IN less than six weeks we will mark 40 years since Darwin was obliterated by Cyclone Tracy – Australia’s most catastrophic natural disaster and one of the most formative events in shaping the tropical, modern and vibrant city we live in now.

A significant milestone and commemoration … but you wouldn’t really know it.

The City of Darwin’s “program of events”, released just a few weeks ago with no pomp or ceremony and seemingly as an afterthought, is underwhelming to say the least.

A bit of tree-light dimming, a stock-standard church service and a couple of small community gatherings. And of course an unveiling of a plaque at the Christ Church Cathedral … because no other denominations were affected by Tracy.

If there is one thing I have learnt in the past few months of talking to survivors who have shared their deeply personal stories with the NT News, it is that many people still bear the scars of Christmas Day, 1974. The emotional ones anyway.

I grew up with considerable respect for cyclones. My parents were in Darwin during Cyclone Tracy so have never been complacent during the Top End’s wet season, particularly my dad, who has made cyclone preparedness an art form. Growing up in the years that followed Tracy, especially in the early 80s. I remember any kind of cyclone event triggering a considerable amount of anxiety for people whose recollection was still so raw and vivid.

As children we used to have what we called “cyclone parties”, where my extended family would gather at alternate houses at even the slightest whiff of a cyclone brewing off our coastline.

We kids of course thought it was great as we’d build make-shift tents in our bedrooms, passing time by placing toys on the ceiling fan blades and delighting in watching the helpless fool who’d be hit in the face by a flying Transformer or My Little Pony once the power was switched back on. We loved it, but thinking back our parents, who had all gone through Tracy, found it comforting to have the extended family together if something cataclysmic were to occur.

Despite hearing bits and pieces of my parents’ own story over the years, I have only recently come to genuinely comprehend the significant level of trauma survivors faced. Aside from the 66 people killed, 500 injured and thousands displaced, the repercussions still reverberate in many instances with marriage breakdowns and mental illnesses surfacing in the years that followed.

Everyone I have spoken to for the NT News’ special 40th anniversary commemoration lift-out has broken down at some point during the interview. On some occasions they have been unable to continue. And on many occasions people have said how disheartening it is that there is such little reminder in Darwin today of this event.

While not an occasion of celebration, it certainly needs to be commemorated in a meaningful way. And I am not convinced that a plaque in a church that our multicultural, multi-denominational community won’t necessarily visit is the way to go.

Aside from a council chamber plaque and the Museum and Art Gallery’s blink and you’ll miss it Cyclone Tracy exhibition, there is no public place or landmark that survivors can visit to reflect.

Some people will say that Darwin being rebuilt into a modern cosmopolitan city today is a landmark in itself. The fact that the city rose from a blank canvas, amid rumours that it should not be rebuilt at all, is testament to the spirit of survivors alone.

But I disagree.

Survivors – including the many who were instrumental in helping rebuild Darwin – are owed more than that.

We have an entire military museum at East Point with a $10 million Defence of Darwin Experience unveiled in 2012 to commemorate the Bombing of Darwin. The interactive multimedia facility is wonderful and a true testament to our diggers and the role of Darwin in WWII.

It provides visitors with such a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the war that it is hard to walk away not having immersed yourself in that era.

It is a pity that our councilors and Lord Mayor didn’t have similar foresight and creative planning for the 40th Cyclone Tracy commemoration this year.

I mean, it’s not like it snuck up on anyone is it?

The NT News will be releasing a special Cyclone Tracy 40th commemoration lift-out next month.