

Tornadoes and true love

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The 1996 hit movie, *Twister*, brought a whole new meaning to storm chasers. Real life storm chasers, Val and Amy Castor, have a passion for chasing tornadoes even greater than the on screen characters.

Val became fascinated with weather as a young boy when his father would rouse him in the middle of the night to run to the family's outdoor cellar to hide from potentially dangerous storms. Playing baseball as he grew up, he remembers paying more attention to the sky than he did the game. He then went on to earn a physical geography degree from Oklahoma State University and a meteorology degree from the University of Oklahoma.

Val's first year at OU, he and fellow weather enthusiasts, Bill Pryor and Steve Nelson, began chasing storms on their own. After chasing for about five years he decided to give News Channel 9 a call. After proving himself as a competent chaser, Gary England offered him a staff position.

"On April 26 of that first year, there was a rash of tornadoes, including the one that hit Red Rock and just north of Enid," said Val. "I ended up getting video of three tornadoes, including an F3 and an F4. They were real happy with the footage and decided they wanted me on board. Gary England basically pioneered the use of storm chasers at television stations."

Val became the first official storm chaser in the spring of 1991. Thus began his new career, chasing tornadoes and ultimately, how he met his wife.

Amy grew up in Mangum watching storms with her dad. She came to OSU and was majoring in electrical engineering technology. Her interest in weather just kept growing.

"I didn't know much about it," said Amy. "So, I went to the library and checked out books on meteorology and started storm chasing on my own."

In 1997, she was looking for a weather project to use in her senior projects class. She contacted Gary England by email and told him about her interest in the technology side of storm chasing.

"Gary forwarded my email on to Val. At the time, they didn't have any projects or internships for me to work on, but I did start working on Val's web page. We started chasing together in May of 1998. After my first chase with Val, I knew that's what I

wanted to do for the rest of my life. I had never been that close to a tornado before. It was really amazing."

"That fall, Val and I became chasing partners for Channel 9. We fell in love and got engaged. Our true test came May 3, 1999, when we followed the F5 that destroyed part of Oklahoma City. We were just meant for each other and married June 26 of that same year."

"I had never seen a tornado that strong before," said Val. "All of our previous experience had been leading up to this tornado and it all paid off that day. Forty-four people were killed that day and that might seem like a lot, but there could have been a lot more people killed in a tornado of that magnitude.

As a matter of fact, I think the National Weather Service had calculated that there could have been as many as 800 people killed based on how big the tornado was and how densely populated of an area it went through."

"When that tornado headed into the residential areas, my heart just went out to those people," said Amy. "It was the first time I really felt how important my job was."

"We both have a passion for chasing tornadoes," said Val, "but, our primary concern is to get the information out and to save lives."

Val's obligation to Channel 9 makes it almost impossible to provide storm chasing tours like some chasers do. However, he has agreed to take four people in the spring. Each of the four bought a one-day trip during a fundraising auction held by Eagle Heights Baptist Church. Val and Amy are both very active in the church, so Val donated the storm chasing trips for the auction to raise money to build a new church facility.

The Castors are also very active with their 17-month-old daughter, Grace. Will the toddler grow up to be a storm chaser, too?

"Probably," states Amy. "As much as we love it, she's bound to love it, too. It's really part of our lifestyle and daily conversation. When she gets about seven or eight, we might take her chasing with us. We want to wait until she's old enough to understand that sometimes it gets scary and to decide for herself if she's ready."

When severe weather is expected, Val and Amy are sure to be close by. Both will be anxiously awaiting the next chance to chase the storm and warn Oklahoma residents of any potential danger.

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