

# Opinion



## State Viewpoint

### Kansas City ranks 7th in teen traffic fatalities

The Kansas City Star

Kansas City ranked seventh among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas for traffic fatalities involving drivers 15 to 19 years old, according to a study by Allstate Insurance Co.

That number, drawing on data from 2000 to 2006, should be a concern for lawmakers and police agencies.

Future studies will likely show an improvement on the Missouri side of the region. New restrictions for teenage drivers took effect at the start of 2007. Since then state officials have reported a significant drop in fatalities involving drivers younger than 21.

The Kansas Legislature, unfortunately, continues to drag its feet on legislation that would toughen up the state's notoriously lenient driving laws. Yet numerous studies show that restrictions on teenage drivers save lives.

Kansas is one of the few states that issue driving permits to 14-year-olds. ...

The Allstate data show that 7 percent of teenagers killed in traffic accidents in Kansas involved 15-year-old drivers. Only five states had a higher fatality rate involving 15-year-olds. Most states wisely make 16 the minimum age for unsupervised driving.

The study showed that excessive speed was involved in nearly half the fatal crashes involving teenagers in the Kansas City region. Law enforcement agencies should devote adequate resources to enforcing speed limits.

In the Kansas City area, half of the teens killed in car crashes in the period covered by the study weren't wearing seat belts.

Overall statewide data for Missouri and Kansas is even starker. In both states, 70 percent of traffic deaths involved persons not wearing seat belts.

Several area police departments are currently participating in the "Click It or Ticket" campaign. The focus of the national effort this year is to encourage youthful drivers to buckle up.

That's a worthwhile project. Making area roads and highways safer for teenage drivers and others should be at the top of everyone's priority list.

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## STRONGER THAN MOTHER NATURE ... HUMAN NATURE



### A stormy experience

Last week was one of the wildest weeks I've had in a long time.

Early on Thursday I had talked to one of the meteorologists at the National Weather Service office in Goodland for a story I'd been working on and we talked about a pending thunderstorm. A thunderstorm which had the potential of producing tornados. I knew bad weather was in the forecast, but I didn't know I'd be reliving Tornado Alley 101.

Having ridden out a tornado in Lawton, Okla. in the late 1970s, I had no clue I'd be driving right in front of the tornado which crossed U.S. Highway 24 on Thursday.

I had been in Colby on a personal errand and when it was time to drive home I called my husband to check on conditions in Hoxie. I now know the calm, but blustery conditions he told me about, was the calm before the storm.

Heading east I noticed dark clouds building in front of me, but I also saw people I knew heading west. I thought to myself, 'Well, if they are heading west they must not be too concerned about bad weather so I'll push on.'

Was I ever wrong.

About a mile past Menlo, there was a lady standing just off the shoulder of the westbound lane of traffic flagging me down. I slowed down and came to an almost stop but still rolling to hear her ask whether I had a tow rope. Looking north past her I could see several vehicles equipped with storm chasing equipment and one of the pickups' rear ends was off in the ditch. Having no tow rope, I proceeded east.

Having lived in northwest Kansas for 30 years and having been on many of the back roads either as a driver or passenger, I know there are roads one should just use common sense and avoid.

While I'm all in favor of having storm chasers learn about weather conditions, I believe they should scope out the area and talk to locals about which roads to avoid. For their own protection, and that of those who may have to rescue them.

I'm sure I was not the only person flagged down and asked for a tow rope. While I could not offer the crew help, I'm sure they will learn from the experience.

Anyway, back to the race to Hoxie. As I continued east, at the point of being about four



**Jan Katz Ackerman**

#### • From Where I stand

miles west of Hoxie I came up behind a mini van driving about 40 miles per hour. I waited to clear a no passing zone and beat it around the van and continued on east.

A driving rain forced me to realize that I was just ahead of the eye of a tornado. Looking to the south I could not see any rotation, but having grown up in southwestern Kansas I was all too familiar with the routine. A driving rain, the train-like sound of winds that ripped things apart like none other, then the eerie quiet aftermath.

I raced into town and got to the point my husband had designated as the place to meet up with him, parked my car and jumped into his pickup.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "Out of town," he said. "It's four miles west."

He didn't have to tell me it was four miles west, I'd just been there.

As we headed east I looked in the side mirror of the pickup and saw the tornado cross the highway where I had just been driving. We waited about three minutes, turned around and headed back to Hoxie. There, out our windshield, we could see a tornado making its way north toward Selden.

I had my husband let me out of the pickup about one-quarter mile north of Hoxie so I could stop and take photos and visit with a group of storm chasers from Texas. Sure enough, data recorded on the lead storm chaser's computer confirmed the tornado to be an F3 about one-half mile at its bottom.

I was asked whether I wanted to accompany the group north to continue following the tornado. I said in most instances I would have accepted the offer, but due to the fact I'm marrying off my only daughter in eight weeks I think the bride would prefer I stay a safer distance from the "Big Girl."

That was Thursday.

On Friday, I had to drive to Russell on business. That was another wild day.

While the business of the day went well, the return trip was equally as eerie as that of Thursday.

I was driving west on Interstate 70 when the radio anchor broke into the song I was listening to with a report from the National Weather Service in Goodland. I was driving right into the path of a thunderstorm which had produced a tornado near Healey.

I drove for about five minutes and the radio screamed out another alert. A tornado was scheduled to hit Quinter at 4:50 p.m. I maintained my speed and passed Quinter at 4:35 p.m. and race home to safety.

The traffic on I-70 was very heavy due to the Memorial Day weekend holiday and while I got off the interstate safely, I wondered about the many other folks heading to and fro on it.

About 10 miles south of Hoxie I noticed a single motorcyclist who had pulled off K-23 to an intersection's blacktop.

I pulled over the the opposite side of the intersection, rolled down my window and motioned for the rider to come toward me. He asked whether conditions on the interstate were worsening, to which I replied he needed to return to Hoxie or he'd be heading directly into the path of a tornado.

The rider followed my advice and returned to safety to wait out the storm in Hoxie.

Whew, I can't imagine the trauma he would have had if he had headed on south and toward Quinter. While I have not seen the damage the storm caused in Quinter, I do know both Thursday and Friday strengthened my respect for Mother Nature.

I'm not afraid of tornados, but I do respect their power. It goes back to my Christian faith, where God tells us several hundred times in the Bible to "fear not." Fear not and know that He is God. He created everything, even tornados, and if we respect His and their power we will be on the right track.

That's not to say bad things won't happen to us, like the tornados which struck 30 homes, plus numerous farmsteads, in Sheridan and Gove Counties on Thursday and Friday. But even during bad times, God is in control.

## Kansas governor declares disaster

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius signed a State of Disaster Emergency declaration today for 59 Kansas counties impacted by the severe thunderstorms, hail, lightning, tornadoes, high winds and flooding that begin May 22 and is continuing.

Included in the declaration were Decatur, Logan, Rawlins, Sheridan, Sherman, Thomas, Trego, and Wallace. The declaration activates the disaster response and recovery portions of the Kansas Response Plan.

#### Storm-related deaths

Gary and Kimberly Whitlow of Rocky Ford, Colo., were found in a car in a field 13 miles east of Pratt on Saturday, May 24. Their car was picked up by a tornado on Friday evening and thrown into a wheat field approximately 150 yards north of a rest area on U.S. Highway 54.

A third death has been attributed to the storm system. An investigation is being con-

ducted into a fourth death that may be storm-related. Osage County sheriff's officers were called to Osage County Lake on Saturday, May 24, where they found four people with possible lightning-related injuries. They were transported to Overland Park Regional Medical Center where one victim, Nathan Eugene Sullivan, 20, died of his injuries.

An autopsy by the Shawnee County coroner confirmed lightning as the cause of death. The other three had injuries described as non-life threatening. In Reno County, a 28-year-old man was killed in a one-car accident on a flooded roadway.

#### Damage estimates

Tentative damage estimates related to the storm have been placed in excess of \$8 million for all affected areas. Midwest Energy alone has damage estimates of approximately \$5.25 million in 10 counties where it operates. Some local areas included Gove County

where Western Electric County Rural Electric Cooperative had about \$225,000 in damages and Ninnescah REC has about \$4 million in damages in Pratt County.

Decatur County officials estimate about \$2.5 million damages to private property; it is unknown how much of that is uninsured. They are still assessing damage to roads and other infrastructure. Norton County officials report about \$500,000 in damages to roads and an unknown value on private property damages.

In Sheridan County some communication systems repeaters are out of commission due to possible lightning strikes.

Four homes were listed as destroyed, four sustained major damage and one had minor damage.

Gove County officials say that there is about \$4 million in damages to private property, including 12 to 13 homes damaged by tornadoes. It is unknown how much of that is insured.

### Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

