“Is there anyone in there?” “Is everyone ok?” – the words echoed in my head as we heard someone calling out as the morning broke on Christmas day in 1974. It was comforting to hear the voices after the terror we just endured throughout the night. The whistling wind, the thunder and the light show and the deafening sounds of houses collapsing was a nightmare we will never be able to erase from our minds. A night we never thought would end. A night we thought was our worst nightmare. We didn’t know what to expect. We didn’t think we would survive this terrifying ordeal.

Yet 40 years later we have moved on as the journey through life took a different path to what we imagined.

In 1974 we were new to Australia – new residents of Darwin. We lived in Casuarina. My father was offered a position to join the Royal Australian Flying doctor service and migrated to Darwin from Sri Lanka in January 1974. As he settled there, the rest of the family joined him later in the year. My mother, 2 brothers and my younger sister migrated to Darwin in October 1974. My eldest brother (20yrs) and myself (19years) left Sri Lanka at the end of the school term and arrived in Darwin to join the rest of the family on the 18th of December – 1 week before Tracy. We were just getting to know the place when my dad said there is a prediction that a cyclone will hit Darwin towards the end of December. He was unsure yet there was an element of certainty in his voice. I remember him saying that “the cyclone that was expected to hit Darwin in the beginning of December turned away” yet he felt this may not.

He prepared us, as well as himself for the worst. He drove to a friend of his who was a doctor at the Royal Darwin, to advise him to take shelter at the hospital with his young family, just hours before the big storm. Which he did and up to this date he is grateful for that warning he received from my father – as the house they were staying was totally destroyed. They are now well established in Sydney.

As we received the warning sounds throughout the day - my father prepared himself gathering important documents, belongings etc. We listened to the radio station that was broadcasting Cyclone warnings and advice. We filled the bath tub as advised and stayed close the bathroom. Around midnight we lost signals from the radio station and didn’t know what was happening after that. We tried to go to sleep, yet my father kept us awake knowing that this may turn in to something he didn’t want his family to face.

He was visibly frightened. My mother was praying and hoping that this big storm will pass through. Yet when the windows shattered and the roof flew off from the main room and the lounge room, we knew this is not just another storm. Our electricity was out, we were in darkness. The only time we could see each other or the outside was during flashes of lightening. I remember one of those scary moments myself and my brother looked out and saw this van that was parked on the other side of the road was under water and only the roof was visible. During the next flash of lightening we saw that all the neighbouring houses were flattened to the ground. (Houses in the neighbourhood were built on stilts). That is when we started to panic and scream out for help. We were terrified. We all huddled together and stayed hanging on to each other. We were going to go down together. We screamed for help, we cried, we howled. Yet no one could hear us. Everyone was facing their worst nightmare.
On Christmas morning, we heard voices calling out and my father asked for help to get all of us out to safety, as the house was shaky and unstable. When we came out we realised how lucky we were. Our house was one of the few houses in that area that was still standing on its stilts, with part of the roof and walls missing and all the windows shattered. There were people walking around in a daze and in sheer shock. It looked like a war zone. Not a house or a building that was not ruined. Cars over turned and water and debris everywhere.