

Case 1998
by Nancy Bose

Why Chase?

I grew up the middle child of two hard working parents. My childhood was wonderful, my school years rather uneventful. We lived in various spots in the Midwest, ultimately settling in the East in Fairfield, CT. My college years were seasoned by the usual doings of the times, sit ins, war protests, etc. Like most baby boomers, I survived college, married the man I loved, had three wonderful children, and found a career. Throughout my years, though, always there were the storms.

When I was 5, and living in Michigan, our town was struck by a large tornado. The devastation was huge, and its impact on me was immense. It hit at night, and I was hastily grabbed from my bed, barely making it to the cellar. Hail the size of baseballs broke our casement windows, and when we emerged, our neighborhood was a mess. The effect that this sort of tragedy has on a youngster is crippling. It proves to a child that there really ARE monsters in the dark that can hurt you. They can invade your "safe place" and take away everything you have come to accept as being permanent.

I spent the next few years with a devastating fear of storms. I would become fearful at every the sound of thunder, and nearly catatonic during tornado watches, which were frequent in that part of the Midwest. Many a night, my Mom would hold me and quiet my sobs. Only when all my family was safely home, and the various pets all accounted for would I have any peace at all. Sleep would come only if my father was standing sentry in front of our old black and white TV watching the warnings, or when the "all clear" whistle blew. My parents realized that they had a real problem, and began to confront that problem by teaching me everything they could about the nature of severe weather. My Dad once showed me how very small a tornado was on a map of our town, and how relatively limited its damage path was. He armed me with science, knowledge, math and logic to battle my demons.

On one of our many trips south, to visit relatives, we actually paralleled a tornado spinning some 5 or 6 miles away. Though it was traveling away from us, and we were in no danger, at that time I thought the world had come to an end, the unbelievable had happened...the demon had found me once again! Yet as it disappeared from view, I found myself with an inexplicable sadness of sorts. In retrospect, I think I "stockholmed". My terror was so great, in defense, I actually bonded with its source. When I was in 6th grade, my Dad actually got me to sit out on the back porch and watch storm cells develop. As the clouds overhead began to rotate and descend, my dread (and cold sweats) were slowly replaced by wonder and fascination. Over the course of

the afternoon, we watched wall clouds form and dissipate, lightening flash, and a few funnel clouds start to develop in the distance. When the storm system passed, I found myself disappointed and wanting more. I was hooked.

My first "chase vehicle" was my chestnut gelding, "Surprise". When storm clouds would start to move in, I'd gallop out to the top of a near hill and watch them coming. I'd watch until the first few drops of rain fell, then gallop pell-mell back home, racing the very wind.

Over the years to adulthood, my fascination continued. I would "chase" after storms, hoping to catch a sky show. My family could never quite figure out why I scheduled all the family vacations on the Atlantic seaboard during hurricane season, and all trips to the Midwest during the summer months. Just the possibility of seeing heavy weather was enough of an enticement. My own children grew up to respect severe weather, but not to fear it. Big storms were party times in my home; we get soda and munchies, and watch nature's shows. I get the sky here in the east in SLICES. Trees, hills, buildings, etc., block what little visibility there is to our few big storms, so I got in the habit of trying to intercept them in the few places where I DID have decent visibility. I had never heard of ANYONE with this sort of preoccupation with severe weather, and managed to keep it hidden pretty well.

When the movie, Twister, came out, I left the theater stunned. First of all, I felt as if someone had pirated a part of my life; the opening sequence was so very, very familiar, only I was the little blond girl roused from her sleep to flee to the cellar. The beginning segment so mirrored my own childhood experience...even the part where the little dog almost didn't make it to the shelter. Our wire-haired fox terrier had hidden himself under the sofa when we ran to shelter, and though all hell was breaking loose, I was more fearful for him than for myself. He scooted in at the last possible second, and rode out what was later classified as an F4 curled next to me on a blanket. Also, I never realized before that storm chasing was a legitimate activity...others actually did it! I reasoned that any activity HAD to have a web site, and indeed, storm chasing had a dandy. Gilbert Sebenste authored a wonderful site called the Storm Chaser's Home Page. In addition to some wonderful meteorological sites, it had a section entitled "chasers in need of partners". I was somewhat sickened as I discovered that all this chase business had been going on for quite some time, way back when I was a college student trying to "find myself" in Tarrytown, New York. I read the marvelous accounts of the storm chasers and saw the magnificent pictures, realizing that I had missed the boat completely. My mind was whirring, voices saying, "its too late, you're too old, too late, too late".

I tell the children I lecture to that just because one age's and grows up, that doesn't mean that somewhere deep inside, they don't have all that

wonderful stuff they had when they were kids. It just gets buried under the burden of jobs, taxes, responsibility, etc. Every so often, though, an adult can be in touch with the "child within", and can once again become that child that felt that "anything is possible." If my inner child had not taken over that night, it WOULD have been too late...sound, grown-up reasoning would have taken over, and I would have Xed out of the Storm Chasers Home Page forever, hobbling back into some "over 40" chat room to discuss kids, homes, bills, and marriage. As someone possessed, I listed my name and bio on the blasted page. "One week, I'll give you one week...." started my paragraph. I looked it over quickly, and before I could talk myself out of it, I hit the "send" button. I didn't know it then, but I had altered the course of my life in that one split second.

Finding a Team

I never expected a response. My entry was honest, but intense, nearly daring someone to "sign me on". Someone took the dare. I had received a passport to neverland, and THIS old' Wendy wasn't about to pass, either.

John Bender, a 30 year veteran of Skywarn, and a Skywarn instructor was impressed by my determination to chase. Skywarn is a network of trained weather watchers who report significant weather events to the National Weather Service. Skywarn spotters report actual weather events that give meaning to the NWS radar readings, and generate the warnings. John and I began a cyber friendship that grew into a plan for a storm chase in tornado alley. Over the next year, I also began an intensive study of meteorology; no mean feat for someone who had made a career of avoiding math. Together, we planned for and recruited for a 10 day chase to take place in the Spring of the following year, in Tornado Alley.

We had heartbreaking upsets, set backs, equipment failures, recruiting problems, and there was always "the budget". What began as a recreational chase became more of a research mission in applying chase technologies to the work of warning. We also addressed the fact that many spotters are under trained, and much of the reported information is inaccurate or incorrect. What we planned to do was to establish a mobile lab prototype, which could act as a debunking point for spotters in a watch area, and also a tracking center to monitor storms; and to do it within a budget that any municipality could handle. Over the months, the plans slowly fell into place. What we ended up with was a fully functional mobile weather lab made of pirated parts, home made computers, etc. The team we ended up with, all recruited over the Internet, was highly talented and very diverse. We had a 22 year old Atmospheric physicist from Pennsylvania, an ex-pilot/now spotter from N. Dakota, an award-winning photojournalist from Ohio (who this year was a runner up for the Pulitzer), a news cameraman from New Zealand, a Skywarn instructor from Illinois, a reporter from Pittsburgh, and a housewife from

Verbank, NY

We did our chase, and did it well, gypsying around Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Texas for about 10 days. Yes, we caught the action (and it nearly caught us) Our project was entirely self funded (with a little help from T shirt sales made from artwork commissioned for our team by local artist Jack Lashway).

The recruitment aspect of forming our team was the most exhausting. We found out early on that though many people claim they want to chase storms, when confronted with the opportunity to do so, they backed down. This was compounded by the fact that John and I were being damned picky who we were going to share our dream with. Sure, we were looking for people with "something to bring to the table" in terms of experience, expertise, technical knowledge...but more importantly, we were looking for people with what I can best describe as "heart". It is not enough to want to see storms and tornadoes. One has to be in love with the process, savor the hunt as much as the catch. Most chases are busts. So how would we find talented people with the means and wherewithal to take 10 days and a bunch of money to go chase after something there was very little chance of even seeing, let alone catching? However, with only months to go, we found that we had a very promising group. That's when things really got tough.

One of our first team members, a meteorologist from Arizona, was involved in a fatal accident wherein three people died and he was airlifted to a hospital for months of rehabilitation, and though we lost him as a team member, he's up and running again, and working as an environmental engineer in Arizona.. When Jonathan got hurt, I was devastated. Then our EMT from New York City had a skiing accident and needed surgery that ultimately left him with no nerve reaction in his right arm. We held his space open to the last moment, but he couldn't go. Of course, there were rays of sunshine amidst the clouds. We (via Internet and as a team,) helped a young student in Dover Plains, New York, compile data for a term paper (which of course he aced!) One night, one of those nights when everything seemed to have gone wrong, I received from a woman my age who applauded my determination to fulfill my dream of chasing. She confided that she had let to many of her dreams and ambitions "wait", and was now afflicted with crippling arthritis and couldn't do the things she had saved for "later", one of which was chasing. I contacted SKYWARN in her area, explained her situation, and a half a dozen E mails later, she was a certified spotter and absolutely delighted to be able to be of service once again to her community. suffering from anxiety-panic disorder. After much research on her condition, Two months to chase time, and there was only one surviving member of our original group, Allan Detrich. Allan is a wonderfully talented photojournalist, and a very "game" guy. But with three people, we barely had enough people to drive, let alone monitor the electronics and data.

Bang. Out of the blue, Gilbert's Storm Chaser's Home Page came through for us. In a matter of days, we found three additional people that showed more promise, talent, and "heart" than almost anyone we had prospected over the entire prior year. What follows is my version of the events and experiences of our storm chase team.

Wednesday morning, the chase only two days away, I picked up Brian McNoldy in Scranton, PA. This marked the first team member I had met "in the flesh." As previously described, our team was composed entirely of people that had met on the Internet. I, being a baby boomer and very late to jump on the PC boat, am still rather disoriented over this "new" form of communication. After nearly a year of Internet communications, I found myself in a situation where some of my closest and dearest friends were people I had never met. Brian had been "on board" only for a few months, but we had communicated frequently. Brian is 22 years old, and a completely brilliant graduate of Lycoming College. He is, I discovered, somewhat soft spoken in a way that is often misconstrued as being shy; Brian is not shy, though, and has a wonderfully offbeat sense of humor that immediately endeared him to me. So there I was, in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn in Scranton, PA, hugging a total stranger that was also a dear friend.

Brian's sense of humor was called upon almost immediately. I took him home with me. As a full time automotive professional married to a full time Corrections Officer, our household is a bit bizarre in structure, and should not be visited by people expecting a Ward and June Cleaver scenario of blissful middle America. We live in an extremely rural area. My parting words to Brian as I left for work were, "Have a nice walk, but if you see a large dog in the road that looks like a bear, come home, because it probably IS a bear." However Brian fared that day with my daughter, who is going through her "enraged artist" phase, my son who believes school exists only so one can do sports, and my husband, who I know poured at least one of his health drink concoctions into Brian, is something I didn't really look to closely at. He survived.

Hiegh Ho, Heigh Ho, it is Chasing We Go

We left the next morning for Stewart Airport, an international airport in Newburgh, New York, whose significance would not come into play until much later in the chase. More on that later. Our flight was somewhat uneventful, and we made our connecting flight in Philly without a hitch. Dave, another of our team, had mentioned that he'd be wearing a Denver Bronco's shirt, and we spotted him almost immediately when we deplaned in St. Louis. Dave was another late addition to our team, and we lucked out with him. He proved to be rock solid, absolutely without a fearful bone in his body, resilient, and a damned fine driver, navigator, meteorologist, and friend. Again, though,

I'm getting ahead of myself. At first glance, Dave appeared to be younger than what I had expected (he owns 2 Subway sandwich shops in North Dakota and has a lovely wife and two beautiful kids) and was exactly where he should have been at exactly the right time, wearing exactly what he said he'd be wearing...a characteristic that would manifest again and again.

As we scurried through the terminal, we passed a young fellow that we knew HAD to be Geoff; even before we saw the sign "Nancy and the Storm Chasers" attached to his back pack. To my knowledge, I have never met a New Zealander, let alone a New Zealand news cameraman. However, I knew Geoff immediately, because he looked like a New Zealand news cameraman. Geoff's Internet sign on name is something involving Rambocam. Now I can admit, this had me worried. I had envisioned a rather "Rambo" type individual, completely caught up in his role of superman, and someone we would have to leave on the roadside somewhere, while he fed his ego. Geoff is about as far from that as a fellow can get. He is a very animated, friendly, energetic individual that lives the kind of adventure we had planned for over the past year on a daily basis. As with Brian and Dave, I liked him immensely and immediately. A humorous note; a few passers by had thought "Nancy and the Storm Chasers" were a rock group. I loved it!

We were still missing John Bender, who with me had parented this love child we merely called "the chase." John was driving in from Illinois in a Ford Escort loaded with electronics for our chase. Our luggage was missing, and we didn't know where to pick up the shuttle to the RV dealership to pick up the RV we had reserved for our trip. Things were quickly deteriorating.

The luggage, it seems, had arrived ahead of us, and was in the US Air office. About the same time we found it, someone had found the shuttle. I ran the entire length of the parking lot looking for John, cell phone in hand, and had nearly given up when I spotted an equally desperate looking individual who happened to be sporting a SKYWARN pin attached to his shirt. Had to be him. After a quick exchange of names for verification, we exchanged a world class hug. John and I had, at that point, been in daily communication for over 10 months, sometimes many times a day. We had weathered countless set backs, from equipment failure to recruiting members, losing members, budget set backs...everything. Yet after all, there we were at last at Lambert airport, complete with the team, the electronics, the shuttle, and ready to roll. What we didn't know at that time was that we had lucked into what I truly believe to be the best darned team of people ever to have graced the plains.

We arrived at MB Thomas at around 6pm and prepaid for the RV rental. Due to a few last-minute dropouts from the team, everyone had to pay a larger share than we had originally planned. For some reason, I felt singularly responsible for this turn of events. I had taken on budgeting as a sacred

trust, and was irritated that the figures had to change so late in the game, and after everyone had counted on it being what I had first said. The guys were great though, and ponied up without question.

I was fearful that the rental company would not approve of our little venture, so we had all agreed before hand to pose as a group of researchers in the area to get atmospheric readings and gather environmental data. No one, under penalty of death, was to mention storms, tornadoes, chasing, or anything at all along those lines. At this point, I had planned that we would probably incur some hail damage, and a broken windshield or two, and never see even a portion of the insurance deductible we prepaid. The innocent smile on my face as I was handed the keys had been perfected from 10 years of selling used cars.

As the minutes ticked away, we still had no word from John. We had agreed to meet Allan at the hotel later that night, and pick up Bill (our reporter from Pittsburgh) in Kansas City the next morning. Everyone was accounted for except John.

The rental facility was closing, so we piled all our stuff into the RV and proceeded to wait for John across the street in a parking lot. We hadn't been waiting 5 minutes when a gentleman came out and told us that John had just called him. It seemed as though yet another ever-diligent man in blue had mistaken John for a criminal, and had detained him. We had not even started the chase, and one of our people had been arrested not once, but twice! Not bad for a first day. We were also told that John had seemed "a little hot under the collar" over the phone.

About 20 minutes later, John caught up with us. Twice in one day, he'd had thousands of dollars worth of equipment scattered and tossed over the highway by policemen. Yes, he was a little hot under the collar. At this point, we didn't know how much of the equipment had been rendered inoperable. As tired as I was, one look at poor John made me realize that he was spent, and I volunteered to drive the Escort on to Columbia. The RV followed with Dave at the wheel.

Finally, All Together

When we arrived at the hotel in Columbia, it would have been easy to expect that we ALL would be "spent". However, as soon as John fired up the computer and we started getting our first radar images, what was to become a 10-day adrenaline high was launched.

One of the first things I did was to call Allan, who was staying just up the road. Within minutes, he wheeled into the parking lot in his Toyota Rav 4. I was absolutely ill with delight to finally meet him in person. Allan is a

bear of a man, looking more like a lumberjack than a photojournalist. I had seen his work, and it reflected a depth and sensitivity that time and time had distinguished him as an artist in a class of his own.

Geoff was getting hungry, so the two of us popped into the Escort and went searching for munchies. We stopped in a positively dreadful little all-night store that sold gas and hard liquor from the same counter...an irony not lost on us. My finely tuned "early warning radar" was sounding alarms; as at least three different sets of thugs cased us and the Escort, still chock full of electronic goodies. I donned my New York "don't mess with me" persona, and staked myself out at the Escort to defend it against all intruders. Fortunately, we were out of there quickly. I made a mental note to avoid late night stops in major cities for the rest of the trip.

When we returned, it was standing room only around the computer. There were cells all around us, and the possibility of severe weather right where we were! Still, we knew we had to rise early to catch Bill. Allan proved very generous with his resources, and offered to share his room with one of our team. I think it was Dave that took him up on it. As far as my lodging was concerned; the RV was in the lot, the computers were in the RV...case closed.

Our budget allowed us one room a night, and the others shared that one room while John and I stayed in the RV watching the radar till about 3:30 am, then woke at around 5 and continued to monitor. There was a temptation to stay, but we didn't want to be side tracked so early in the trip.

A word on the sleeping arrangements...though it may seem a bit odd, there was no awkwardness in our situation, at least from my point of view. I'm sure a few eyebrows were raised at the sight of one woman gypsying around the countryside with 6 men, but it was an atmosphere of camaraderie and adventure, more like camping out. I was never made to feel excluded from anything at all because I was 'the girl'. From day one, I was one of the guys. Should any other woman think of under going such a venture, my advice would be:

1. Find the best guys in the world to travel with
2. No bitching, whining or complaining. Take adversity on the chin.
3. Ask for no special considerations
4. Pull your own weight
5. Respect the rights and ideas of others
6. Suggest, don't dictate
7. Check your ego at the door
8. Don't assume that the "head" is unoccupied. Knock first. The "head" is always occupied.
9. Develop world-class bladder control

I have always felt that the most crippling form of sexual discrimination there is is for men to have to change what they're talking about and how

they're talking about it when a woman is present. If you can't take the heat, ladies, don't go into the kitchen. Besides, when it comes to rowdiness, I'm more a carrier than a victim.

Though we got some great lightning in Columbia, Missouri and the possibility of more storms, we had to keep on schedule, and our second day destination was Medicine Lodge, Kansas. First, though, we had to pick up our reporter, Bill, in Kansas City. Not wishing to take the RV into airport traffic, we waited at a roadside rest stop while Allan forayed into the airport to collect Bill.

We really didn't know what to expect of Bill. We had known that Allan would be bringing a reporter, but didn't know until just a week or two before the chase that it would be Bill. I had envisioned a rather aloof individual that would tire of us all quickly, and head home after a few days. Again, I couldn't have been more wrong. Bill is a delightfully inquisitive fellow, with a warmth and candor that made one relax their guard and want to talk with him. Over the next week, I chatted with Bill on not only chasing, but also parenting, schooling, politics, business and industry, and the general state of the Union. Bill devoured any and all the meteorology teaching we could supply him with at about the same rate as Geoff devoured mashed potatoes...which would be close to light speed.

Medicine Lodge provided us with some more lightning and storms to the south and northwest, but they were too far to follow. At that point, we were all a bit timid about asserting our opinions on where to go and what to do. We were beyond eager to chase, but still in awe of actually being in Tornado Alley, and reluctant to assert a move that might be a misstep and cause a day to be wasted. The non-median members of the team were starting to feel "under the gun" to provide severe weather for the press. John was diligent at the computer, and provided us with links to all the data we needed, but I for one was lacking the confidence to apply it. I buried myself in the budget book, quite content to let the others make all the plans.

I realize now that John, in his infinite wisdom, was staying silent only to allow the rest of us the time and space to step forward and do our thing. Dave Ott actually was the catalyst for our taking the step from storm watchers to storm chasers. In a late night conversation, Dave suggested to me that we all forget the self-imposed pressure and step up and apply our combined knowledge, experience, and instincts. He shared that John had tremendous confidence in me and my abilities, and felt that once I started applying what I knew (instead of dwelling on what I didn't know), that I would surprise myself. Determined not to betray John's confidence, I kicked myself in the butt, grabbed a spot at the computer, and started analyzing data. I don't know for sure, but I have a sneaking suspicion that Dave had a similar chat with Brian. At any rate, for the remainder of the trip, we were

constantly at the computer in brainstorming sessions that would have set John's lightning detector singing.

On the personal side, we were still getting to know each other. Dave was emerging as the voice of reason and logic, a rock solid presence that brought us back to earth from time to time and helped us keep our focus. It would be impossible for me to imagine Dave angry, or out of control. He loved being there, he loved chasing, but I was touched at his obvious dedication as a husband and father. He called home daily, and spoke of his wife and kids in the same wistful loving tones that he discussed tornadoes.

Brian emerged as the ideal chase partner; willing to fill any capacity and able to fill all capacities. Brian meted out tidbits of his immense knowledge in digestible parcels, never once making the rest of us feel stupid or awkward. At times, in our planning sessions, he reminded me of an older brother waiting patiently for his younger siblings to catch up.

Geoff lives off a steady diet of health food and adrenaline. As mentioned, he had been filming volcanoes just prior to hooking up with us. He has plans to fly an experimental ultra light aircraft from Auckland, New Zealand to London, England in the near future, as well as a jaunt into the eye of a hurricane. If I live to see Armageddon, I'll look for Geoff...he'll be in the front lines, filming. We discovered early on that when Geoff was ready to eat, the world stopped. Mealtimes with Geoff proved to be a scientific study unto themselves. Unfortunately, we were all too hysterical with laughter over Geoff's pronunciation of the menu items to properly document the phenomenal rate at which he made food disappear.

Bill and Allan had not worked together prior to the chase. I was determined not to make the same mistake with Bill as I had with Allan earlier, so from the start we treated him like one of the guys. Imagining Bill without a note pad is as incongruous as imagining Allan without a camera. They were ever present and always on the job. The pressure we had felt to produce nasty weather DID NOT come from them, but from what we anticipated was expected of us. Another misconception. They were non-tiring troopers, and in for the duration.

John. The real deal. Mr. Weather. My mentor and friend. John had certified me earlier in the year as a SKYWARN spotter, but only after months of independent study on my part. Certification is not something he hands out easily, and I have always felt extremely honored that my certification came through him. He's tough, and allows only three wrong on a six-page certification test he administers for SKYWARN. His contribution to the team was immeasurable. He brought with him about \$30,000 of uninsured electronic equipment that he put totally at our disposal. Some of us have knowledge. Some of us have experience. Some of us have instincts. John has it all.

On The Road Again

As we were preparing to leave Medicine Lodge, I started chatting with the owner of the little inn we were staying at. I had gotten the impression that the "locals" looked upon chasers as a plague worse than locusts. This proved to be untrue. People were fascinated with what we were doing, and supplied us with their own tales of storms and twisters. Ever the slave of an adoring public, within minutes, I was conducting tours of the mobile lab for not only the lodge owner, but a number of guests. We even scored a T-shirt sale and signed autographs! As I watched the team scramble for pens, I realized that the great T-shirt venture (at that point about \$352 in the red) had just paid for itself.

It was in this atmosphere of growing confidence and friendship that we made our plans for the day. In the absence of any interesting weather, we were to let our hair down, become tourists, and headed unashamedly to Wakita, Oklahoma.

Wakita is a tiny town that much of the movie "Twister" was filmed in. A word about "Twister". In chase circles, any reference to the movie is considered extremely uncool, and followed by countless snickers and disclaimers of how ridiculous and unrealistic it was. Our team is/was completely unconcerned with what is considered to be uncool in chase circles. We loved the movie. "Twister" depicted the best day a chaser could hope for. How many times can you watch a "best day?" I think John and Brian hold the official record at over 50 times. This was our prepared "press statement". Secretly, we ALL watched it many more times than even that.

If there is a heart to Tornado Alley, I feel Wakita would be it. It is a community in beautifully flat land, with visibility for miles and miles. Perfect chase country. We loved the people of Wakita, who openly discussed the filming and their own storm tales. One fellow had seen over 200 funnel clouds in his 20 years there. But none that day.

>From Wakita, we traveled northeast to Emporia. Though we were hitting storms every time (and patting ourselves on the back for that) tornadic activity did not occur. We were establishing a pattern though. Every place we went was hit by tornadoes the day AFTER we were there. The poor lodge owner in Medicine Lodge, who bragged that they'd never even seen a tornado, is currently rebuilding his facility and looking for his picnic table that just days before I had been writing at.

After a few days of chasing (or being chased) we found ourselves in Ponca City, Oklahoma. Once again, all the signals were right. The air was extremely unstable, the humidity was in the "righteous" range, but nothing

showed on radar but a few little cells moving in from the west. We had developed a system of making our convective outlooks independently of each other, and then comparing notes. This system assured us that we wouldn't influence each other's forecast. Our combined prognosis was to sit and wait.

After checking into a little motel in Ponca City, we sort of relaxed and braced ourselves for the horrors of "nice weather".

Shortly after 6pm, John and Brian were at the computers in the RV and noticed a small rain shower cruising along the western Kansas-Oklahoma border. At the time, it was nothing too impressive, but all signs were a "go" that something big could develop from it. I don't know who got the idea first, or if we all sort of got the idea together, but we decided to jump in the vehicles and head a few miles north into Kansas to see what those cells might develop into. We hadn't tried the GPS (global positioning system) yet, or the lightning sensor, and we were all getting a little bored and more than a little tired of doing everything right yet somehow missing the action. As we homed in on the developing cells, it was with a growing sense that we were about to hit pay dirt.

The Jackpot

As we entered the little town of Gueda Springs, Kansas, despite strict rules to the contrary, I found myself going about 5 miles over the speed limit. A young kid in a black T-shirt was standing roadside and gave me the universal signal to slow down, which I did immediately. Respect the locals!

We pulled over at an intersection just north of town. The instincts, knowledge and experience were red lining. Even a novice could take one look at that sky, and realize that all hell was about to break loose. The sky was varying shades of gray, black and green, with patterns of light and dark, swirling clouds dropping down and raising up. We pulled our convoy into the wind, and leaving the vehicles running, emerged to view the beast that we had been playing tag with for days; maybe even lifetimes. We had found ourselves a full-blown supercell storm. Actually, a few of them.

We were monitoring the radio, the scanner, and the computer. The sky darkened, and the wind increased. The lightning split the sky time and time again, cloud to cloud, cloud to ground. Behind the precipitation just a few miles to our north, there were "sisters", two tornadoes spiraling around each other. To our right, another tornado, also hidden by precipitation, but visible when backlit by the lightning. Wall clouds were still forming in the distance, and funnel clouds were starting down (they aren't tornadoes till they hit the ground). In the middle of this environmental maelstrom, seven people who had never seen even each other four days before, were laughing, crying, high fiving, hugging, and, slapping each other on the back. Somewhere, deep, deep inside me, the voice of a five-year-old child defiantly

whispered to the roaring tornadic wind, "Remember me?"

We were soon joined by a few local SKYWARN spotters. Tornadoes were being spotted all around us, even to the south (of course, in Wakita). Amazingly, after the initial awe made itself at home in our souls, we, totally without consulting or planning, pulled together like a team that had been together for years. One person charted a safe route out, another activated the amber lights in the mobile lab, another looked for an emergency shelter (in this case an irrigation ditch) just in case. We simply fell into the roles. And why not? This was a scene many of us had lived time and time again in our dreams. We were in the bear cage with the bear.

All the pictures and films in the world can't capture the beauty of a full-blown storm. We were hypnotized by it. When the sirens started to sound in the little town behind us, we got the first inkling that perhaps the situation was escalating beyond the point of safety. Shortly after, we made the unanimous decision to move off. As the weather intensified, we were told by one of the spotters to "Go to the shelter or leave the area... quickly". We followed his lead, and left quickly. John and I were in the Escort (called "Chase 1", Allan, Bill, and Geoff were in the Rav 4, and Dave and Brian were manning the mobile lab ("Chase Base").

By the time we got back to the town, we had overshot the public shelter, and were then committed to making an escape. The weather had intensified to the point that the rain was completely horizontal, the lightning was non-stop, and the wind was blowing branches down. I was driving the lead vehicle, and took a wrong turn (quite a feat when you're in a town with only two roads) and for a few brief moments, we were completely disoriented. This disorientation was compounded by the fact that the Internet connection had recently been lost, and the GPS was not on. We were completely blind. Dave, in the RV, got the bearings (God bless pilots), and relayed them to me over our two-way radio. John, who as mentioned, had more field experience than all of us put together, merely said, "This is not good. This is bad. We're near the core." A few moments later, he said in no uncertain terms "We have to get the hell out of here. Punch it!" I didn't have to be told twice. I got on the two-way and announced, "Hey guys, PUNCH IT!"

Busted

A pedal to the metal acceleration in an overloaded Ford Escort means that you're instantaneously catapulted to the heart stopping speed of 43 miles an hour within seconds. There we were in Gueda Springs, Kansas, with the entire population in the public shelter, the town in a state of emergency, I find the one cop in town, and he's got his radar on. We're fleeing a tornado that is perhaps less than 2 miles behind us and closing, and I got pulled over. The Rav and the RV proceeded down the road, while I was being cited

for speeding.

The cop looked no more than 16 years old. When he said that he had warned me earlier (remember the person in the black T-shirt?) and therefore had to now ticket me, I was in a state of shock. The irony that one of the locals had advised us to leave the area quickly, and two miles down the road is a cop with a radar gun was not lost on me. Unfortunately, I couldn't put my hands on my license immediately. Not knowing how far the young man would take this, I respectfully asked, "Do you have any idea what's about to happen here?" He answered that he did, and therefore couldn't wait any longer for me to produce my license or he'd be hit by lightning. I was to come back after the storm passed and "turn myself in." He then left the area quickly. Never did he offer to lead us to the shelter or see us to safety.

When we got on the road again, we were separated from the rest. Before, my only concern had been for the team and getting us as a unit to safety. Now my feelings had turned to the issue of personal survival. Just about the time that I thought the world was going to end, the two-way crackled to life, and I heard Dave's calming tones inform me that they were just ahead, and would wait for us. He talked us in over the next 10 minutes and when I finally saw the lights of Chase Base ahead, I entertained the notion that we just might survive this.

We got back to the motel in one piece, like returning victorious warriors. These particular warriors were soaked to the skin, dirty, hungry, and on top of the world. We had done it! We had charted and found our own personal storm system. Other than the slight overstaying or our welcome, we had done it right! We had it all on film, even rare footage of a reverse rotating wall cloud. We had made it back to Ponca City safely. And about 10 minutes after we got there, the sirens went off and two tornadoes were descending on Ponca City.

Again, we fell into our roles. We monitored, we watched. We went door to door in the motel, advising people as to what to do (seek shelter in the innermost room, away from glass, and covered with pillows.) These twisters scooted by to the south of town though, and left Ponca City unscathed.

A few days later, we went to Lamont, Oklahoma, where the biggest storm in the system we were tracking hit. Our tornadoes ultimately proved to be mild, but the one in Lamont, some 30 miles from Gueda Springs, was an F3, and caused unbelievable damage. Many houses were destroyed completely. We went not as gawkers, but as researchers. We were respectful and as non-obtrusive as possible, talked to many of the people and offered our support and what empty words of comfort we could muster. We had visited the National Severe Storms Laboratory in Norman, Oklahoma where in addition to being told quite graphically what happens to RVs caught in tornadoes, the NWS had asked us to

chart the damage path of the Lamont tornado with our GPS, which we did. We left Lamont reflecting on just what a dangerous playmate we had dedicated ourselves to pursuing.

We chased storms the rest of the week, though nothing came close to the night in Gueda Springs. We went into Texas at one point, and though supercells imminent, the terrain was inappropriate for chasing (poor and limited visibility) and with a maturity we didn't know we possessed, decided to let them happen without us. We returned to Kansas and caught some great storms, but no tornadoes. At one point, I think it was Allan that asked me if my expectations were met. My expectations were met the first day at the airport. All the rest was gravy. In retrospect, its not enough to love storms; you have to love chasing. If nothing more had happened than just being there, learning, gathering data, planning, plotting and chasing, it would have been enough. That we gelled as a team and emerged as life long friends was a miracle.

The Birth of M.E.S.O.

And now what? Well, we've formed an organization named M.E.S.O. (Multi-community Environmental Storm Organization.) It's a non-profit organization dedicated to research, public safety, and public education and awareness. A number of us are planning to visit local schools with our message. We are currently pursuing a new mobile lab, one that we will own as a group. It'll be safer than the RV, and serve as a prototype for others like it. To get it running as it should, we'll need sponsors which we hope will be forthcoming. Up till now, we've been entirely self funded. We feel that if we can show others that such a mobile lab can be and was a success in the field, various municipalities will adopt a similar system for monitoring severe weather and directing their spotters. An interesting sideline is that our story is being published in papers across the country, and Life magazine is looking at it as well. People, for whatever reason, have fallen in love with our story. Its about adventure, its about science, its about safety; but more over, its about making your dreams come true. Not hoping they come true, or wishing they come true, but pursuing them with tenacity that never even entertains the possibility that "it can't happen".

Its back to the books for me. I have learned much, but it's only a drop in the bucket. My radar work in "the Alley" has earned me my advanced certification with SKYWARN, which means I'm a pretty good spotter, an up and coming chaser, but light years from being a meteorologist. Along the way, I'm sharing my knowledge with my kids. My son Josh says, "Mom, you lived your own movie!". My daughter Holly recently joined me on a mini chase up Route 9 in Fishkill to catch a lightning show. She shows great potential as a navigator! My husband Randy is proud of me, and has resigned himself to having a loving dutiful wife for 50 out of 52 weeks a year. The other two

weeks? You can find me in Kansas with Bender, Mackley, McNoldy, Detrich, Ott, and Steigerwald, same time, same station.