

Cliff Shank, Ad Astra Per Aspera Broadcasting

A tornado rumbles across Reno county. Wherever it goes, Cliff Shank will be on the job, broadcasting the whereabouts of severe weather and more. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we met Cliff Shank, owner of Ad Astra Per Aspera Broadcasting which includes four radio stations serving central Kansas. His stations are leaders in sports and severe weather coverage.

Cliff grew up near Salina. As a kid, he went fishing at a nearby sandpit with his family one early spring day. "We caught some fish and had a picnic," Cliff said. "Then my mom got a concerned look on her face and said, 'I have a bad feeling about the weather. Let's pack up and get home.'" They did so, despite Cliff's protests. But two hours later, a tornado developed and struck the very sandpit where they had been fishing.

"I don't believe in ESP and my mom's never done that before or since," Cliff said, but this incident sparked a lifelong interest in severe weather. While studying radio-television at K-State, his senior project was about severe weather coverage by radio stations in Kansas.

Cliff went on to a career in broadcasting and eventually settled in Hutchinson.

Today, he owns Ad Astra Per Aspera Broadcasting. It includes four FM stations: 94.7 KSKU, which does top 40; 95.9 KWHK, which carries oldies; 100.3 KNZS which does classic rock; and 106.1 KXKU, which carries country. These stations also specialize in sports and severe weather coverage.

"In our neck of the woods, I'm the severe weather guy," Cliff said. When there is bad weather in or around Reno County, he is faithfully on the scene, reporting the storm's whereabouts. He has had some close calls and was first-hand witness to storms which hit communities such as Hesston and the rural town of Willowbrook, population 87 people. Now, that's rural. Such weather reports are vital in rural communities.

"People have said to me, 'Your coverage saved my family's life,'" Cliff said.

Sometimes disasters come from man-made sources as well. On September 2, 2011, Cliff got a call at three in the morning. "Our news director told me that the radio station is on fire," Cliff said. "By the time I got there, the fire chief said the building was a total loss and they needed to demolish the remaining walls for safety. They brought in a backhoe. By eight p.m., the building we had been in for 25 years was gone and hauled to the dump. I bawled like a baby," Cliff said.

But he soon was working on a plan to get the stations back on the air. He arranged for a new location and had the stations broadcasting again in less than a month. "On the day after our zoning approval came through, our tower was up in the air," Cliff said.

"Everybody has worked really hard," Cliff said. He credits his wife Vicki, co-owner Mike Hill, and the sales staff for hard work and support.

“We’re kind of like family,” Cliff said. “Mike and I have worked together in 36 of the 38 years I’ve been in broadcasting, and some of the sales staff I’ve known for 30 years.” Cliff is especially proud of his own children, including son Chris who is a teacher and coach in Hill City, Stefanie who is an animator-illustrator in New York, and Jonathan who is a college librarian and musician in Chicago.

“Ad Astra Per Aspera is the Kansas motto, and it means To the Stars Through Difficulties,” Cliff said. “I think it’s a great description of becoming an entrepreneurial businessperson.”

"Entrepreneurs must be quick to take advantage of opportunities and challenges. Cliff Shank has succeeded at that," said Gloria Freeland, director of the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media. "To be able to come back after a devastating fire speaks to the courage and persistence of Cliff, his family and his co-workers."

A tornado crosses central Kansas, and Cliff Shank is on the scene. Whether reporting on severe weather or overcoming a disastrous fire of his own, Cliff Shank is making a difference in the broadcast industry of Kansas.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.