City of Champions: The Edmonton Tornado of 1987

For residents of Edmonton throughout the 1980’s, the City of Champions moniker represented the many sports championships won by the city’s football and hockey teams – from the Oilers bringing home the Stanley Cup for the third time to the Edmonton Eskimos Grey Cup win – all in 1987. Though the slogan had been around since 1984, it would gain a new meaning in the way that the residents and community were brought together in response to one of the most devastating tornadoes to touch down in Edmonton.

On a stormy July 31st, 1987, a Category 4 tornado touched down on the eastern edge of Edmonton,. Though only Category 1 at first sighting, weather conditions were just right for the funnel cloud to gain power and head northwards. Carving out a path of destruction that killed 27 people, injured hundreds of others, and caused over 300 million dollars in damage, the tornado lasted for approximately one hour and finally dissipated a few kilometres northeast of the city just after 4 PM.

Despite the lack of an emergency alert system, local emergency response and help from the Canadian Forces was dispatched immediately following the tornado’s dissipation. Setup and mobilisation of Red Cross stations was swift with more than 1300 registered volunteers helping out those in need. By the next day, all of the survivors of the tornado were registered and accounted for, and on August 3rd a Victim Assistance Centre was established to provide long term help for survivors affected by the tornado. Laurence Decore, the mayor at the time, cited the response by the community and emergency services as evidence that Edmonton was a ‘City of Champions.’

As a result of the tornado, the Emergency Public Warning System was developed to inform residents on both radio and TV communication of any imminent emergency events. This was later succeeded by the Alberta Emergency Alert, though the EPWS is still in use by the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia. Though the stormy afternoon known as Black Friday was etched into the minds of an entire generation of Edmontonians, it is the sheer perseverance, determination, and sense of community that personifies Edmonton as the City of Champions.