

A Note from Executive Director, Vicki Hickman

The Family That Shelters Together...

September 20 was quite the ending to my Hilton Head vacation.

After a week away, I was looking forward to getting home, settling into my own bed and enjoying a good night's sleep.

Mother Nature apparently had other plans. Living in a multigenerational household means that a tornado warning is no longer simply a matter of turning on the weather, listening for the sirens and deciding whether the storm is really headed your way. When there is a baby and a toddler sleeping upstairs, a tornado warning becomes a full-scale family relocation project.

And unfortunately, we have had plenty of practice.

Several times now, tornado warnings have arrived during the night, requiring us to wake the boys and make the trip downstairs to the basement. Usually, my daughter and I immediately go into action. The weather alerts start buzzing on our watches, the tornado sirens are blaring outside, and we start gathering children, blankets, bottles, phones and whatever else seems necessary at that particular hour.

Meanwhile, my husband and son-in-law generally enter what I can only describe as the "Are we sure this is really necessary?" phase of tornado preparedness.

Apparently, the combination of tornado sirens, emergency alerts and the Weather Channel announcing a tornado warning is not always sufficient evidence.

My daughter and I, however, require considerably less convincing. So down to the basement we go.

Our designated shelter area also happens to be my home gym. This means the entire family ends up huddled together on exercise mats surrounded by two stationary bikes, a rower, a treadmill, a rack of dumbbells, barbells, two workout benches and a Smith machine.

It is an excellent gym. It is not an excellent toddler playroom.

We have even added a Pack 'n Play to our tornado preparedness plan so the boys theoretically have somewhere to sleep while we wait out the storm.

"Theoretically" is the important word in that sentence.

There is something about being awakened in the middle of the night, carried downstairs and placed in a brightly lit basement with your parents, grandparents and an entire room full of fascinating exercise equipment that apparently tells a toddler, "It's playtime!" Sleep is generally the furthest thing from anyone's mind.

Last night's adventure came with an additional challenge. My daughter has been dealing with volleyball related knee pain, and I had just sprained my ankle and could barely walk.

Eventually, everyone made it safely downstairs, where we sat together on gym mats waiting for the warning to expire.

At some point, as I looked around at our little group wedged between the treadmill, weights and Pack 'n Play, I had to laugh.

There are many things you imagine when your children grow up. You picture holidays together, family dinners, vacations and grandchildren running through the house.

You probably don't picture sitting on the basement floor in the middle of the night, surrounded by exercise equipment, while your grandchildren refuse to sleep during a tornado warning. But that is life in our house. It is sometimes chaotic, occasionally exhausting and rarely boring.

And after several middle-of-the-night tornado warnings, I have learned one thing for certain: When the sirens go off, my daughter, the kids, and I will be in the basement.

Eventually, the men will probably join us.

-Vicki