

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Tornado Victims of 1985

Personal Experience

O.H. 1197

CARLA L. PADULA

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

October 25, 1988

## CARLA PADULA

Mrs. Carla Padula and her family were victims of the 1985 tornado in Niles. Mrs. Padula was not at home when the tornado hit her house on 140 Susan Court. Her husband was at work and her twin sons were at a baseball game. Mrs. Padula was returning home and was caught in traffic. Her immediate concern, after learning that the tornado struck Niles, was for the safety of her children. After finding that her family was safe, the Padula's proceeded to sift through the rubble of their home. Mrs. Padula spoke of the difficult time her family experienced with their insurance company. She finally had to plea to the Attorney General to receive funds for her home. She highly commends the Red Cross and Salvation Army for the relief they provided. The Padula's rebuilt their home on Susan Court and still reside there today.

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Tornado Victims of 1985

INTERVIEWEE: CARLA L. PADULA

INTERVIEWER: Molly McNamara

SUBJECT: tornado, looters, family, the Salvation Army,  
trouble with insurance company

DATE: October 25, 1988

M: This is an interview with Mrs. Carla Padula for the Youngstown State University 1985 Tornado Victims Project, by Molly McNamara, at 140 Susan Court, Niles, Ohio, on October 25, 1988, at approximately 5:00 p.m.

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

P: Well, I'm married and I have two twin sons, they're both 19. One's in college, one's going to college in January. My husband works for Warren Consolidated and I work for Packard Electric.

M: How long have you worked for Packard Electric?

P: Twenty years.

M: Oh, okay. I want you to tell me a little bit about your neighborhood here on Susan Court. What was it like before the tornado?

P: Basically, it's the same. We've had four families move out, and three younger families moved in, one older family, and they're basically the same. It brought our neighborhood closer together. The neighbors are friendlier. It's like they're all homebodies. Everybody's close-knit. Basically it's just the same.

M: It's a fairly young neighborhood, you'd say?

P: Yes, I would say. Middle age. There's not too many older people on this end of Nancy Street.

M: But does it have families?

P: Oh, yes.

M: Okay. I want you to tell me a little bit about what you do on a normal day. Do you usually work everyday?

P: I work steady day-turn. I get home around 3:00, make supper, listen to the kids gripe, clean up, and I bowl twice a week. That keeps me pretty well occupied. That's about it.

M: On May 31, 1985--I know you remember it well--tell me what you were doing that day. Tell me how your day started out.

P: Well, I came home from work and it was really hot, humid, ugly. I had a swimming pool at the time and the kids were in the backyard, swimming. So I was making supper, and my husband was working afternoon turn and I heard on the radio that there was a tornado watch out. So I yelled out to the kids, I said, "There's a tornado watch out, maybe you better come in." So they said "We'll be in in a little bit." So just then, their baseball coach called and said they had a make-up game and for the boys to be ready about 5:00 and he would pick them up and take them to the game. So I hollered out to the kids, I said, "You better come in, your coach called, you have a ball game." So they flew out of the pool and they came in. My one son, Lee, said, "Mom, we'll never have a tornado, will we?" I said, "Never say never." And usually, I'll say "No," but that day there I said, "Never say never." So the coach picks them up and away they go. And I'm here by myself and in the other house, the central air was broken. I tell you what, I was miserable. It was really ugly. It was a yellowish day. And by this time, it was about 6:30. So I was playing around with my hair and I was putting makeup on because every once in a while I go to bingo on Friday nights. So something told me, "Go for a ride in your car, you got air in your car," which I did. So it wasn't even five minutes after I left I got hit. I just got blown away and I didn't even know it.

M: Where were you then?

P: I was at the traffic light on 422 and [Rt.] 46.

M: Up on the corner?

P: Yes. I was waiting for the traffic light. And I was getting ready to make a right hand turn to go up towards the skating rink. So I didn't know what was going on. So the light changed, I make my right hand turn, I go up the strip there, I get by Alberini's, I looked up on the hill, and I see . . . well, the traffic was getting bumper to bumper by then. And I said to myself, "There must have been a heck of a wreck up there." Then I looked up and I saw people running back and forth across the street. So by this time, the car had crept up to the hill. I looked to my right and I saw this big tree was laying down on the ground. Well, it still didn't hit me what had happened. So I looked over to my left and I didn't see the skating rink and I didn't see the Park Plaza. All I saw was a body laying in a field, somebody was just covering the body up and then it hit me. "Oh, gosh, we had a tornado!" I made a U-turn and I came back down 422, and by this time, the sirens were going crazy, ambulances were flying everywhere. Now all I could think of was getting to my kids, never even dreaming about this house. So I came down 422 to come down on 46, it's blocked off. I can't get through.

M: That was probably the most frustrating moment of your life, wasn't it.

P: By this time, I'm near panic. So I go back up 422 and I try to come down North Road. Blocked off. I said, "Okay." So I go up to Ridge Plaza, Ridge Road, try to come down 169, it's blocked off. Now, I can't get anywhere near this house. By this time, I'm panicked. I'm crying. I ran out of gas. So I went over to my girlfriend's house, who happens to live in that area. So I went over there, and she wasn't home. So, a neighbor siphoned gas out of his truck and put it in my car. He say's, "Hey, the only thing I can tell you to do is get to the closest point and walk." So needless to say, I was in a frenzy. I didn't know which end was up. So I went to the scrap place there, across the street from Republic, I parked the car, I locked it, I got out, and I started running. Well, Republic was laying out on the road. And the cops were screaming, "You can't go through here." I didn't pay any attention. So I just kept running. So I got to the other side and I ran into one of my husband's buddies. And all I said to him was, "Did anybody see the kids." He said, "We saw them." I said, "Was it before the tornado or after?" He said, "Well, it was before." I said, "I want to see them now." So he said, "We'll see what we can do." So he gets me close to home. I said to him, "Ronnie, go to the mill and tell Louie." He says, "Okay." So he dropped me off here and he took off to go get my husband. Well in the meantime, I started

running down the street while all my neighbors were up on that corner. And they said, "Don't even go down there, it's gone." And I said, "Did anybody see the kids?" And they said, "Yes, they were there looking for you."

M: What was your feeling right then?

P: A big sign of relief. I didn't even want to see the house. My concern was my kids. So I'm pacing up on the corner over there because my neighbors said don't go down there. I'm waiting for my husband and I saw the kids [at] about 9:30. It was about 9:30 that night. And then, we were waiting for their father and when I saw him, it was 11:30. So we made our tour down here to see the house at 11:30 that night.

M: What state was the house in?

P: It was gone.

M: It wasn't the same house, right?

P: Oh, no, this is altogether a different home. I had inside walls, the outside walls were gone. I had my neighbors back wall of her house in my living room. There was a chair in my living room that ended up in my laundry room which had to go around the corner and down six steps, and it ended up on my washer. Today I still can't figure out how that chair got there. And it didn't bust the door or anything. It just went right through the entrance way and ended up on the washer. The sliding doors were out, the whole roof was completely gone. It was really a wreck. It looked like somebody had dropped a bomb.

M: What was your immediate reaction?

P: "I'm homeless!" It was really weird because you left there a couple hours ago and now you come back to nothing. My girlfriend lives down here on Cynthia. She lived on the first section where they just got damage and the upper part got totaled. So we stayed two nights with her and then I went up my brothers and I stayed six nights with him. My husband ended up in the hospital over this. He had like an attack a few years ago. So he ended up in the hospital. So here, I am trying to find a contractor to go into the hospital to visit my husband, trying to get the insurance company to give me some money. I was going crazy.

M: Where did you even begin to start over, the next day, Saturday? Did you have any idea where you were going to even start over?

P: No, the only thing I could think of was coming here and cleaning it out and seeing what I could save. Then after we got situated in my brother's house, he helped me along. He said, "You better find a contractor if you're going to build or your kids are going back to school in September. Get yourself settled." So I found a contractor and I said the only thing that was left here was I had to have it excavated, then they tore it down and I started from dirt. I just rebuilt it.

M: So this took how many months?

P: Six months.

M: Six months to do all that.

P: But I still don't have towel racks. I'll never be where I was. Because, it was 18 years that I worked for everything. Now I'm just slowly getting it back together and its three years later.

M: The day after though, it happened, I had other people in this neighborhood and in other neighborhoods where they were hit bad tell me about looters and people that were sightseeing. Did you have any experiences with that?

P: Yes, I did. The night that it had happened, my neighbors down on the other end, they put up a roadblock and patrolled this area through the night, so they had walkie talkies and stuff where they could communicate back and forth.

M: That was great though, a good idea.

P: So they would take their turns and through the night, they would come through here and they caught three people in this house.

M: Really?

P: Well, they had come up through the woods. So they chased them out of here. The next day, in daylight, when we were in the process of getting what we had and moving it to store it somewhere, somebody was in here having a field day. They were chased out of here again. Now my neighbor over here, he lived in his house. His house was livable. So he stayed there and he kept an eye out for what was left over here. He chased a few people out of here. The sightseers, you could not get your cars in to get anything. We had to park clear down the end of the street and walk up here because the traffic was bumper to bumper of sightseers.

M: Did they have the national guard stationed down here?

P: They came a few days later.

M: Oh, I see.

P: And I saw cars from Geagua County. I saw license plates from West Virginia through here.

M: How did you feel about somebody gawking at your house?

P: I just wished they would all go away. "Let me do what I have to do." I guess it was to be expected, too, but at that time, I just didn't really care. But the traffic was just unbelievable. You couldn't park anywhere.

M: I remember just everywhere in Niles it was like that, too.

P: They were coming in busloads and they would come up through the woods over here. My neighbor said he would see couples come through here just sightseeing, and he chased them out of here. He said, "If you don't have friends of family down here and if you're not here to help, get out of here!" And they just looked at him and laughed. But he probably very easily could have punched somebody out or something.

M: But it was a good thing he was there.

P: Oh, yes. He took care of this place, what was left of it. He guarded what I managed to salvage, which wasn't much.

M: Yes. I was just going to ask you. How much stuff did you actually get that was usable or reusable?

P: Not too much. My TV, and it was ironic because everything that was glass--I had a glass coffee table and my TV and I had a glass curio--did not break.

M: That's unbelievable.

P: I had a pecan dining room set, dining room table and chairs, solid pecan that was busted in 9 million pieces. And there are these pieces of glass that did not break. It was just really weird because you really look at this stuff, you figure glass would be the first to go. But I saved that stuff. I still have it. But basically, the majority of my stuff I had to buy all over again.



M: Now did you get immediate relief as far as from your insurance company, and did they help you as much as you expected?

P: I had some trouble with my insurance company. I mean the next day, a lot of people's insurance companies were down here handing out checks. It took me 10 days to get a check from my insurance company. I couldn't touch this house until I had an adjuster come down here. And I kept telling him to get down here.

M: Right, you wanted to pick up your stuff.

P: Yes. I wanted to pick up my stuff and start over. And it took three days maybe for an insurance adjuster to come down here. But I came in the next day and started cleaning up, and I said that it's his problem. So, he came down and he looked in my house, and he said, "Do you have any receipts?" Well, I looked at this guy and I said "Yes, they're in Czechoslovakia if you want to go find them." You know, how could you. . . . I don't have a house and your asking me about receipts? So he said, "Well," and he kind of chuckled, he said, "Well, there's no doubt this house is totaled." So he wrote it all down and stuff and I had an above ground pool, and that was totaled, and everything that was in my garage was completely gone because the garage was wiped out. It was right down to the cement. And I had all my Christmas decorations and stuff there. Well, it was all gone. So he totaled the house and I was waiting for some kind of additional living expenses so I could either go stay at a motel or pay somebody that I'm staying with. So finally, it took my brother, because my husband was in the hospital at the time, finally he called the insurance company up and he said, "You get her some money down here now." And it came federal express. To top it all off I had to see the Attorney General for him to get this insurance company to move. I went down to the high school where they were set up down there, and I went to him and I told him I can't get any money from my insurance company. I said, "Here we are. Now we're going into a week."

M: So they moved quick after that?

P: He said, "You'll have your money Monday morning." He made a phone call and it came Federal Express, a check. So then I got the check, and they wanted me to make an inventory list. They wanted to know how much of everything I had, what it cost today to buy, what I paid for it, how old it was, and they wanted serial numbers. Well not everything has serial numbers. So I had to go down, and I made an inventory list. Now this was how many shirts and how many socks, how many shoes, how

many coats, make up, whatever. They wanted an inventory of. . . .

M: They really didn't give you much of a break there, did they?

P: And I had catalogs to try to get something the closest to what I had, what it cost today to buy, and what I paid for it and how old it was, which they depreciated it. They did not give me total replacement because I did not know about it at the time. So they depreciated . . . if that refrigerator was \$1,400 and it was 10 years old, they're going to depreciate it and that's what they're going to give me. They gave me full price on my house but they depreciated my contents. The cupboards are considered contents. My cupboards were 10 years old in that house.

M: But still, a 10 year old house is new.

P: My house was 10 years old. It would have been 10 years old that August. So, they depreciated everything, but I got the full cost on my house. But this [house] cost more to build than what the other one was.

M: Sure. So you really had a hard time, in other words.

P: Basically, yes. I did.

M: What about the relief organizations such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. Did you have any experiences with them?

P: Oh yes, I have, and I'll tell you what, they were wonderful. I don't know what we would have done without them.

M: Tell me what they did.

P: Well, right away, before you knew it, they were set up down at the high school. They were giving food, they were giving shelter, they were giving clothes. I walked in there, I never thought I would have to do that, and I walked in there and they handed me boxes, food, dog food, cat food, diapers if you had babies, blankets. It was unbelievable what they did. They were there and set up. They wasted no time. And the Salvation Army were giving out vouchers for clothing to any store that you wanted to go to, and my kids spent three days in their ball uniforms. So I had to hurry up and get them some clothes. So, they were all really good. The night the National Guard was here, of course they were here for a few days. They had a curfew on here. They didn't want anybody in and out at certain times. The guards were patrolling the area, and all of

a sudden, here comes truckloads, vanloads of cars and vans. Right away the national guard [said,] "What's going on here?" Here, it was the Boy Scouts of America. They came in from Youngstown, it must have been about 11:30 that night. They brought in food, anything that you can imagine. They would go knocking on the doors of the houses that were up, because we were without power for how long. And they were giving anything that they needed. They had to call the Mayor, I guess, for permission to come in, but people were really nice. They were really excellent. I didn't think there would be people out there like that.

M: I guess maybe it takes something like that to make you realize. . . .

P: Could be. There was a lot of hard work involved and a lot of people.

M: What about the Niles Safety System. I've had people say both good and bad about it, what they think about it today. There was no warning before this happened. You said that you had heard on the radio most people didn't have any kind of warning, didn't even know that there was any kind of warning or watch out. What do you think today. Today, what do you do if you hear about a tornado?

P: Oh, I run down [to] the cellar. I have in my basement--between the other house I didn't have a basement. But this one I do, and I have a fallout shelter in my basement. Well its a wine cellar or a fruit cellar, but I call it a fall out shelter. And it wasn't a year later, they had the sirens go off because there was a tornado spotted, a funnel cloud spotted, and I heard the sirens go off and my blood ran cold. I took off down [to] the cellar. No, first I ran upstairs and got my husband and got him out of bed. I said, "The sirens are going off. Lets go." The kids weren't home again. So I ran down [to the] cellar, and I was like a lunatic. I was running back and forth in that cellar screaming. Then finally, my son got word--they were at the VIP--that there was a funnel cloud spotted, and he was home. Well, the VIP were bringing kids in the basement down there. My boy left the VIP with a couple of his friends, and he was home in three seconds. He almost busted down the front door and ran down [into] the cellar. And we all were in that little. . . . My husband was outside watching. "Get in here. Get in here!" But I have that fear. I'll always have that fear. Before, I never paid any attention to it.

M: You said in your other house you never had a basement.

P: No, I had my family room, laundry room and a bathroom that was four feet in the ground. It was like a tri-level. You would go down five steps, but I didn't have a basement in that house.

M: I wonder what would have happened had you been home.

P: I have no idea, and I'm glad I wasn't home.

M: I'm glad, too.

P: At least I could sit here and talk about it.

M: Yes.

P: If I would have been home, I don't know.

M: I didn't even think of that. I just naturally assumed that everybody had basements in their homes, but I didn't know that.

P: But I have a basement now and that's the first place I run. Thunderstorms, thunder, lightning, downstairs. It's terrible because before we always neglected them. You never paid any attention. I'd be out at the mall shopping.

M: Everybody's like that, I think.

P: No, not anymore. My kids, they'll have the weather channel on as soon as they hear of a storm. And they're 19. And they'll put on the weather channel and they'll stay and listen to the radio, and the first sign of a storm, they're a little bit panicky, because they saw the actual thing. It went over them. I didn't see it. I just saw what it did. But I didn't see the actual thing. They did.

M: I just have a couple more questions for you. Your neighborhood today, how has it changed? How do you think its changed since it was before the tornado?

P: The neighbors are more closer. There's only two houses down here that are built different, mine and Don and Nancy Stouffer's. The rest of the houses are basically the same. They might have just improved them a little, but they built basically the same houses, and it just brought this whole neighborhood closer together. We've had block parties. May 31 we'd celebrate our block party and everybody would get together and have a big picnic. And some people thought that was disgusting. Why would you celebrate a tornado? And I explained to them it wasn't that we were celebrating the tornado, we were celebrating that we were all here. You know, a party.

M: I think that's great.

P: And finally, after they realized what we were doing, they said, "Oh, okay." But basically, its the same neighborhood, just a little better, and a little closer.

M: Did anybody move away from this neighborhood?

P: There were about four families that moved away. We got four new families in. My sons didn't want to stay here. My sons wanted to move on. "Don't build there, don't build there." I said, "Hey, [if] it's meant to be it's meant to be, no matter where you go." I said, "I own that land, and I'm going to build back there." And that's what I did.

M: Why, just out of curiosity, did you fill in your swimming pool?

P: I had an above ground pool.

M: Oh, I see.

P: And I would have loved to have another one, but I figured my boys were 16 years old and my husband said that they're going to be going to school, and they're not going to be around much longer, and it's going to be just us. He said, "Why put the money back into the pool when we can use it inside the house." So that's what we did. Instead of putting it out there, we put it in here.

M: Your house, then, is different than it was. I don't know why. I assume most of these houses I've gone into, I always ask people because they're like, "No, it was totally different."

P: This house is altogether different. It's moved back seven feet, its bigger, I had a tri-level before. This is a two-story colonial. I have the basement now that I didn't have before.

M: Was that a result of what happened? Did you want the basement?

P: Oh, that's the first thing I told my husband. He didn't really want to build again because it was a headache. And I said, "Whatever we do, I want a house with a basement."

M: That's understandable.

- P: My first priority is a basement. He said, "Okay." So we found a contractor and I told him what I wanted, and here I am.
- M: There's one last thing I wanted to ask you. You were talking to me before about a clock you had that stopped that you kept. Tell me a little about that.
- P: This clock was run by a battery, and I had it on my wall in my kitchen in the other house. And as soon as that tornado hit this house, that battery popped out of that clock, and that's the exact time that I was hit. And the clock never broke. I could probably put a battery back in there and it would probably work, but I'm like, "Don't anybody touch that." And if you look on my fireplace, that's where I have it, in the corner. It's not clearly out in the open, but I have that. That's a big memento, and I have pictures.
- M: Okay, is there anything else that I haven't mentioned that you'd like to talk about.
- P: No, not really. I think we covered everything.
- M: I think so. Okay, thank you.
- P: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW