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A growing army of 'weather nerds'

Spotters: Lovers of wind and rain devote their mania to public service.

By Laura Barnhardt
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When weather forecasters warn of an approaching storm, Christine Iacarino stays glued to the television and the Internet.

A prediction of snowfall overnight? She says it's all she can do to get to sleep.

"I think it's the drama," says Iacarino, a social worker from the Fullerton area of Baltimore County. "And I like to be informed about what's coming my way."

Iacarino says she endured plenty of teasing from her husband about being such a "weather nerd" that she would spend a Wednesday evening in a government building's cafeteria, watching slides of cloud formations and video clips of tornadoes. But she emerged last week from the 2 1/2 -hour session a decal-displaying "weather spotter" who will, when conditions warrant, call in hail storms and wind damage, flash floods and snow accumulations.

For all the satellites, Doppler radar systems and other high-tech instruments used to predict stormy weather and measure its effects, the National Weather Service still counts on people like Iacarino who want to help warn others about what's in store for them.

Last Wednesday night in Towson, about 80 people attended a Skywarn Weather Spotters class conducted by a weather service meteorologist - nearly doubling the number of spotters in the county.

There are about 20,000 registered weather spotters across the country, including about 2,000 in the Delaware-Maryland-Virginia area, according to the National Weather Service.

Among them is H. George Jackson Jr., who has been collecting weather data for years and giving reports from his home in the Caroline County crossroads of American Corner - "home," he says, "of the best turnips in the world." Jackson says he checks his digital equipment for accuracy with a "good old-fashioned thermometer, the kind with the red stuff inside."

He says it's hard to pinpoint what it is about the weather that he finds so fascinating.

"How do you explain a hobby?" he says. "I just love watching weather."

The National Weather Service, which has long received weather information from amateur radio

operators, formalized its training of citizens in 1990. The service began offering more classes, often sponsored by local government.

Baltimore County has hosted a weather spotters' course every few years since the mid-1990s. A class two years ago drew about 25 people. But officials at the county Office of Emergency Management say they might try to offer it more frequently after seeing the interest it generated this week.

Organizers had to move Wednesday night's class from a conference room in the public safety headquarters in Towson to the larger cafeteria.

During the class, David R. Manning, warning coordination meteorologist in the Baltimore-Washington forecast office of the National Weather Service in Sterling, Va., talks about updrafts, wall clouds and funnel spotting as part of his slide presentation. He shows clips of tornadoes and floods.

Some questions from the audience are technical, about the physics at play in a storm, for example. Others want to know what happens to weather balloons when they pop. (If it's a National Weather Service balloon, the instruments inside float down on a parachute and then biodegrade, although they have been mistaken for UFOs more than once, Manning says.)

Manning also covers when weather spotters should call the National Service: to report hail bigger than the size of peas, flooding or wind damage, ice glazing on road surfaces or measurements of significant rain or snow. "Significant" is considered an inch of rain, 4 inches of snow and then every 2 inches above that, he says. Spotters can submit their observations by e-mail, or by phone or ham radio.

Volunteers need only a ruler, although rain and wind gauges are a plus, Manning says.

"The observation of people on the ground can help fill in the blanks left by technology and the limitations of science," he says.

Radar can show the areas where precipitation is the heaviest. But it doesn't show whether it's a combination of rain and snow or sleet, for example. And satellites and automated observation stations and gauges don't show wind damage and can't measure snow or ice depth, Manning says.

Having residents trained to spot the warning signs of bad weather, such as a forming funnel cloud, also is helpful to emergency officials, says Elise Armacost, a county Fire Department spokeswoman.

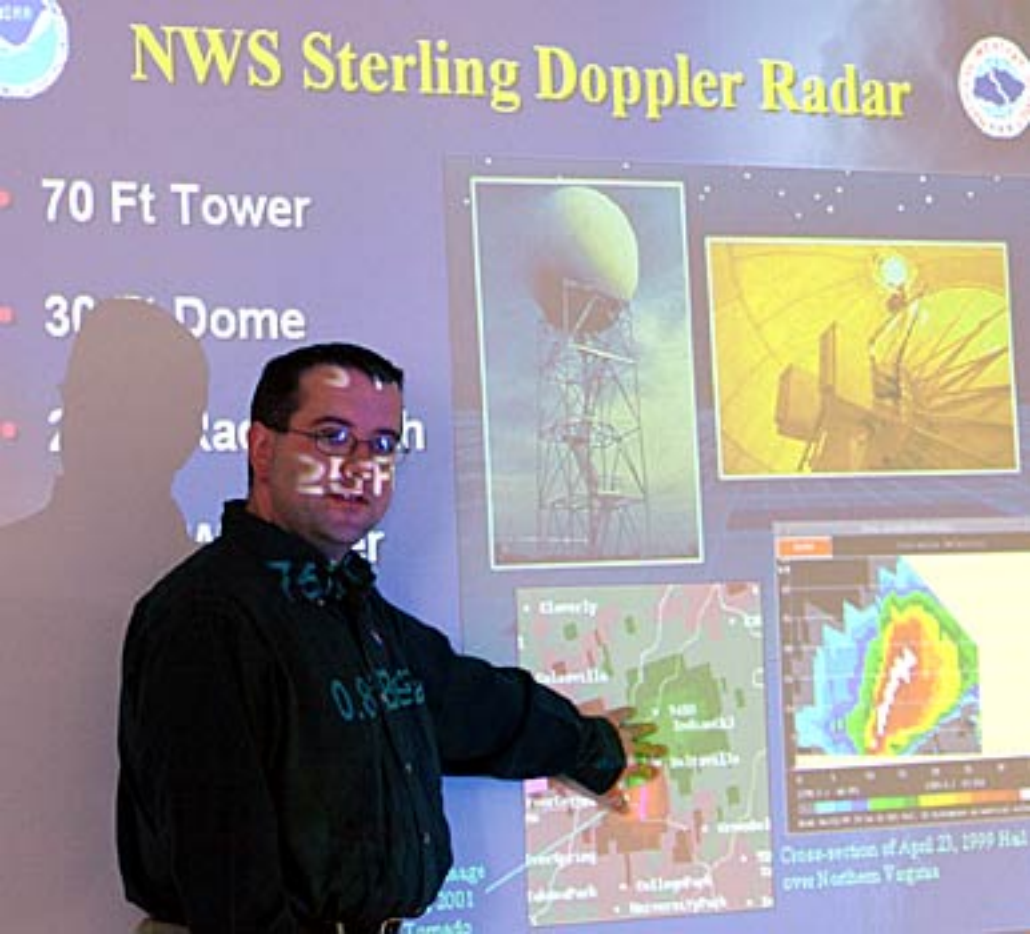
"We have an interest in having a network of citizens helping to report signs of severe weather ... so that we can get out warnings as quickly as possible," she says.

The volunteers willing to help in this effort include an off-duty police officer who says he'd like one day to take a "storm-chasing" vacation. A teacher from Overlea attending this week's session acknowledges that he has stayed up nearly all night to see whether a forecast for a storm turned out to be accurate. And a self-described meteorologist "wannabe" from Hunt Valley says she has been fascinated by weather since childhood.

Steve Pedri, a Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. repairman attending the training session with his 12-year-old son, Dominic, says they have at their Perry Hall home a weather instrument that measures "the whole nine yards," including wind chill and dew point. Dominic turns on the Weather Channel (dismissed by some as a cable-TV folly two decades ago but now, according to its parent company, reaching 87 million households) even before he checks out ESPN in the morning.

They track storms on the Internet and watch for darkening skies and swirling clouds.

Steve Pedri says he is amazed how quickly weather can change. And though he stresses that he hates to see "bad things happen" as a result, he says, "I like severe weather."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