The Soronens found shingles torn off their house. One shutter was blown down. Some brick also needed replacing. The roughed-in house next door had its frame shifted on the basement foundation.

From there, the funnel cloud skipped over several houses and headed up the street.

"At the corner of Bycroft and Tiverton, it sliced off the family room and garage from the rest of a two-story house. Luckily, no one was home."

"THE SWIRLING winds then headed northwest into West Bloomfield, where they turned deadly. The storm lasted only minutes, but

Skywarn classes set

Oakland County will offer free Skywarn tornado-sighting classes this month.

Skywarn is an effort to save lives during severe weather emergencies by expanding networks of spotters and encouraging wide participation in tornado preparedness programs.

There is no way to stop tornadoes, and not all tornadoes show up on radar. But they can be seen with certainty.

Spotter classes for police officers, firefighters, EMS

workers, volunteers and the public are scheduled for 9:30-11 a.m. Friday, March 25; 1:30-3 p.m. Tuesday, March 29; and 7:30-9 p.m. Wednesday, March 30.

Marvin Green, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Detroit, will teach the classes at the Oakland County EMS & Emergency Management Division, on the lower level of the Oakland County Sheriff's Department, 1200 N. Telegraph, Pontiac. Call 858-5300 to register for one of the sessions.

it killed power to their subdivision. So the Soronens and other Woodbrook residents didn't learn about the devastation in West Bloomfield until the next day.

The evening of Sept. 26, 1986, the tail of a tornado lifted a house under construction in Bridle Hills subdivision in eastern Farmington Hills from its foundation, moved it forward, then dropped it, leaving the shingled roof nearly intact. The house, valued at \$152,000, had to be demolished. The twister also damaged two nearby houses in the subdivision, near 10 Mile and Inkster.

Last June 21, a tornado swooped down from a crackling thunderstorm in the late afternoon and killed a 24-year-old man in Chateau Estates mobile home park at 13 Mile near Decker in Novi. His 27-year-old wife and 19-month-old son were badly injured. At least six other injuries were reported. Damage to more than 200 mobile homes topped \$2 million.

Michigan averages 17 tornado deaths a year, the third highest average in the nation. The majority of the 437 tornadoes in the state since 1950 struck in southern Michigan.

AS PART of Michigan Tornado Safety Week, the Oakland County Division of EMS & Emergency Management will test the county's 147-siren tornado-warning system for three minutes at 1 p.m. Thursday, March 24. Farmington Hills has nine

warning sirens; Farmington has two. The siren sounding, a steady three-minute tone, will be just a test. There is no "all clear" siren.

Should the siren sound in threatening weather, don't call the police dispatcher unless you have a fire or medical emergency to report. Take basic precautions, like making sure the stove is off and take cover quickly. Turn on a battery-powered radio or a portable TV for information. Waiting in the living room for a TV report could prove dangerous.

A siren sounding doesn't necessarily mean a tornado has been spotted locally.

All sirens in Oakland County are activated by either the National Weather Service or Oakland County. And all go off, rather than just those in a specific area of the county.

"We now, though, have a monitor that, within minutes, broadcasts the location of the sighting," said Capt. Russ Conway of the Farmington Hills Police Department. "We used to have a 20-minute to a half-hour delay to get such information."

FARMINGTON HILLS Deputy Fire Chief Peter Baldwin encourages families to prepare and practice a tornado safety plan.

"You never know when one will strike," he said. "Don't wait until the siren sounds to start thinking about what you're supposed to do. 'It's better to plan ahead.'"



An aerial view shows some of the destruction from the tornado that struck Chateau Estates mobile home park in Novi June 25.

Tips to help do battle with a twister's fury

The Michigan Department of State Police Emergency Management Division compiled the following tornado facts:

- Tornadoes can occur at any time of the day or night in almost any month. But most occur in April, May, June and July, in the late afternoon and evening hours, usually between 3 and 7 p.m. when the temperature is 70-75 degrees with high relative humidities.

- Tornadoes usually come from the southwest at 20-45 mph. Almost all come from the western horizon, and they have traveled at speeds nearing 70 mph.

- The typical tornado is on the ground less than 10 minutes and travels a distance of five miles. But tornadoes have stayed on the ground for more than three hours and have traveled more than 200 miles.

- The width of a tornado as it touches the ground averages 300-400 yards but may be wider, up to one mile across.

- Tornadoes usually turn counter-clockwise, with wind speeds varying from less than 100 mph to nearly 300 mph. They do their destructive work through the combined action of strong rotary winds, flying debris and the partial vacuum in the center.

- Tornadoes usually develop from thunderstorms and normally occur at the trailing edge of the storm.

- Tornadoes developing from storms early in the season tend to be the most severe.

A TORNADO or severe thunderstorm watch is issued by the National Severe Storm Center in Kansas City when conditions exist for severe weather to develop. Watches are two to six hours long. They give you time to plan and prepare by:

- Placing small objects, which could become deadly missiles, inside, away from the wind.

- Making sure the entire family knows what to do if a tornado is sighted. Children should be closely supervised.

A tornado or severe thunderstorm warning is issued by the National Weather Service when a tornado or severe thunderstorm has been sighted or strongly indicated by radar. Warnings usually last no longer than 90 minutes.

Warnings are designed to give you time to act by seeking shelter immediately or staying near shelter, depending on how severe the weather has been forecast.

WHAT CONSTITUTES shelter?

- Houses — a basement offers the greatest safety. Seek shelter under sturdy furniture or under the stairs, away from under the kitchen, if possible. In houses without basements, take cover in the center of the house on the lowest floor in a small room, such as a closet or bathroom, or under sturdy furniture. If you have time, open a window.

- Mobile homes — during warnings, go to a prearranged, substantial shelter.

- Driving a car — travel at right

angles to the tornado's path. If there isn't time to drive away from it, get out of the car and into a basement, ditch or ravine, away from the car. If outside, lie flat in the nearest depression and use your hands to shield your head.

- At work or at school — follow advance plans to move to interior hallways or small rooms on the lowest floor. Avoid areas with glass and wide, free-span roofs.

- In open country — get into a sturdy building, or on the ground, if possible.

WHAT IF your house is struck by a tornado?

- Do your best to protect yourself, your family and your neighbors from further damage.

- Make certain authorities are notified you are a tornado victim.

- Photograph or otherwise document the damage to your property and injuries to your family members.

- Cooperate with authorized officers and volunteers who will arrive to give emergency aid and provide access to state and federal relief and recovery agencies.

- Do not sign contracts for repair work, removal of rubble or additional insurance without consulting authorities.

What if a touchdown happens nearby? Do not go to the tornado scene. The area must be kept clear and secure for the victims and for emergency workers. Besides, tornadoes can strike anywhere, anytime

and more than once.

NOAA WEATHER Radio is a service of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, part of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

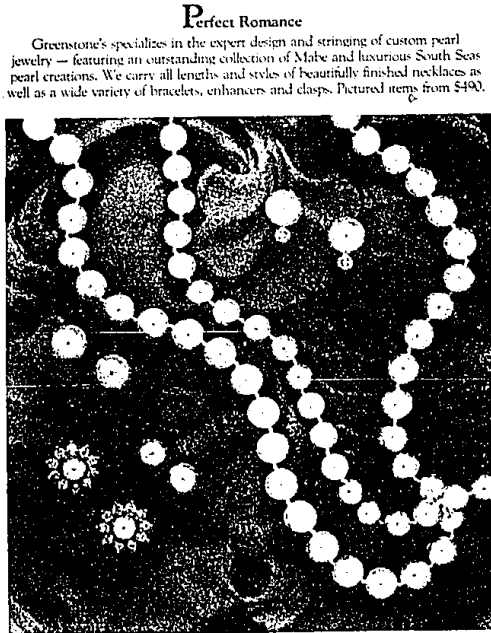
It provides continuous broadcasts of the latest weather information directly from the National Weather Service. Broadcasts are made on three high-band FM frequencies not typically found on household radios.

But many radio manufacturers offer special weather radios that pick up these frequencies and which have an emergency warning alarm. Many radios also offer standard AM/FM frequencies plus the weather band.



Jody and Rusty Soronen in front of their Farmington Hills home, one of those in Woodbrook subdivision struck by the 1976 tornado that

also devastated part of West Bloomfield Township.



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