

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

1985 Tornado Victims

Personal Experience

O. H. 1198

KAREN L. PALMER

Interviewed

by

Molly A. McNamara

on

November 2, 1988

Karen L. Palmer

Mrs. Karen Palmer and her family were one of the first families to live on the newly developed part of Nancy Street in Niles. The Palmer's lived on Nancy Street until the tornado of 1985 destroyed their home. On the evening of May 31, 1985, Mrs. Palmer had gotten home from work late. She stopped at her sister's to pick up her daughter. Before they could leave to go home, the tornado struck the house. They had made it into the basement safely. Once the Palmer's returned to their home, they were shocked at the terrible damage to their street. Her husband and son were not home at the time of the tornado and also escaped injury. The Palmer's house was still intact, but looked as though it had been picked-up off its foundation and dropped. Insulation damaged much of the furniture and personal belongings. Instead of rebuilding their home on Nancy Street, the Palmer's decided to move. Mrs. Palmer explained they wanted a larger house anyway. Today the Palmer's still live in Niles, on Bonnie Brae Avenue.

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INTERVIEWEE: KAREN L. PALMER

INTERVIEWER: Molly A. McNamara

SUBJECT: Cynthia Street, Waddell Park, Woodglen Avenue

DATE: November 2, 1988

M: This is an interview with Mrs. Karen Palmer for the Youngstown State University 1985 Tornado Project by Molly McNamara at 446 Bonnie Brae Avenue, Niles, Ohio on November 2, 1988 at approximately 6:00 in the evening.

M: Mrs. Palmer, can you tell me a little bit about your family?

P: I have a husband and two children. My husband works for LTV in Warren and I have a son who's attending college and who graduated from Niles, and Ellie is a sophomore at Niles-McKinley.

M: Tell me a little bit about your neighborhood. You lived on Nancy Street, right?

P: Right. Tell you about Nancy Street?

M: Please.

P: We moved in to Nancy Street in 1973 and that part of Nancy Street was a new development. So we built one of the first houses that were built there. All of the houses that came after that, we sort of grew up together with, so to speak. We helped each other with lawns and drive ways.

So the neighborhood was pretty nice. It was close-knit. And we lived there until the tornado.

M: So was it a young neighborhood?

P: Generally no. It was a mixture. There were some young children, young families and then there were older families. There was a lady who had no children, whose children were all raised and were gone. A son and a daughter....

M: Yes. There was a mixture. Tell me what you do in a typical day. Describe for me, a typical day.

P: I generally get up about 6:00 or 6:30 to get ready to go to work. I go at 8:00. The kids go to school. I drop them off about a quarter 'til. I work until 5:00, sometimes weekends. I generally do a little house work. I do some type of school organization work.

M: Do you remember what you were doing on May 31, 1985?

P: I worked that day. We worked late-- finished at 6:15 and I went home and was stopping to pick my daughter up at my sister's house. She lived behind me, a street behind me and her house and my house, the backyards connected. So, Ellie, I talked to her on the phone earlier and she wanted me to pick her up. So I stopped on the way home from work. And I stopped for gas so I must have gotten there about 6:30, 6:40 something like that. And I went in the house and it was sort of misty and rainy so I still had my raincoat on and I was waiting for her to get her shoes on. And then my sister's brother-in-law was leaving the house and saw the tornado and that's when we ran in the basement.

M: Do you remember hearing any... Having any warning?

P: We didn't hear anything from the tornado.

M: So what happened right after that?

P: We went into the basement. My sister and her husband and his brother and they had two children, and then Ellie and I. So we all went into the basement and we could look up at the basement windows and see things coming against the windows, we couldn't hear anything. We couldn't hear anything at all. We heard nothing at all.

M: That's strange.

P: After a while, I don't how know exactly we knew it was all over, but somehow we knew. So my brother-in-law went upstairs and came down and said, "There's a little

bit of a problem." He didn't want to scare the children or anything. So we went upstairs and her house had been damaged considerably. We went outside. We just made sure that everybody got out of the house. We were afraid of gas and things like that. We started to walk away from the house. They were on the last street of Nancy Street, so we started to walk up towards Nancy. We took the kids up two streets to some houses that had not really been affected by the tornado and then my brother-in-law and I came back to my house. So at that time I didn't know that our house was affected or that Nancy Street was, or whatever. All we knew was that one area. So we came down on to Nancy Street and we saw some of the people coming out and then we went to my house. We had two dogs and a bird that the kids were real concerned about. Ellie and I were just at home at this time. My husband and my son were down at the ball park. Anyway, we went in and both the dog that was in the house and the bird that was in the house both survived, no problem. And the dog that was outside in the backyard also was unharmed. We took those up to the house that we were staying. And we just stayed for a while there and left the kids there and came back down to the neighborhood and just found...

M: What did your house look like? Was there any damage?

P: Oh, yes. I had about twenty-one large trees in my backyard. Huge trees in the backyard and the tornado seemed to have come and hit the trees, tore everyone of them out. We had a basketball court in the backyard with a steel pole for the basketball pole and it had just bent it completely down. So all the trees were all torn and the house seemed to have been lifted up and then put back down.

M: No kidding.

P: So it wasn't blown away, it was just lifted up and then sort of settled back down. So we managed to recover all of our personal effects. There were some things that were just thrown around, lost, and damaged just because there was damage inside the house too. So then we just went around the neighborhood and looked and found out what was going on. So that was, I don't know what time. My husband finally made his way home late from the ball park.

M: Did you have any idea of what had happened to them or anything?

P: No.

M: I bet you were terrified.

P: Or anybody else. They were down at the ball park, at Waddell, and saw the tornado come past, they got into the bowl, which is a recession in the ball park and watched it go past but never thinking it would have caused any damage or anything. So then they got down to the end of one of the streets and people are telling them that "You can't go down there." He said, "Well, I live there." And they told him that all the houses had been damaged so they made their way on foot to the house and found out what was going on so...But in our family, we lost six houses. I don't know if my sister told you that.

M: Yes, she did.

P: But nobody was hurt.

M: That's unbelievable. Six houses.

P: Yes. Then it was just a matter of...

M: Was it immediate, I mean did the police come and help?

P: There were police around and there were people around but I don't remember that night. There was nothing.

M: You didn't stay there, right?

P: No, we stayed in a house two streets up.

M: Okay.

P: One of my cousins had a house two streets up so we all just sort of slept on the floor in the same clothes that we were in. We didn't ... It was a strange evening because people were saying that there were other tornadoes spotted. It was sort of scary. And the kids were really uneasy. So the next morning, we went back into the area and we started just sifting through things. We just started...It was a big job. We knew some people who were in the construction business and so they started in right away. The first day, it was just sort of walking around, finding out what had happened to things and looking at whatever happened. We did not get to talk to anybody because of the phone situation until a day after to make sure...Someone called in. We could not call out from the house we were in. But someone called in. They could call in and so we could pass messages along.

M: I see. So you were lucky enough to have a phone that worked. I know a lot of people didn't.

P: Coming in, not going out. We couldn't get outgoing calls.

M: If you were lucky enough to have somebody call you.

P: So, we managed that way to get some messages out to people and my sister, I did have a sister that lived on Woodglen.

M: Oh, did you.

P: Yes. My sister lived on Woodglen and we didn't find out about her until later, Saturday.

M: What happened to her?

P: Her house was also...

M: Was one of the six that you were talking about.

P: Yes. Damaged...Everybody in her family was alright too, so that was... She has three small children. After that it was just sort of a big clean up process. Sifting through, settling with the insurance people, finding out what was going on. We went and stayed with my husband's parents who lived in Howland and stayed the week with them.

M: Did you have any problems with people looting?

P: We did...We didn't have anything taken from our house. The neighbors across the street stayed in their house. Their house was not damaged. So they stayed in their house so they sort of watched the neighborhood and then the National Guard did patrol. They were stationed at the end of these streets. So they did do a pretty good job although I know that some of the people at the end of this street had things taken from the house. But we didn't, but I did notice some going on at night especially.

M: How did you feel about people coming down there and sightseeing, looking at what was going on. Did that bother you?

P: No. We didn't really have a lot. Unless the people who came down were the people who were concerned, the ones that got hit. After a while you couldn't get in.

M: Really?

P: No, they had the streets blocked off. You had to show that you lived there or had some business there to settle, so there weren't a lot of people walking down. There weren't a lot of drive-byers because you can't

get to the area too easily.

M: Right because it's out of the way.

P: So, no, but most of the people were genuinely concerned. They came down just to make sure what they could do.

M: What about some of the relief organizations like the Red Cross. Did you see any help?

P: Yes, the Red Cross was very good. They came around everyday with hot meals, three times a day. They came around with coffee or water or whatever, gave you some supplies and they were there when we needed them. Then they set up the disaster organization at the high school and it seemed to be very well organized to me. We had no problems with them.

M: Now most of your clothing and things like that were okay?

P: Most of ours were saved, yes, eventually. They were all damaged.

M: Oh really?

P: Yes. When it happened, most in our house was that the insulation that was in the ceiling was blown into the house and it was just totally into everything. Every...

M: Could that be saved, I mean any of the clothing...

P: Some of it could, but that is fiberglass insulation and is very difficult to...

M: I've heard everybody tell me that. Everybody that had their houses damaged.

P: And then there was the thing of not wanting to take a chance, you know, wear something because the fiberglass was just all over, just blown into your clothes, into your clothes drawers and there wasn't anything that didn't have fiberglass in it or on it or.... And then there was damage...The house was plaster, all plaster, the walls, the ceilings. It wasn't dry wall and the plaster had broken the plaster was all down in everything, so some of the stuff was damaged... Flying glass...

M: What was your address on Nancy Street, I'm trying to think of which...

P: 930, I was one of the first new houses on the left hand side on the street.

M: Okay, so it was more, when you turn down, it was kind of ...I'm trying to picture where it was. Because it seems like the ones in the center were the ones that were hit really bad.

P: Yes, because their homes were totally destroyed. Things were scattered all over the place. Their houses were scattered, where as ours were just contained in the house. There was damage lying around, some thing like that.

M: Why didn't you rebuild on Nancy Street?

P: Well at the time, oh maybe a year before, we had looked to buy another house, a bigger house. So really when that happened, it was just sort of an impetus to look for a new house and it was not the same feeling either. It was different.

M: Is the house standing today.

P: Yes. They rebuilt it.

M: Because, I know, down there, I've noticed on all these streets, on Lantern Lane and even on Woodglen there was a lot of empty lots. I was just wondering if maybe they...

P: I think most of the houses down there they rebuilt.

M: I think so too.

P: Maybe not by the same person. I know there were a number of people who moved away from here but they're all different.

M: So it wasn't because of your fear maybe of living there again?

P: No. In fact my children say they would like to go back.

M: Would they?

P: They had a lot of happy memories there. We've only been here three years.

M: Of course you're not that far away.

P: And my sister lives in the same place.

M: That's pretty convenient. That's really nice. Can you

tell me about...What was your impression of the Niles Safety System, maybe then and today, what you think?

P: Well you know, I don't really remember having a lot of communication with our need to do anything. They're there, but not...I wasn'tThe fire captain at that time, he came around and was very helpful to us and he did help us with some problems that we were having so...But other than that, we really didn't have a need for anything. But they were there, I realized they were there.

M: How about the federal agencies. You probably didn't even have to go through them if you had insurance.

P: No. We didn't have to. We didn't have any reason to know what was going on.

M: Some people have told me, they didn't have enough insurance to cover everything and they did have some major problems with the federal agency. So I was just wondering.

P: It is a shame.

M: It is. It is a shame. Since the tornado, I know you've moved out of the neighborhood and all, do you feel safe, I guess if that's the right word to ask?

P: Sure. I don't feel any differently than I did before the tornado happened. The first few months to maybe a year afterward, there was...Anytime there was a major storm or a problem like that, I was working, in the summer, I went back to work and my daughter would be alone or something for a while, then we got upset. Sometimes when there is a bad storm we went to the basement. That's hardly anytime now. We don't even bother.

M: Do you have anything like a weather alert that you keep? You know it seems like everybody I've talked to has told me, "Oh, well we bought this or we bought that to warn us." I was just wondering.

P: No. But you do listen for the sirens.

M: I think those are new.

P: The times that they test the siren, we listen to make sure.

M: The times that they have tested them.

P: Other than that, no, we haven't thought about it or talked about it. The last couple years we have not

even been aware that there was a bad storm or something.

M: That's good though, that you've gotten over it. I know of a lot of people who have had major psychological affects from it.

P: I can understand.

M: How do you think the neighborhood has changed?

P: Physically, the neighborhood has changed because all the trees.

M: Yes, I've noticed that.

P: It was such a change to see that because it was a nice neighborhood. The people who developed it believed in leaving all the trees that they could. And it really added something to the neighborhood, especially on my lot because I had most of the trees in the area. It was a nice wooded lot and the kids spent a lot of time in the backyard. Our kids and the neighborhood kids too, it was always a place to play and now there are none. It's just amazing. It does look different. But people, some of them are the same, I think most of them stayed the same. Some of them built different types of homes, I know my aunt had a two-story house and built a ranch, and there was a family in the cul-de-sac area that had a split level and built a two story. So there are some changes physically and ...

M: Did most of the people move back there?

P: Yes.

M: Is there anything else that I haven't mentioned or talked about or that maybe I have forgotten that you'd like to talk about?

P: I don't think so. Today I was mentioning to the people at work that I was going to do this interview and I said that I hadn't thought about the tornado for a while and so I was trying to remember and it was coming back and then we started talking a little about it and they started talking about where they were and I really haven't thought about it much lately.

M: Maybe that's good though. Maybe it is good to forget it. Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW