

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

1985 Tornado Victims

Personal Experience

O. H. 1202

DONNA J. YOUNG

Interviewed

by

Molly A. McNamara

on

November 3, 1988

Mr. and Mrs. Harry Young have lived on Woodglen Avenue in Niles for thirty-three years. On May 31, 1985, their home was hit by a tornado. The Young's were at home when the tornado struck. Mrs. Young, her younger son and dog made it into the basement under a table before the house collapsed. Mr. Young had not quite made it into the basement, he was trapped in the doorway by a pipe. Very little remained, standing of the Young's house. The Young's had several looters take objects from what remained of their garage. Several pieces of furniture were salvageable from their home. The Young's immediately decided to rebuild. Within five days, the insurance companies had provided the Young's money. One month later, the Young's began rebuilding on Woodglen. Today, Mr. and Mrs. Young and their son reside on Woodglen Avenue.

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INTERVIEWEE: DONNA J. YOUNG

INTERVIEWER: Molly A. McNamara

SUBJECT: Family, looters, Red Cross, North Road

DATE: November 3, 1988

M: This is an interview with Mrs. Donna Young for the Youngstown State University 1985 Tornado Project by Molly McNamara on 12 Woodglen Avenue, Niles, Ohio on November 3, 1988 at approximately 6:00 p.m.

Mrs. Young, can you tell me a little bit about your family?

DY: Well, we have two boys, a dog. We're Mr. and Mrs. Young.

M: How long have you lived here on Woodglen?

DY: Thirty-three years.

M: So you came here right after you were married?

DY: About two years after.

M: I see. And your children were raised here too, on this street?

DY: Right.

M: Tell me a little bit about this neighborhood. What's it like living here?

DY: Well, it's a nice, quiet neighborhood and the neighbors all help each other, they visit quite a bit, not a whole lot. They're all nice. I don't know what we'd do without them.

M: That's good. I'd like you to describe for me May 31, 1985. Tell me what you were doing that day.

DY: Well, my husband was mowing the lawn and I was sitting at the table making out a grocery order. It was just kind of an ordinary day.

M: Do you remember what the weather was like.

DY: Yes. It was very hot and sticky; muggy, all day. For May, I told a lot of people that day, "Oh, it's so hot, you can't get your breath." And there didn't seem to be any breeze or anything going. I said, "For May, this is too hot."

M: So what were you doing then that day? What happened after that? You were telling me a little bit about what was going on that day.

DY: When the tornado hit?

M: Right.

DY: Well, like I said, my husband had just come in from mowing the lawn. I was sitting at the table. Our youngest son was watching TV. My husband looked up and said, "There's a tornado coming. Hit the ground! Do something!"

M: Did you hear anything?

DY: Yes. I thought he had left the tractor on and I asked him if he left the tractor running. He said, "No, I put it away in the garage. You could just hear this noise and when he looked up and saw the tornado, then by that time, we were under the table, my son and I, and you could start hearing glass crack. Like real far away. You could just hear this real big roaring noise. It just kept getting closer. Like a jet was coming in to land or something like that. It just kept getting closer and closer.

M: Now you were in the cellar by this time? Right?

DY: We were under the table.

M: Were things moving around you?

DY: To my knowledge, I didn't know because I was on top of my son and holding on to the dog and I kept telling

him, "Keep your head covered." And I was on top of him, of course, I was trying to keep everything close too.

M: Where was your husband?

DY: He was in the doorway of the house. He just kind of had to hold on and protect himself.

M: So what happened after that? What happened after you figured it was safe to come up?

DY: Well, we waited until it got real quiet and I asked my husband, "Is it safe to get up." I don't really remember what he said, but he said he was stuck. A pipe was on top of him. I looked out, down the street, and I thought, "Oh my God. How many people are dead?" Like I said, there was a telephone on the table. It was still there. There were plates on the wall hanging over top of the table. They were still there. There was no roof on the house. Three walls were gone and I picked up the telephone. I said, "Oh, we have to get help." So I picked up the telephone and I said, "Oh, darn, it's dead."

M: Of course this is before you came upstairs to see what was going on.

DY: Yes. Well, we were under the table where the telephone was and it was still sitting there, all in one piece. By that time then the neighbors, the one in our one house, he was calling, he needed help. The one across on the other side of Woodglen, the Seford boy, he called over and said, "Are you people okay?" and I said, "Well, Harry isn't. He's stuck in the doorway." Well he checked on the other neighbor lady, Mrs. Smith and she had been cut a little bit but he said she was alright, and able to walk around. So then he came over and walked clear around the house and got Mr. Young free then. Then we just...We couldn't walk in the house or anything much because there was glass and everything everywhere. The one whole wall of the house was laying down in the neighbor's driveway and we walked out because she had just came out and wanted to know if we were alright. So I took the dog and Billy and we went over in her garage and then...I don't know how long, five or ten minutes, people started coming through to see if we were okay.

M: What was your immediate reaction when you came up and saw what your house looked like? What did you think?

DY: I was just kind of numb. I just looked around at all the total dismay and neighbors were starting, like I said, to come out of their houses, so we knew they were

okay. They would call to us, we would call to them. But my first impression was that there had to be a lot of them dead.

M: Yes. That's understandable.

DY: There was just nothing...I was just a total disaster everywhere you looked.

M: So what happened right after that? What did you do? You had gone next door, you said, to see if your neighbors were okay.

DY: Yes. They were all okay. Like I said, in a very short time, I don't know how they got through but they started coming through, Civil Defense workers and people from other streets and that, to see if we were okay. We sat over here until I couldn't even tell you how long and then our relatives started getting through somehow and one relative on Market Avenue took Billy, and another neighbor took me and the dog, and Harry stayed with our older son and slept here so that no one would loot. Because by this time, it was dark.

M: Now did you have problems with people looting here?

DY: Some, yes. Some. Now they stayed here the first night but then after that, the next day, the whole family came in and helped us take everything up to his sister's house that we could get out. It was even hard to get in to get anything out, really, because of the streets and that. But then he didn't get everything out of the garage and they did loot some stuff out of the garage.

M: They actually took stuff from you.

DY: Yes.

M: What did they take?

HARRY YOUNG: A bunch of lawn mower parts, bicycle.

M: Was there anything of value in the house, that was left? I mean were you able to salvage anything from your house?

DY: We, thank goodness, got most of all our photo albums, pictures and things. Because they were low. Records, also. Records weren't broken or anything. They were all down in lower cabinets. Everything just went over top of that. Now if it would have rained, they would have got ruined. And my bride and groom from my wedding cake, which will be 35 years old, is very very brittle. But it was in a glass bookcase. The bookcase

was blown over, the glass on it was broken, but that wedding thing, I still have.

M: That's amazing. I can't even believe that. It's perfect. It's right there.

DY: I'm afraid to pick it up because it is so crumbly. It was before the tornado and how it survived, I don't know.

M: How about furniture and clothing?

HY: Our desk there...

DY: The desk there, the two boys went together and bought that for Mr. Young years ago and it was like sandblasted. But I went and really scrubbed it up and did it with Old English Polish so we survived that.

HY: It took the porch right off the house right around it.

DY: The drawers were full of glass and grit. Even a roof shingle.

M: Wow. No kidding.

DY: How it got in there I don't know because the back is closed in and the drawers weren't open. But there was all this stuff inside the drawers. I mean you had to be very careful when we were cleaning it out because there was like grit in there.

M: That's amazing. I don't know how that would have happened.

DY: I don't know how it got in there either. Unless when the wind was going, they were opening and shutting.

M: Maybe.

DY: Because there was even a piece of roof shingle in there.

M: That's amazing. Where did you even begin to start picking things up, start cleaning up, to rebuild. Where did you even begin to do that?

DY: Well, like I said, our insurance companies, they were out here the very first day.

M: This would be June 1. Then they were out here the next day?

DY: Yes. They worked on Saturday because we called them from Harry's sister's house. We didn't even think they would be working. And I called my car insurance and the lady up there, we've had our insurance there for years, she said, "I already have your file pulled. We're working today." Wilson Insurance Agency was who we had the house with and I think they worked that day too. But they were all out here either Saturday or Monday and we had our full checks that Wednesday, that coming Wednesday.

M: That was great.

HY: We saved that picture that was on the wall.

DY: Yes. The mirror was broken but that was on the wall too.

M: That picture there?

DY: Yes.

M: Wow. I don't know.

HY: That knick knack shelf.

DY: That knick knack shelf is his mother's.

M: That's beautiful.

DY: We saved that.

M: That's amazing that there are some things that are as fragile as those are, being glass.

DY: That is what I said about my wedding thing.

M: That was able to survive.

DY: I'm afraid to pick it up myself.

HY: She has got that doll lamp in on the dresser there.

M: Oh, yes, I see that too.

HY: That was in the corner of the living room.

M: So, some things did survive that you wouldn't even imagine would have.

DY: Thank God we got all of our pictures. Because you can't replace those. Furniture or a car or a house, you know, and we got each other.



M: That's important. What happened to your car? I saw those pictures.

DY: It was in the driveway and it just picked it up turned it around and put it down in the yard.

M: Yes. It looked like it was in pretty bad shape.

DY: All the glass was broken. Harry said when he saw the tornado coming, he was thinking of getting in the car. I'm glad he didn't because I think, what was it, a pole or something even went through the windshield.

M: Really.

HY: Trees went right through...

DY: Debris or something went through it. But it just literally picked it up and just kind of turned it around and put it down in the yard.

M: I don't know.

HY: It was sitting out there like the car is sitting out there now. So that goes to show you shouldn't be in a car.

M: Yes. That's true. You're never supposed to go into a car. It's a good thing that you didn't go in there.

DY: He said he was thinking about it though.

M: What about people sight seeing? Did you have problems with people coming down here?

DY: Yes, we still do.

M: Do you really? I am not surprised.

DY: When we first moved here, I felt leery about even going out and sitting on the steps. I love to sit out here in the evening or something but people, especially the very first year, would just drive up and down and you knew what they were doing and I said, "Well, you had to go along with it." But you felt like they were looking at you or something all the time.

M: Sure.

DY: Which they were. They were looking at everything. We had a lot of those.

M: Did that bother you?

DY: Yes. It did. It made me kind of self conscious.

M: That's understandable.

DY: Like I said, when we were interviewed, when we got our house up right away, because we were the first ones on the street and they really thought it was something great. Not only that, the man who put the house up, Red Wood Homes, I think that's the name of it.

M: West Wood.

DY: West wood. They put up a lot more on the street of the same kind. But they were just tickled to death because we signed right away and got our house up right away. So they wanted the publicity. But that made us a little nervous too. It kind of ruined moving into the house. Because you knew everyone was saying, "Oh, there's the house that was on TV." We just weren't too crazy about it but we had to go along with it.

M: What made you decide to rebuild right here? You said that you were looking for another house?

DY: Yes. We had like four real estate agents. We knew when we got our insurance money how much we had to work with. We really thought at first, "Well it would cost too much to rebuild." Because they tell you it costs three or four times what you get to rebuild and we did not want to go in debt. So we had four agents looking for us from different agencies. We were looking at other homes. We found a couple real cute little homes but Billy didn't want to change schools because he had went down here all of his life. So then these people that we bought the house off of sent us a letter in the mail and showed us some pictures. So we called them. Well they came out right away and came down and saw the lot and they said, "That would be a beautiful place to put this house." So the more they kept talking, because your appliances, your furnace, all that stuff, the carpeting, that all came with it. Even the curtains came with it. So all we had to do was replace our furniture. So they were going to have open house. They did put some furniture in because we didn't have any of ours replaced yet. But then we could have even bought the furniture but I decided to go with what I could get. Like this up in here, we picked up at a garage sale. I bought two dressers first, the two white dressers in there. He had the dinette set there but he thought it was sold. So I put money down and I laid it on the dressers so he would hold them until we got the house ready, when I went back, they still had this dining room set. I said, "How much are you asking for that? Is it sold yet?" He said, "No the lady never came back after it." So anyway we ended up getting this and the two dressers. He said, "Since you are a tornado victim, I'll give it to you for \$100."

M: Oh my.

DY: He said, "I'll even bring it up to your house for you in my truck."

M: That was nice.

DY: And like I said, everybody, when they found out you were in the tornado, they went as far as they could go for you.

M: What about the Red Cross coming down here. Did they help you out?

DY: They were here right away.

M: What did they do for you?

DY: Well, we weren't here too much during the day. We met them first out at the high school because we went down there to sign up for the insurance because that's where all the insurance agents and everything like that went.

M: Oh, I see.

DY: They made sure we had food. They made sure we had clothing. The whole high school was just full of clothes and food and anything you needed. They said, "Go and get it. Come back everyday. If you need something that you forgot the day before, come back." It was like that for like a week. They were very good and I know they were giving food and everything out on the street but like I said, we weren't here too much during the day.

M: You think they did a good job, generally?

DY: Oh, very nice, yes. They checked my husband out. They asked us if we had any health problems. Had we lost dentures, glasses, anything like that, they would replace them. They checked my husband's forehead because he was burned, like a sandblasting on his forehead.

M: From the wind and everything.

DY: Yes.

HY: The darn thing came right through the two front windows and I was standing about three feet from that.

M: So your insurance company then really helped you a lot. Right away?

DY: Oh, they were beautiful. At first, our house insurance said maybe we'd have to itemize. When they looked at the house they said, "No way are we going to ask you to itemize."

M: They didn't ask you to do that?

DY: They said, "We are just going to totally total it out." They said, "You've lived there thirty-three years and everything is gone." So they said, "We're going to go as far with you as our policy can go."

M: Oh, that's wonderful.

DY: And that's what they did. We're still with the same insurance company too.

M: That's good.

DY: They were very nice.

M: So how long did it take you to rebuild and to move back in?

DY: The tornado hit May 31 1985, we were in our house on July 3 of the same year.

M: That was so fast. That is amazing. You are the only people I think that have...

DY: Well the people that built our house, like I said, they wanted the publicity because they wanted to sell more homes on our street. They even had a sign in the yard, "We want to help rebuild Woodglen." And they cleared the lot off for us and got that all going. They had a surveyor come in and everything. Of course we paid for this as they went, but they took care of everything. And then our house was just up in a matter of a couple...The longest thing we had to wait on was it coming from Indiana on a truck.

M: Oh, I see.

DY: But they had the foundation up right away and it went just like clock work.

M: That's great though. What about clearing the lots and everything. Did you have to do that yourself?

DY: We paid the people that did the house. They included that in with the house. It was written in there. But now I think a lot of people probably did have to pay someone to come in and do it. Of course now we did too, but the people that did our houses, we had the equipment, we have to have it there to build your foundation, so we'll just go ahead and do it.

M: So did you have any desire to move any place else in Niles? Or you were happy with staying here?

DY: No, we liked it on Woodglen. Like I said, we had lived here thirty-three years and we really did...I think Mr. Young and Billy sized it up for me. I did find another house I liked but they kind of talked me into coming back to Woodglen. And like I said, we have a lot of friends, nice neighbors and everything on this street. It is a quiet street. It's like a new street now.

M: Well, after thirty years of being here, I would think you would be happy, happy here too.

HY: And we got nice neighbor's over here now.

M: Were there new people that moved in?

DY: That is one thing that I used to feel so bad about because they didn't get this house ready to go for a long time. And we didn't have anyone over here and I missed having someone over here and now we have the nicest people in there.

M: Oh that's good.

DY: But now, like the lady, Mrs. Smith, on the corner, we both lived here together all those years, they were here when we came here so that's how long they've been here too and a lot of them down the street and across the street.

M: Did anybody move away from this neighborhood?

DY: Some of them did, yes. They moved to other neighborhoods. A lot of them just looked for...Well for one thing, I think we might have had quite a few renters on this street too and they would rent other houses and that.

HY: Some of the renter's came back.

DY: Yes, some of them did because the apartment houses were damaged and that.

M: Yes, I was going to say I saw that when I pulled up.

DY: And a lot of those people came back too.

M: Do you feel safe here? Do you ever worry about this happening again to you?

DY: Yes, very definitely. Before this hit, I used to be...I was always afraid of the wind and he used to laugh at me and I used to console myself and say, "Well, if a tornado hits, it could go down St. John's Street. It could even go down North Road. And it would miss us. I said, "It would have to go directly down Woodglen Avenue to really get us." Well, it did. Straight down Woodglen as could be. But were all...We went to some counseling that the Red Cross recommended because Billy had nightmares. See, he was ten at the time and he had nightmares. He wanted to sleep with us. So we went for counseling but we are still afraid. They put up a tornado warning and you can just feel the tension in here. But now we have two good neighbors on both sides and they tell us, go down in our basement. So if it gets bad, we usually do.

M: It doesn't bother you not having a basement?

DY: Well, I wanted a basement but I didn't have enough money. I just couldn't swing it. It does bother me.

M: Well, it's not like you don't have any place to go.

DY: If you can get there fast enough. That is the biggest worry. But we do...We all get...Like I said you can feel the tension whenever they put them up on the TV. Even if it's not for our area. The minute you see that word "tornado" that's all it takes. You can just feel everybody tightening up.

M: I think it's like that everywhere, though now.

DY: Even the dog. In the wintertime...We still have the same dog, we had to board him in a kennel but, you put him out and the wind is blowing, he doesn't want to go out. He wants to come right back in, you know.

M: Well, he's not dumb.

DY: He doesn't want to stay out there. If he hears a jet going over, pretty noisy, he'll look pretty funny. So even the dog remembers I guess.

M: How would you say this neighborhood has changed, since the tornado, in the past three years?

DY: I think the neighbors kind of look out for themselves a little bit more. Everyone has fixed up their homes, better. Of course we miss a lot of the houses not

being there. There are still a lot of empty lots. It is mostly the same people. And when we get renters in they all understand and they are all curious about it but it doesn't seem to bother them. They still move here.

M: What about the physical appearance of the street. You were showing me pictures of those trees in the backyard

DY: Oh, we miss the trees, very much. It was so hot last summer and you don't even have a shade tree. We have some planted but they're not big enough yet. Probably we'll be gone by the time their big enough. But we do miss the trees very much. The whole street had a lot of trees.

M: I guess it did.

DY: And that was really a great loss because you can't replace them the way they were. You have to wait for them to grow up.

M: Is there anything else that you'd like to mention that I haven't covered? I can't think of anything that I might have missed.

DY: Just that everybody was real nice. I guess it takes a tragedy to...Like I said the neighborhood, they kind of watch out better for each other now. The elderly...We have some elderly and I even find myself...I stop and ask them, "Hey, can I mow the lawn for you?" when I see them out there. We kind of worry about each other more. Like if I don't see my neighbor over here, I'm either going over or I'm calling and she does the same because Mr. Young has heart problems. And when she sees our lights on in the middle of the night, she'll call, "Is everything okay?" They're the same way over here. I think people just are noticing more about what is going on around them.

M: Well that's good. Was that also your purpose in writing...Your wrote an editorial, right? Or had an article in the editorial part of the Niles Daily Times?

DY: Just to thank everyone. Because you can't thank everyone that you meet. I mean there were people there that I didn't even know their name. There was a lady in an Ohio Bell Telephone Shop, come by and she handed us an envelope with money in it. And we don't know her name, where she came from, or anything.

M: She just wanted to help.

DY: How do you thank her? Because you don't know who she is. And so many people stopped, "Whatever we can do, name it." And it's just very unusual for people to do that. But like I said, I know the neighbors on our street watch out for each other a lot better than they did before.

M: Now your article was in the Niles Daily Times?

DY: Yes. Even the policemen, the National Guard, they had a heck of a job. Because when they go into a neighborhood, they don't know who lives there and who don't and once in a while I guess they got a little bit hyper with some of the neighbors here, but they had a big job to do and they did it good. Because they didn't know us from Adam or Eve

M: Sure.

DY: And we didn't know them. So when you came up the street, up North Road to go down Woodglen, they weren't sure you lived here. So you had to show identification, which was good. It was a pain in the neck but they were doing their job and I'm glad they were here. And once in a while, there would be a little squabble, one of the neighbors would say, "Hey, I live right down here. Come with me." So then finally they got to giving us identification cards.

M: I was going to say, how did they do that? They just assigned a card?

DY: We had to get them down at the high school.

HY: My family all had to get identification.

M: Did they, your whole family had to?

DY: Yes they did. Like I said, they did a good job. They had them stopped down here at North Road and right here at North Road and Woodglen and you didn't get down there without the identification card. The looting I think took place before they got here.

M: I was going to say I think it did too.

DY: Because they did a good job afterwards, after they got in here.

M: I can't think of anything else. I think we've covered everything that I have on my list.

END OF INTERVIEW