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Texas Hams Help to Deal with Tornado Aftermath

FT WORTH, TX, Apr 20, 2000-*Tornados don't go downtown, they're always attracted to mobile home parks.* That's the general belief on this rare style of Mother Nature's fury. However, on March 28th, people in downtown Fort Worth, Texas, found out differently. In the wake of hundreds of millions of dollars in damage to downtown skyscrapers and several deaths, people are picking through the rubble and attempting to piece their lives back together.

Ham radio operators played a vital role in that night's storms. More than 40 storm spotters were out tracking the storm as it made its way slowly across Tarrant County. Gary Cooper, KA5TXC, who was net control that night noted that a spotter reported a rain-free base with a possible lowering. Other spotters confirmed the lowering and then rotation.

Tarrant County sounded the sirens alerting the public to the tornados.



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The Tarrant County RACES


repeater, K5FTW on 146.940 MHz, was on top of one of the buildings downtown. Most people were amazed that it continued to operate throughout the storms' passage. "The repeater remained on the air the whole time," said Chuck Adams, K5WRR, who helps to maintain the repeater. "The antenna needs to be replaced, but that's a small price to pay for giving some very critical warning time to the National Weather Service office and the Fort Worth Office of Emergency Management to warn the public of the tornado."


Adams, who's been involved with the Fort Worth Chapter of the Texas VHF-FM Society since 1978, says he and others put in countless hours building, maintaining and troubleshooting the 146.94 repeater and other club and personal repeaters. "Sometimes, I wonder if it's really worth all the effort," he says. "But, I know now that when the repeater worked flawlessly for that critical 30 minutes right before, during and after the tornado that all the effort was worth it."

The days following the tornado were busy for hams as well. Mike Heskett, WB5QLD, almost lived at the Red Cross for the next week. He and other volunteers helped provide communication between Red Cross shelters, set up to house those without a place to stay after the tornado. The hams also assisted with damage assessment in residential areas hit by the tornado.

"I am really proud of the amateur radio operators in our area," Heskett said. "They came out of the woodwork to help and they did an excellent job." Heskett said the day after the tornado, approximately 20 hams turned out to work with the Red Cross. "I don't really know how many hours the hams volunteered to the Red Cross, but it had to be over 600 hours in the first four days," he estimated.

Downtown Fort Worth dealt with the storms as well. The city had to relocate its annual Main Street Arts Festival from the downtown area because the threat of debris falling from buildings remained too great. Despite the relocation, the turnout was good, and festival sponsors hope to be back downtown next year.--*Melissa Rasmussen, K5MCR*

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