

A prom night no one will forget

By Mike Courson

The most memorable thing planned for April 21, 2001 was the Hoisington High School prom. As residents of Kansas know, the weather often changes plans. That night, approximately 150 high school students waited in the basement as an F-4 tornado ripped apart one-third of the town.

The prom that night was held at the Knights of Columbus on Main Street. Ideal weather conditions earlier in the day had turned into darkening skies and a few sprinkles as couples made their way inside the building.

Inside, the dance began to pick up. About an hour in, the lights began flickering until they finally went off for good. Karla Reisner is the Family and Consumer Science instructor at Hoisington High and was one of the sponsors at the prom that night. She was one of several people outside watching the storm approach. One mother came and picked up her daughter and date before the storm hit.

"The scariest part was we all just stood there and watched the ambulances go by," Reisner said. "They have the lights on in the back and the terror on the patients who were being transported from the hospital to other hospitals, the kids were like 'Oh my gosh.'"

Reisner suspects the tornado was already on the ground west of town when an ambulance drove down Main Street, its driver barking orders to go inside and take cover.

Sensing the possibility of bad weather, then-Principal Mike Nulton had checked the basement entrances at the Knights earlier in the day. With the warning, the students were ushered downstairs. The DJs grabbed snacks from the tables upstairs and took them downstairs.

No one was sure what was happening outside.

"Kids who had cell phones were on their phones trying to find out what was going on," Reisner said. "Some of them found out their houses had been hit."

The tornado passed by five or six blocks from the Knights of Columbus. No one inside the building knew until they heard by telephone or saw for themselves upon exiting the basement.

"We didn't know that anything had hit until we found out later," she said. "We'd heard Dairy Queen had been hit because Dean Baird had went out there and checked on people. He was driving around making sure people were okay."

"Once we got the okay to come out of the basement we held all the students there and waited for a parent to come get them. Ironically, a lot of our girls brought Clafin boys. Kirby Krier, who was a county commissioner at the time, he came over to take the boys back over and they wanted to stay and help clean up."

As a teacher and sponsor, Reisner had the tall task of accounting for all the students and trying to keep everyone calm.

"It was dark," said Reisner. "We tried keeping them corralled but

we had some kids who sneaked out. One kid found out his house got hit. He said he didn't have basement and he ran home, which was very dangerous because there were power lines down."

Eventually, the students were picked up by those who still had cars. Check-ins were established at the city building and Catholic church so everyone could be accounted for.

In the weeks to follow, Hoisington High students had the opportunity to attend other proms in the area, including one in Great Bend two weeks after the tornado ruined their own. Various sponsors helped make that a free event for Hoisington students.

With Hoisington High being damaged by the tornado, classes were moved to the middle school and three churches in town. All home sporting events for the remainder of that spring were rescheduled as road games.

The memories of that night are never too distant for Reisner, who will sponsor her 21st prom this weekend.

"I always want rain on prom," she said. "I remember sitting outside on my porch - it was caddy-corner from my house and there were some kids going to prom - I remember thinking, 'Man, the kids really had a beautiful day for prom.' My philosophy is if we have rain, it's okay. It will clear off for prom. The kids make fun of me because I say that, but I say no, the day of prom was beautiful and that night we got hit by an F-4."



FEMA Director Joe Allbaugh and Kansas Governor Bill Graves spoke with residents in Hoisington about disaster assistance in the wake of the destructive tornado. (photo by Dave Saville/FEMA News)

Swept Away: a student account of 2001 prom

(Will Rubio was a senior at Hoisington High in 2001. His account of Prom Night, written by Susan Barton, appeared in New York Times Magazine about a month after the tornado hit. Will and his cousin, Zack, were killed in a car accident on July 21, 2001, exactly three months after the tornado).

mostly it'll be a tech college or a junior college. It's a nice town. It's quiet, and nothing really ever happens. I didn't think about the prom that much until about a month before. My girlfriend, Amy, and I have been together for a year, so it was just kind of set in stone we were going to go. Most ladies want the prom to be a night they'll never forget. And, well, some of them got one.

We were all joking around and dancing like a bunch of idiots. Just laughing and not caring. The power went out. Everyone was cracking jokes. Then the lights came back on, and we started dancing again. Then the lights went back off, and they told us to go downstairs. I wasn't really worried, because that's a normal thing around here. We get quite a few storms. Some are bad, some where it's hailing like no other. Everybody just sat around.

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I just graduated from Hoisington High School in Kansas. Some of the smarter kids will go to a university and stuff, but



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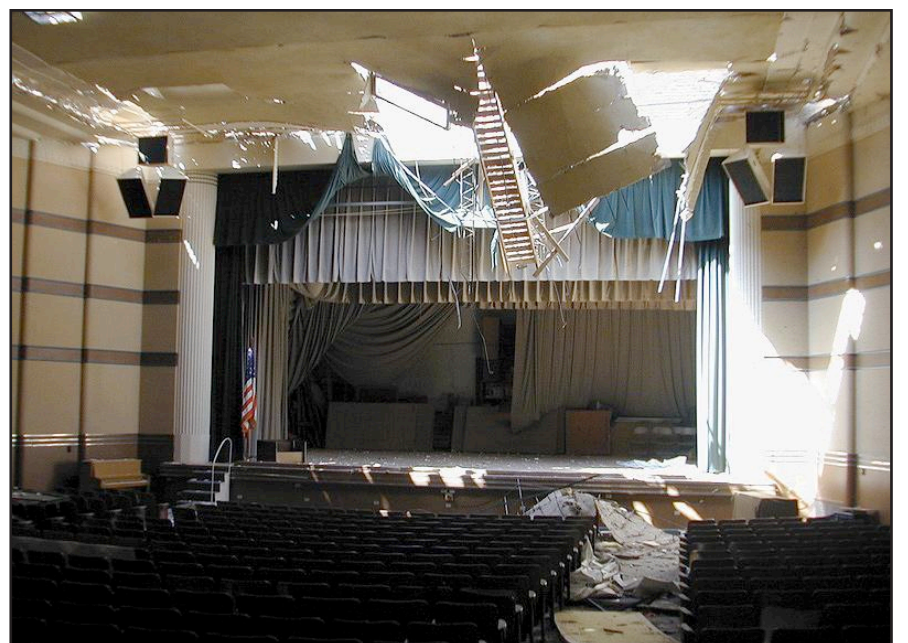


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