

RANDOM SAMPLES

1965 TORNADO DESTROYED HIS HOME, BUT NOT HIS SPIRIT

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Last year marked the 70th anniversary of when Dorothy took her big ride in a tornado in the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*.

In two days, it will have been 45 years since Tom Szymczak took one of his own.

It was Palm Sunday, April 11, 1965, when a series of tornadoes tore through the state, killing 55 people in Ohio, including more than a dozen locally. Tom was 16 and living in Point Place when he went to close his bedroom window that night and looked outside.

“There was this black, black, black funnel,” he remembers. “I don’t think it really registered what it was.”

Then he saw a semi-truck and a bus flying through the air. Before he could do anything, his door blew shut and the wind became so great that he had to dig his nails into the hardwood floor to prevent being blown away. Eventually Tom was able to join his parents and young niece in a central bathroom of their ranch home.

“We were listening to houses just getting ... ripped apart, one wall after another,” he said. “All of a sudden we were just in open air. I was just blown away. Literally. The wind blew me away and I was unconscious for a while. And the next day I was found in the next block and I was under drywall in another house and I was OK.”

Miraculously, Tom escaped with only some bruises. But instead of waking up to a land full of Munchkins and a talking tin man, Tom saw a war zone. Houses all around him were destroyed. Cement slabs were wiped clean of any trace of human existence. A body with no legs was found on his property.

“I couldn’t believe the devastation,” he said. “Everything was just gone.”

Considered the worst natural disaster in Toledo’s history, the incident injured 208 people, left 310 families homeless, and caused \$12 million in damage. It was enough to convince President Lyndon B. Johnson — who met Tom when he visited the region — to declare it a federal disaster area.

The tornadoes led to some important changes, including the creation of a severe-weather warning system in 11 northwest Ohio counties. They led to some changes in Tom too.

“I express my feelings openly like I never did before. I’m more appreciative of people, especially my friends,” he said. “It’s been nothing less than profound.” Tom, now 61, said his family became tighter as they stayed with relatives for more than six months while their home was rebuilt.

He also learned about the unimportance of things and how fast they can disappear.

“All of my working life I’ve prepared myself, psychologically and financially, to lose everything, like I almost expect it to happen,” he said.

The pharmacist, who now lives in Temperance, still thinks about that day 45 years ago. It still brings tears to his eyes to talk about it. But he doesn’t live in fear of it.

“I’ll stand in the driveway as a storm approaches and feel it relaxing. ... The smell of the air, I find it refreshing. It’s like,” he said, pausing a moment. “It’s almost like a closeness to God.”



Tom's close call with the Palm Sunday tornadoes may serve as a tremendous reminder that Mother Nature has the power to raze buildings and destroy lives — just as the more recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile did — but it's also proof that it can't destroy our spirit unless we let it.

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