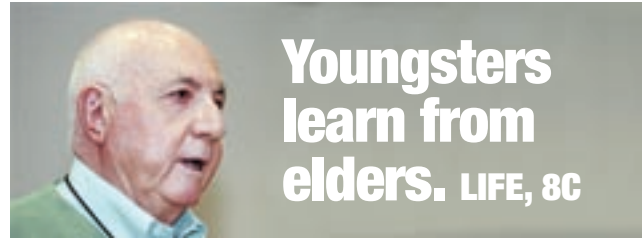


BRACKET MANIA: Print the NCAA tournament brackets at gainesvilletimes.com



Also: Palm Sunday celebration goes wild at one church. LOCAL, 1C

MONDAY
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IN SPORTS

SEC goes to the Dawgs!



Georgia wins four games in three days, completing an improbable run to the SEC title and an automatic berth in the NCAA tournament. They'll face Xavier in the first round Thursday. **Coverage, 1B**

THE ATLANTA TORNADO

Gainesville couple at epicenter of storms



For The Times
Jena Payne of Murrayville and an unidentified man take shelter in the stairwell of the CNN center in Atlanta Friday night after a tornado ripped through downtown.

BY JESSICA JORDAN
jjordan@gainesvilletimes.com

Although no tornadoes reportedly touched down in Hall County Saturday, tornado devastation did hit home for several Hall County residents who were in downtown Atlanta Friday night when a tornado mangled the CNN Center.

The EF-2 tornado registered winds near 130 mph, according to the National Weather Service. The tornado first touched down near the intersection of Simpson and Burbank streets at 9:38 p.m. and traveled six miles east over the Georgia World Congress Center, the Georgia Dome, the CNN Center and Omni Hotel Complex and Philips Arena, where an NBA basketball game was under way.

At its maximum strength, the tornado roared through downtown Atlanta, spanning 200 yards. Jennifer Cochran was attending a dental conference at the CNN Center Omni Hotel with her husband, Sean Cochran, a dentist with Cleveland Family Dental, when downtown Atlanta was jolted by its first ever tornado.

"I'm still shaken," Jennifer said. "We were eat-

gainesvilletimes.com: See more photos of the Cochrans' trip to Atlanta, including damage to their room at the Omni Hotel. Go to gainesvilletimes.com/cochran. Also, hear Jennifer Cochran describe the event.

■ **Tornado damage to Atlanta may be bad for business conventions. Local, 1C**

■ **Storms in Savannah mean lights out for St. Patrick's Day partygoers. Local, 1C**

ing dinner at a restaurant, Ray's in the City, one block north of the Westin, when the tornado came through."

Jennifer said she and her husband were enjoying their dinner at a table five feet from a window at the restaurant when howling winds quieted dining patrons at about 9:45 p.m. Friday.

"A hush fell over the restaurant. We all just kind of watched as everything just rolled down the street," Jennifer said. "Everything rolled down

■ Please see **COUPLE**, Page 3A

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

Ten years after the North Hall tornado

Are we better prepared today?

March 20, 1998: The waiting room at Northeast Georgia Medical Center shortly after the tornado struck.



Times file photo

1998 tornado led to better understanding, better preparedness

BY STEPHEN GURR
sgurr@gainesvilletimes.com

It came without warning.

The deadly tornado that claimed 12 lives on March 20, 1998, was undetected and unexpected when it touched down in North Hall, the result of weaknesses in a Doppler radar system, the early morning hour it struck and a weather phenomenon that was at the time on the edge of scientific understanding.

Ten years later, officials say, conditions that spawn similar tornadoes might be spotted by forecasters, prompting a tornado watch or warning that could save lives. Better coordination between emergency management officials and forecasters, scientific advances and a push for more citizen preparedness have combined to create a more reliable early warning system, officials said.



gainesvilletimes.com: Would you recognize the sound of a tornado siren? Go to our Web site and listen to one.

"I think on all fronts, from the research side on tornadoes to the warning process, we've made huge strides in the last decade," said Kevin Kloesel, a tornado expert and associate dean at the College of Atmospheric and Geographic Sciences at the University of Oklahoma.

"We're far better prepared than we were in 1998," said David Kimbrell, Emergency Management Agency director for Hall County, which has undertaken an extensive storm preparedness campaign that includes outdoor warning sirens, public education and a push for distributing weather alert radios. Kimbrell added, "We never want to say that we are 100 percent prepared."

Officials say the storm that produced the Hall County tornado of 1998 came in "under the radar," manifesting from what scientists call a "Quasi-Linear Convective System." Most tornadoes don't form in that manner, but instead are spawned from supercell thunderstorms, the conditions of which are easier for forecasters to spot, said Steven Nelson,

MORE COVERAGE, INSIDE AND ONLINE

A frustrating day

Two Hall firefighters were among the first on the scene.

PAGE 4A

A helping hand

The tornado was the largest local disaster the local Red Cross has ever handled.

PAGE 4A

gainesvilletimes.com:

Visit our special multimedia section to hear first-person accounts of the storm.

Hospital staff sprang to action even before any patients arrived

BY DEBBIE GILBERT
dgilbert@gainesvilletimes.com

For the staff at Northeast Georgia Medical Center, the tornado of 1998 will always be remembered with great pride in how they were able to handle the situation, but also with great sadness at the human tragedy they encountered.

"It was one of the most memorable things that I've ever been involved in," said Shannon Garner, who was the hospital's nursing supervisor at the time.

"I still cry sometimes when I try to talk about it. And I dream about tornadoes all the time. I'm always OK in my dreams and always trying to gather people up to get to safety. Sometimes it's my own

gainesvilletimes.com: Emergency physician Dr. Gary Kempler and ER manager Kay Smith recall how Northeast Georgia Medical Center handled the influx of tornado victims.

family. Sometimes it's people I don't even know."

Garner was on her way to attend a workshop at the Georgia Mountains Center that morning, but when she heard radio reports about the storm's impact, she called a co-worker and asked if she should go straight to the hospital.

"All she could say was, 'It's bad, it's really bad.

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Lottery **2A** World **3A**

WEATHER 2A

High **66** Low **43**

Lake Lanier level: **1,055.33 feet**
Up 0.49 feet in 24 hours

DEATHS 2C

J.B. Allison, 57
James Leon Evans, 79
John Edward "Ed" Satterfield, 85

James Alexander Sprayberry, 79
Dorothy "Dottie" V. Walden, 64

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