

Continuing After Breast Cancer Support Group Reminiscence of the 2006 Tornado  
Submitted by Mary McCarthy, RN, Mercy Iowa City

On Thursday, April 13, 2006 nine women gathered in the Fanning room which is in the lower level of the Mercy Medical Plaza, 540 East Jefferson Street, Iowa City. The women were meeting as part of the monthly Continuing After Breast Cancer Support Group which had met since 1991.

Former Mercy Housekeeping staff member, Jason Figg, stopped by the room around 7:40 p.m. to tell Mary McCarthy, RN, the facilitator of the group, that a Dr. White had been called. Mercy Hospital which is located across the street from the Medical Plaza had been notified that a tornado was approaching the Johnson County area. "Dr. White" was an emergency notification to alert staff of a potential weather emergency. Mercy has a well-defined protocol for the protection of patients, visitors, and staff.

The room next door to the Fanning room had another meeting going on. It was a local support group for those with arthritis. Eventually about another dozen people and a dog congregated in the hallway of the Plaza's lower level. These were people who had been walking in the neighborhood or had come from church services for Holy Thursday (there are several churches in the neighborhood). They took shelter in the Plaza due to the billowing wind and rain.

Within about 30 minutes of receiving the notification about the tornado conditions, the electricity in the Medical Plaza went out. There were exit emergency lights but the lower level was a blackout. The housekeeping staff of Jason, David Jeter, and David Heck came and told us to all stay put as the tornado sirens were activated.

Thankfully a few people had cell phones that were opened for light sources. One group participant had a small transistor radio which she turned on and found a local station which was broadcasting about the weather conditions. We learned that a tornado had hit Saint Patrick's Church near downtown Iowa City.

The Plaza remained dark. A few people left to go home. One woman left but returned as she lived near Rochester Avenue and could not make it to her route to home. When she returned she said, "It is like a war zone out there."

Eventually, the sirens stopped and a few of us ventured outside. There was a strange odor; the neighborhood was dark except lights were on at Mercy Hospital with its emergency power. One of the participants of the other meeting being held in the Plaza was in a motorized wheelchair. She was very concerned about getting home and had come to the meeting via the SEATS bus. We located a regular wheelchair from the Plaza lobby, transferred her to that chair and the three housekeepers pulled her in the regular wheelchair up the stairs to the parking lot. Mary called SEATS to confirm that they would be coming. She was told, "Yes, but we don't know when." The housekeeping staff hauled the motorized chair up the stairs and we transferred the woman to her own chair. Mary waited with her until after 9:30 p.m. when the SEATS driver was able to come to take her home.

The group participants and other people within the safety of the Plaza's lower level left for their homes. It was an eventful meeting and fortunately all were safe. The help of the Mercy housekeeping staff, cell phone lights and a pocket radio all made the event less frightening.

Today all of the participants of that Continuing After Breast Cancer Group meeting continue to survive cancer and the tornado of April 2006!

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