

Frozen

Remembering the Light Dusting That Stunned the City

Written by Lindsey Osborne

Anyone who was there has a story. I've told my story a thousand times: to my rheumatologist, at small group, to that one lady who was humming "Let It Snow" in Publix last year. Even the people with a nonstory have a story about what it felt like to watch it happen from the comfort and warmth of their homes. If you lived through Snowpocalypse, you lived to tell the story.

It was a Tuesday morning in late January of 2014. It had been much colder than usual that winter—I remember joking that I needed a sign that read, "I didn't gain five pounds. I'm just wearing three pairs of pants." And of course, we all wanted snow. That morning, I put on my socks with snowflakes on them as a hopeful nod to the sky. What followed for me was fairly milktoast, given what many of my coworkers and friends went through. I left work in the nick of time, around 10:30 that morning, as the snow began to stick. It took me around four hours to get home to Trussville, but I made it safe and sound, if a bit shaken by the driving conditions. I didn't go back to work in Southside for three more days.

Many others, including some of my coworkers, weren't so lucky. Several left just a few minutes after I did but found they couldn't make it to the Interstate and had to turn around. A number of B-Metro employees holed up in the office that night, sharing sandwiches from the Five Points Firehouse Subs. Joni Ayers, a marketing specialist at B-Metro, was able to leave—but she never did make it home.

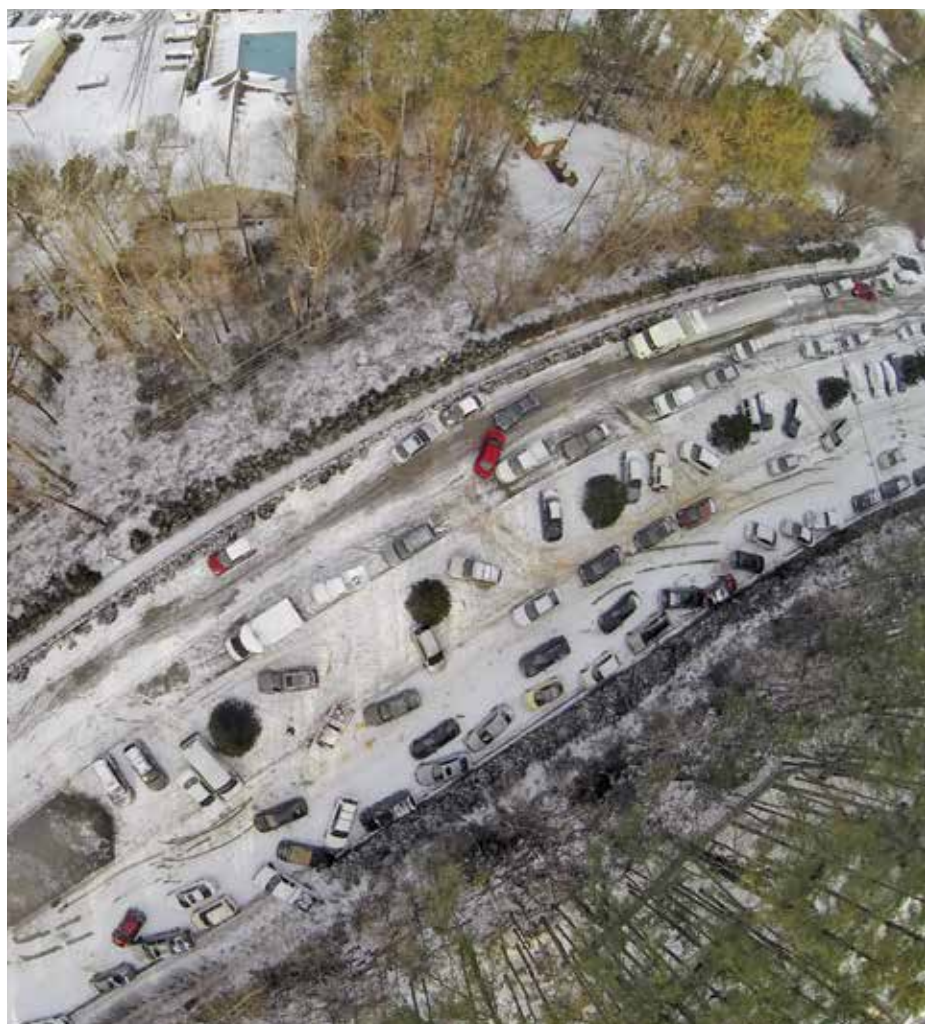


After nearly six hours on Highway 280 (and stopping at Academy Sports to buy weather-appropriate clothing in case she needed to walk), she realized it was likely she wasn't going to be able to pick up her daughter (who was eventually retrieved by a friend) or make it home. "When I finally made it to Lee Branch, I had a decision to make. Would I try to drive my SUV up Double Oak Mountain, even though I could see abandoned cars all along way, and knew I had to traverse the other side of the mountain down into my neighborhood? Should I walk up the mountain and down the other side to my house? (I was not dressed for that and I was worried about falling or being hit by an out of control car.) Or would I just go sit in the lobby at the Hampton Inn [which had opened its doors to those stuck in the snow]?" Ayers remembers. "I made my way to the Hampton Inn lobby. The lobby was full of snow refugees. Young, old, families, singles. We could put our name on a list hoping a room would come open. I was on page four. I then found a table with electronic charging ports surrounded by other ladies (the moms' table). Being a talkative person, especially when I'm nervous, I went over and made some friends. Jennifer had been out on a quick errand to Pastry Arts to get her husband Baby Bites for his birthday. Melissa was trying to get to the Montessori school to pick up her preschooler, who had multiple food allergies. Brittany had her 10-month-old little girl with her. Another mom was trying to get to her autistic teen at Chelsea High School. And many, many more."

Across town, someone else was facing a similar predicament: How should I get to where I need to go? Dr. Zenko Hrynkiw, a neurosurgeon at Trinity Medical Center, had been in surgery all morning at Brookwood Hospital. When he got a phone call that he was needed for a patient across town at Trinity, he told them he'd soon be on his way. He didn't even realize that snow had begun to fall. "I really don't watch the news much or pay attention to the radio. I was doing surgery at Brookwood, and getting some calls—there was a patient in the emergency room over at Trinity. They sent me a picture of the CAT scan and I realized he had a major bleed in his head. I said, 'Get him ready and I'll leave as soon as I'm done,'" he remembers. "I start leaving the



Photos on this spread show aerial views of the snow and chaos.
Photos by Kevin Henderson/SkyBama.com







This Page: Dr. Zenko Hrynkiw
 Right: Kelly Garner
 Photos by Beau Gustafson

hospital and people are all standing in the hallway, looking outside the window. And I noticed then that it was really snowing.”

Hrynkiw still didn’t understand the scope of what was happening, but what he did know was that if he didn’t get to Trinity to operate, his patient, who at that point had about a 5 percent chance of survival, would die. So he went outside and hopped in his car, figuring it was just a little snow—but he didn’t even make it out of the parking lot. “There were cars everywhere; I couldn’t go forward and I couldn’t go backward,” he says. “Eventually, I had to abandon my car and hope they wouldn’t tow it.” Armed

with a sense of urgency and a good attitude and wearing his scrubs and surgery clogs, Hrynkiw set out to walk to Trinity, some six miles away.

Not too far away, Matt Kerlin, vice president for Spiritual Life and university minister at Samford University, was facing similar issues at Samford. By the time he was leaving, the reality of the situation had set in, and Kerlin was met with the chaos on Lakeshore Drive. “Lakeshore was total gridlock. People were abandoning their cars left and right. It was like a scene out of *The Walking Dead*,” Kerlin says. “We walked down Lakeshore to

Columbiana, where cars were sliding down the hill one after the other, crashing into one another so that there were dozens of cars just in a pile at the bottom of Columbiana—trashed luxury sedans alongside old beaten down clunkers. We walked up Columbiana (the lane was empty and abandoned since no cars were trying to go up) and watched cars sliding down the other lane with terrified drivers white-knuckling their steering wheels, running off into the ditch or doing 360s. Those that made it to the bottom just crashed into everyone else, like some sort of sadistic theme park ride.” It was a scene repeated across the city, one that many of us saw or experienced: cars stopped, unable to proceed, or worse, like in Kerlin’s case, cars piled up after sliding off the road.

Meteorologist James Spann was the one everyone was watching that morning. It was Spann who initially made the call that Birmingham would receive minimal snow—a

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“light dusting”—that day; very soon, however, he realized he’d been wrong and that Birminghamians needed to get home. “I was on the way to Tuscaloosa County to speak to a middle school, and pulled over at the rest area along I-59/20 near the Mercedes plant. A quick glance at my Twitter feed revealed dozens of pictures of wrecks in Tuscaloosa and Northport, and it was at that time I realized something was going wrong with the forecast. Much like a batter looking at a 95 MPH fastball, I didn’t have time to think; I just had to react. I knew then I had to get back to ABC 33/40 in Riverchase,” Spann remembers. “I made it all the way back to the intersection of U.S. 31 and Riverchase Parkway, where I got into gridlock. Like so many others, I abandoned my car and walked about one mile to the station, which is at the other end of the Parkway, closer to Valleydale Road.”

So what, exactly, went wrong that day?

Why did a couple inches of snow turn into a generational event, one that we still talk about and will for years to come? Well, as Spann says now (and as he described in a blog post apologizing for his original forecast), it happened to be the perfect storm. He and his team had no experience with the conditions and no way of knowing the city was perfectly poised for such an impact. “In terms of meteorology, the snow forecast wasn’t really that bad. I forecast light snow; turns out Birmingham picked up two to three inches. In most parts of the country, that is ‘light snow,’” he says. “What was horrible was the impact forecast. The words ‘no travel problems expected’ will haunt me for years to come. It was a humanitarian crisis, mostly due to my (and the weather community’s) failure to properly forecast the impact of the snow.

“On that day, the snow came down and accumulated with a surface temperature

near 20 degrees,” he explains. “I have had zero experience with that in my 37 years of forecasting weather here. Temperatures are generally between 30 and 36 degrees when snow falls. The ice accretion process on roads is radically different at 20 degrees (as I know now!). Initially, there’s some melting of the snow, but immediately we had a ‘flash freeze,’ which put down a base of ice on every road, giving that two to three inches of snow the same impact as a crippling ice storm on road surfaces.”

Kelly Garner is a testament to the gravity of the situation. That morning, he had a surgery scheduled; he and his wife were on their way when they got the call that it was being postponed due to the weather, so they turned around. Once they made it, Garner immediately headed out to check on their car—they’d had to abandon it—and stayed out to help those stuck on the roads



Meteorologist James Spann
Photo by Beau Gustafson


in Vestavia Hills, near his home. “I thought, ‘What a disaster is beginning to take shape—it was also beautiful since we don’t get the chance to see snow often,” he remembers. “Pretty, but deadly.” Garner was determined to help, but as a diabetic, he had a fragile situation. “It was a total disaster. One hour, one mile, one car after the other, the dozens of volunteers that I was working with were all exhausted,” he recalls.

He does not really recall, however, what happened next. Since he’d been fasting for his surgery that morning, he found himself going into hypoglycemic shock. “Having diabetes for more than 40 years plus my

bullheadedness did not mix,” Garner explains now. “I have grown up with diabetes and grown accustomed to everyone helping me. I wanted to help myself.” When Garner realized what was happening, he began to walk home, but he never made it. Though he can’t remember exactly what happened, it’s clear now that he collapsed some time around 7 p.m.; when he did, he dropped off into a 40-foot ravine near Vestavia Library. He spent 12 hours there—that night it dropped to 8 degrees—before he was rescued the next day after a search was initiated by his family. A neighborhood search party had formed, and it was a neighbor who spotted

him in the ravine. “I do not recall the evacuation process, even though Vestavia Firemedics told me that I was speaking with them. My first recollection came at the UAB Neuro ICU room I was in four days after having my back surgery while lying in my bed,” he says. “I realized that there were lots of tubes coming out of me and wondered why this was.”

Garner spent 10 days in the ICU at UAB Hospital, followed by two weeks at the UAB Spain Rehabilitation Center. He had a brain bleed, shattered vertebrae, and broken bones, among other ailments, including losing the hearing in one ear.



Nonetheless, Garner says the experience strengthened him—in fact, he’s written a book about it, titled *The Night That Changed Our Lives*. “I found a peace with the world—no more fear, more patience, perseverance, a will to live. I realized that I had been living just a happy go lucky guy—no harm, no foul,” Garner says. “Then I came to the understanding that God had a bigger plan, a more purposeful life to live. I gave my book the subtitle *The Devil Pushed Me A Pit, But God Pulled Me Out* for a reason. It just so happened that I did indeed fall into a ravine, off an actual cliff, but God did show me that He had more in store for me.”

Mike Gibson, president of Appleseed Workshop, also lent his aid to those who were stuck on the ice that day. Gibson says he initially didn’t realize (along with everyone else) how severe the situation would become, so he headed

to a meeting at a client’s house. He was surprised to find that the client wasn’t there. “She was stuck a mile down the road in a valley in the road where there was a pile of cars that had slid down the hill. We went and got our client and brought her to her house and we had the meeting. By that time, it was lunch time,” he recalls. Around that time, Gibson found out that his wife, Brooke, was stuck on Highway 280 with their kids, then 3-year-old Iris and 6-week-old Jude. “By that time the roads were covered and we were watching the news. [Brooke] had been in a stand still for over an hour and the kids were getting restless,” he says.

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“She said that people were starting to get out of their cars, so I told her to stay put and that I was coming. We borrowed hats and gloves from the clients and I set out in my new wing tips down 280.”

On the way to get Brooke, Gibson and his business partner came to I-459/280, where they found that the frozen bridge had created panic, so they worked to help. They pushed cars across the bridge for an hour since Brooke was safe at the Longhorn Steakhouse down 280. Eventually, Gibson was able to make it to his wife, bundle up the kids, and head to a friend’s house nearby, where they stayed for two days before being able to make it home. “I am always up for an adventure, so it was fun. We were the first to help anybody on the overpass and kept people from losing their minds until the police got there,” he says. “I just remember thinking, ‘I have got to get to my wife and kids and get our 6-week-old safe.’”

It was for many as it was for Gibson and his family. The ice didn’t melt for two days, leaving cars abandoned, people sheltering at friends’ homes, and all of us in awe of what had happened over a few snowflakes. “I knew when I got back to the station I had to do my best to adjust the thinking of the people. The message: If you are in a warm place with food, do not go anywhere. Your children will be in good care thanks to the wonderful teachers and education professionals we have here, and you will risk your life if you travel,” Spann remembers. “Turns out, at least nine people were killed in accidents related to the snow and ice, and more than 10,000 were stranded on highways.”

Hrynkiw eventually made it to Trinity a couple of hours later—after quite the

beautiful walk, he says—where he was able to operate and save his patient’s life. He ended up at Trinity for two days, where he operated again to save someone who had slipped on the ice. Ayers shared a hotel room with the women she met in the Hampton Inn lobby. The group even trekked to Publix to buy wine and snacks to share back at the hotel. “Looking back, now what I remember most is people being nice and taking care of each other, being thrilled to be able to share kindness in a difficult situation,” she says. “You never know when it will give you shelter from the storm. I am still friends on Facebook with several of the ladies from that day. We enjoy keeping up with each other, and I even saw Jennifer a couple of weeks ago...at Publix.” Kerlin remembers it similarly: “When I got to the top of the hill, there were four or five Samford fraternity guys in a 4x4 truck and they were directing traffic, trying to keep people off the hill and helping older adults into the Shades Mountain Parking lot where they could go for shelter. From that intersection, every direction is downhill so those guys probably saved a lot of people car damage and/or injury. No telling how long they were there,” he says.

Eventually, the ice melted. Cars were recovered, people made it home, and the city returned to normal operations. But we were all left with our stories and reminders of a day that left us all in awe. “My wing tips were never the same,” Gibson says. “I just threw those shoes away last weekend.”

Perhaps Dr. Hrynkiw sums up the experience best: “Man can do many things,” he notes. “But when nature speaks, you gotta listen.” ●