



# Taking Teamwork to a New Level

BY THOMAS GATELY

Right of way professionals are known for their versatility. They analyze situations quickly, draw on their experiences and apply creative problem-solving to whatever challenges they may face. But when it comes to dangerous storms, fire or other peril, even the most seasoned professionals might find themselves in over their heads.

## **New Office Brings New Surprises**

Last fall, my team at Universal Field Services began right of way acquisition operations on some new 345kV transmission line projects in western Oklahoma. We had recently set up a new project office in a nice brick building in Woodward, OK and went about the usual tasks involved with commencing a project. Our team has a good spirit and everyone is willing to share their ideas and experience. Our engineering and client partners are also an important part of that team.

In April, a sudden change of weather proved to be a life-changing event. The weather channel had been announcing warnings of the multiple tornado outbreak and the meteorologists predicted it to hit on Saturday, April 14<sup>th</sup> across the Midwest.

When one of our neighbors came to warn us about what to expect and instructed us to go to the storm shelter in his backyard if the sirens went off in Woodward, the whole situation sounded completely foreign. After all, I am from Maryland. Sure, I have lived through hurricanes, but they give plenty of advance notice before they arrive. Not the case with tornadoes. Annabelle is from Louisiana so her experience with a tornado threat was also limited. We had both seen them covered on the news, but the pure magnitude of such an event was not something either one of us could relate to on a personal level.

It seemed like a typical Saturday until around 2:00 p.m. when the clouds began to look ominous. Our weather radio was giving new updates every five minutes, and we heard that the weather in several towns 20 to 30 miles west was getting very active. Two hours later, the radio announced the first tornado watch for Woodward County. Suddenly, the town sirens went off, and a co-worker called to say he was heading for the town's public shelter across town and suggested we do the same. We didn't have time, so we raced to the neighbor's shelter, as they suggested. We hammered on their front door, but no answer. The door was unlocked, so we ran in calling their names, but



The Universal Field Services Office in Woodward, Oklahoma was completely destroyed by the tornado.

there was still no answer. We went into their backyard where we found them climbing down into the cellar. We all got in together, and for the time being, we felt safe.

We were in the storm shelter for about 30 minutes listening to the local weather station explain how the tornado was on the ground and heading straight toward downtown Woodward. As it veered off into the countryside, it sounded like we would be in the clear. The storms were pushing east and out of the area, so the worst seemed to be over. Another storm was forecast for midnight in our area, but it wasn't perceived to be a serious threat.

Then, about 10:00 p.m., a new storm developed about 100 miles west of us, and it was moving closer. According to the radar maps, it was an elongated storm front that stretched 150 miles, and the core was getting red and purple, which translated to very violent. We were initially concerned, but the TV weather guys said the biggest threat would likely be in the form of some large



The hurricane's path of destruction stretched for miles.

hail and heavy winds. We texted the neighbors and agreed that if the sirens went off again, we would see them back again in the storm shelter.

As midnight grew near, the storm became stronger as it approached. The weather radio was buzzing and things started to get very chaotic. I yelled to Annabelle, "It's heading to Woodward! Get your stuff - we need to go now!" We had already put our keys, wallets, cell phones, passports, and a few other valuables in a plastic bag so that if things changed quickly, we would be ready to go. When Annabelle advised me that the sirens hadn't gone off, I said, "We can't wait for the sirens. Let's go!"

Suddenly, the power went out, and we heard some hail and a sound I will never forget. It sounded like a train was racing toward us, only it wasn't a train. It was a wobbling sound that's hard to explain. I screamed out, "We don't have time. Let's get in the closet now!" I had barely shut the closet doors when I heard what sounded like a loud machine gun. It lasted around 10 seconds, and then there was complete silence. I remember wondering if we were dead.

In a continuing state of panic, we made our way outside and found what looked like a war zone. Debris was everywhere, and lightning flashes were bursting through the darkness. Then the rain came pouring down. Stricken with terror, we sprinted for the neighbor's storm shelter. We banged on the storm shelter door where our neighbors were huddled. They let us in, and we all just sat there staring at each other, shaking, not knowing what devastation awaited us. After what seemed like an eternity, we climbed out to see what had happened.

We discovered that the sirens never went off because they had lost power. Six people died and over 30 were admitted to the hospital. Our project office not far away was totally destroyed. Our entire team was fortunate that no one was killed or injured. We rallied to aid one another and began that next morning to implement a recovery plan to get back on track. Within a week, we had the files reorganized and were back to making landowner contacts. However, we are all still recovering in other ways.

Everyone at Universal is grateful that our staff is doing so well after experiencing such a life-changing event. Our work as a professional team continues with dedication and resourcefulness and a new sense of teamwork for which we are very thankful.

### **Thomas (Tom) J. Gately**

*As a Senior Right of Way Agent for Universal Field Services, Inc., Tom has delivered right of way acquisition services on electric transmission projects and various other projects for over 12 years. While he is currently working in the Woodward, Oklahoma office, Tom maintains his IRWA membership in Bayou Chapter 43 in Louisiana.*

