

Blizzard Survivor

Nowadays, we tend to believe that technology has solved the weather problems faced by nineteenth century pioneers living on the western plains. Karen Nelson knows better. As darkness fell on January 9, 1997, Karen found herself alone in the cab of her pickup truck as a vicious blizzard swirled around her. She was trapped and she had no idea where she was. She had no food or source of heat. The temperature was 20 degrees below zero. How did she get to this point?

Karen left work at 6:45 p.m. for her home, which was 12 miles away. As she drove, the snow grew thicker, and she found herself off the road, stuck in deep drifts. She did have a cellular phone with her, and she called the local sheriff's office. The sheriff sent deputies out on the main roads, but they weren't able to spot her before night fell.

The next day, rescue teams were sent out once again. At this point, an expert in thermal energy was called in as well. Thermal energy uses a camera-like device pointed from an aircraft to locate heat sources. Heat is generated by humans, animals, or machines. From a twin-engine Cessna airplane, the rescue team members used a combination of thermal energy technology and the cell phone signals to search for Karen. She was told to listen for the noise of the plane's engine and let them know by phone when she heard it.

Rescuers searched all day from the ground and the air without finding her. Finally, one of the team members had a hunch. They had been limiting their search to information Karen had given them about the turns she made. Knowing that people in whiteouts can become disoriented and confused about directions, he told the pilot to fly in the opposite direction from what Karen had told them. Finally, she excitedly reported over her cell phone that she heard the plane! Snowmobiles raced to the location and found her little pickup, which was covered with snow and ice.

Unit 2

Karen Nelson's experience may be unusual in today's world of sophisticated forecasting equipment and well-maintained roads, but blizzards can be devastating, no matter what the year.

- Why would some find it ironic that thermal energy was used to find someone lost in a blizzard?

- What items should people carry in their vehicles just in case they find themselves in a similar predicament?

- Would Karen have improved her chances of being rescued if she had been more curious about her location?