

Skywarn systems in place

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By Greg Hunt

greg.hunt@ecm-inc.com

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Last Friday evening at Cambridge Middle School, a Storm Spotter training session was conducted by Todd Krause, Warning Coordination meteorologist of the National Weather Service. Mari DeLage, of the Isanti County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, reported a packed house attended the session, with a large percentage of those signing up as spotters.

"Storm Spotter is pretty much open to anyone – civilians, businesses. We had good representation from fire departments and Safety & Rescue that night. We had people from our region show up, along with some from as far away as Prior Lake since they may have missed the chance to get to their local training session," said DeLage. "I thought the large number in attendance means people are more aware of the need, and it showed a great volunteer spirit."

Right: Isanti's Aaron Diers of Metro Skywarn.

One local citizen in attendance was 17-year-old Aaron Diers of Isanti who is working to set up a Metro Skywarn group in this area. Different than Storm Spotters, Metro Skywarn caters to HAM radio operators, along with being open to a limited number of the non-HAM populace who report to the National Weather Service. While both groups serve the public well, Diers explained that a huge number of phone calls could tie up the NWS, but HAM reports will always get through.

"Philosophies have changed this year. The National Weather Service is relying a lot more on spotters than radar," he said. "You know the Rogers tornado, the last storm of the season last year, it was not on radar in time. We could not quite see it, but we had indications that it was there, the spotters did. They reported it to the National Weather Service, but they didn't see anything on radar. The next swoop around, radar caught it, but by then it was too late."

Logging onto HAM, emergency volunteering

Diers, a homeschooler, can earn high school credits through community service with all his volunteer work. Antennae construction and building a radio would constitute industrial trades credit.

"It started when I began operating my HAM radio (call # KCØWKP). You can do emergency preparedness, emergency communications with HAM. Skywarn is one of the easiest to get into and is a fun thing to do— go out and spotting for the National Weather Service and relaying, by radio, to them."

"It's interesting watching cloud formations as they form. You can sit out there to see the changes. It's just kind of cool and amazing to see the change as it rolls across the sky," continued Diers. "It's essentially serving the community and helping out. We call it, 'Early warning, saving lives.' It's something that needs to be done."

He became aware that there hasn't been a Metro Skywarn group in Isanti for a long time, and he jumped at the chance to be the lead into forming one in his home county.

"I'm interested in emergency training. I'm looking at being an EMT and in becoming a firefighter," said Diers. "I'm a Public Health volunteer at the hospital, testing the HAM system there every month. Especially after Katrina, hospitals have to have multiple methods of communication."

Science is definitely covered through learning the cloud patterns necessary to be an effective sky watcher, he continued. "We record 1 1/2 and over rainfall, obviously funnel clouds, rotating or non-rotating wall clouds (which is an angling cloud coming down), sizes of hail, and winds over 60 mph. With heavy winds, stuff starts breaking at about 58 mph, so you can tell if it's over 60."

"We don't condone storm chasing. There are people who are Skywarn who do go storm chasing. We don't condone that. After dark, we advise our spotters to head home and spot from there. Just be aware of your surroundings and such. To our knowledge, no one's ever died from spotting. People have been hurt, though," said Diers.

His brother, Andrew, and mother, Kim, are also HAM operators. Kim is trained in Skywarn, possibly helping with net control when the local group gets rolling. A new website which Diers set up about the Metro Skywarn group is www.freewebs.com/isantisky.

Two more informational sites he offered are skywarn.com and metroskywarn.com. For more about joining Metro Skywarn, contact Diers at 763-444-6683. For further information about joining the Storm Spotter legion, contact DeLage at 763-689-3591.