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Surviving the Oklahoma tragedy

3 TALES OF COURAGE

Moments after last April's shocking attack, these extraordinary women rushed to tend the injured—and count their blessings. Their lives will never be the same.

BY DERI MARTIN-MORRIS

Most Americans spent much of April 19—the day a bomb exploded at 9:02 a.m. in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building—close to our television sets, watching, stunned, as bloodstained men and women ran through bombed-out streets. It looked like Beirut, but it was downtown Oklahoma City, U.S.A. The horror and pain in the heartland tore a hole in our hearts.

We were especially moved by the plight of the tragedy's smallest victims: the children. The Murrah building housed more than a dozen federal agencies, but its second floor was home to a day-care center called America's Kids. When we saw the children—bloodied, crying, fearful, but alive—we were relieved that some of the kids from the federal building had indeed survived. Later we learned that though six of the children from America's Kids had been hospitalized and were in serious condition, most of the children from that facility were dead. So who

were the kids whose faces had been seen around the world? They were from the other day-care center affected by the blast, the Child Development Center located in the YMCA across the street from the federal building. Oklahoma City Assistant Fire Chief Jon Hansen estimates that of the 337 downtown buildings that were damaged, the Y was one of the hardest hit. Still, there was this to be thankful for: All 52 children who had gone to the Y's day-care center that morning survived. They were injured—six had cuts so wide that stitches were useless; physicians had to staple their skin together—but they were alive.

The three women whose gripping stories follow were all intimately connected with this mammoth disaster. One is a paramedic who rescued the wounded, another had children of her own at the Y's day-care center that morning and a third was working at the center when the bomb detonated.

Melissa Webster, 31: a paramedic on the scene

I was in our management office about six blocks away from the federal building, and I had just sat down at my desk when—kaboom!—some of the ceiling fell in and the glass in the garage doors was blown out. I assumed that our building had been hit by something and ran out the door. I was standing outside when I noticed that smoke was coming from near the federal

When the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was ravaged, Americans everywhere realized "it can happen here."

Melissa Webster, below, with her two kids, was the first paramedic to help James Green, left, age two.



Oklahoma tragedy

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PHOTO: SABA. TOP PHOTO: GREG SMITH/SABA

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building. At that point the first calls for help hadn't come in, but I knew I needed to head toward that smoke.

My partner had an ambulance ready to go. We hopped in and drove to a spot about a block from the federal building—there was so much debris and there were so many bleeding people standing around, we couldn't go any further. As soon as victims saw the ambulance, they started running up, asking for help. I stuffed my pockets with bandages and started setting up a treatment center.

I've seen worse injuries but never before in that quantity and amidst such absolute emotional turmoil. Everywhere I looked I saw people with blood all over their bodies. And it wasn't fear I saw in their faces—it was disbelief.

I wanted to check on my own kids. My daughter, Dilan, is two, and my son, Dakota, is five. I wanted to call my husband, who was working about ten miles away. But after the explosion the phones didn't work.

“Everywhere I looked, I saw people with blood all over their bodies.”

I was starting to treat patients when someone brought over a little boy from the Y's day-care center. My daughter had gone there until earlier this year. All I could think was that this might have been my child. The boy must have been three; it was hard to tell—he had so much blood on him from cuts on his neck and near one of his eyes. Still, he was not in critical condition, so I had to leave him and help others who were worse off. But he wouldn't let go. That's when the whole thing hit me. I teared up. I just wanted to hold the little boy and cry. I shook that off. I



The Valleans with their sons, who were victims of the bombing. Brandon, right, 11 weeks old at the time, escaped without a scratch. Desmond, now three, suffered numerous cuts and has scars.

had to. Somebody brought over the boy's older brother, who was about four—he was already bandaged—and I sent them both in an ambulance to the hospital.

A while later a medic brought over a woman in her late 20s. She'd been rescued from a building two blocks away from the blast. When I knelt down to check on her, she wasn't

hospital before she went home. She doesn't know how close she came to death. If there'd been 50 other people hurt worse than she was, somebody might have had to call her.

Then there was a second bomb scare and everybody started running away. That's when I found a friend who had a cellular phone and called my husband, Todd. I said, "Hi, I'm okay," and the phone went dead. At least he knew I was all right. After that scare was over, I went into the federal building. I heard there were people trapped inside. Kids too. I didn't even have a hard hat on. I just went in and started digging with my hands. I must have been near where the day-care center fell through, because all I dug up was baby shoes, nap cots and those low tables kids sit at. I continued to dig when someone called me over to look at something. All I could see was a woman's leg from the knee down. There was so much debris on top of her. We dug some more. I saw an arm and a head. When she was uncovered, I could tell she was gone. That's when somebody took control and said, "Everybody out." The building was sealed off, and nobody could enter it without protective clothing and gear.

When I went back to the office that day, I saw my kids. A friend had brought them there. I hugged and kissed them, grateful that they had escaped the suffering I'd seen. They were fine. But the full impact of the experience didn't hit me until I was home, alone, in the shower. That's when I finally broke down and cried. Even then, I wasn't sure why I was crying.

In the ambulance business, you train for the Big One. You truly hope it doesn't happen, but, by gosh, if it does, you want to be right in the middle of it, doing everything you can. I'm glad I got to be there that day to help. As bad as it was, I had to be there.

Michele Vallean, 36: a mother whose two children, Desmond and Brandon, were caught in the blast

I was in a meeting in my company president's office (I'm a vice president of Anthony's stores) when out of nowhere, boom! A huge window in the office shattered. I started running—all I could think of was my kids at the Y day-care center a block away. I got out of that building so fast, I left my purse behind. It wasn't until I was outside that I saw smoke coming from the direction of the ▶

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Y. I ran toward it in high heels, dodging broken glass all along the way.

When I got to the Y, everybody from the day-care center was standing around outside the building. Kids were crying and screaming. I looked around for one of Brandon's caregivers; she was holding him in her arms. I grabbed him and looked him over. There wasn't a scratch on him. I was relieved. Then I heard Des, his tiny voice crying "Mommy! Mommy!" I followed that sound through the crowd. When I saw him, his face was covered with blood. His shirt was bloody. His jeans were bloody. I grabbed him and used my blazer to wipe his face. Then I pulled him to me and my blouse became soaked with blood.

A medic cleaned up Des, and then we saw where the blood was coming from. He had a 2-inch cut on his right eyelid and a puncture wound between his eye and nose bone. His hair was full of glass. His arms had more slivers of glass in them. My husband, Michael, who works downtown as a sheriff's deputy, had also run to

the Y when he heard the blast. When he got there, we stood together, happy that we were all alive. Michael got our car, and we drove Des and the baby to the hospital. The doctor said the baby was fine, but Des had to have six stitches on his face. He's going to have scars. It wasn't until four days after the blast that Des looked in a mirror. He just stood there, studying his face. Then he went crazy and cried, saying, "I got hurt by the bomb."

On Mother's Day, 25 days after that dreadful attack, my mom and I drove by the Y. We looked at the federal building, and we were still shocked to see how close the Y was to it. We both were struck by what a miracle it was that my kids are still alive.

Ali Hatton, 23:
an assistant teacher at the day-care center across the street from the explosion

Everything was just so ordinary, like every other Wednesday morning. The three-year-olds were getting ready to glue cotton balls onto paper cutouts of lambs. The toddlers

had just had their diapers changed, and I was sitting on the floor in the library, leaning against a wall reading *The Grumpy Old Rabbit* to some two-year-olds. One kid was sitting on my lap, and a few were clustered on either side of me. With two

about how his parents would be there soon, and I started singing the *Barney* song to him. I handed him to a medic, who then took him to the hospital.

I ended up at the hospital too. All I had was a cut across my cheek and some

“I didn't know if we were in a war or if the city had been bombed.”

pages left to read, I heard the loudest noise I've ever heard and was knocked away from the wall.

The windows burst. Everything went flying—pieces of glass, toys. The ceiling fell in. I knew there had been an explosion. Was it just our building that blew up? I didn't know. My husband, Willie, works downtown too, and he happened to be at the courthouse, a few blocks away. My mom was working about six blocks away in the tallest building downtown. Since I didn't know if we were in a war or if the whole city had been bombed, it crossed my mind that Willie and my mom might not be okay. But I couldn't think about that. The kids came first.

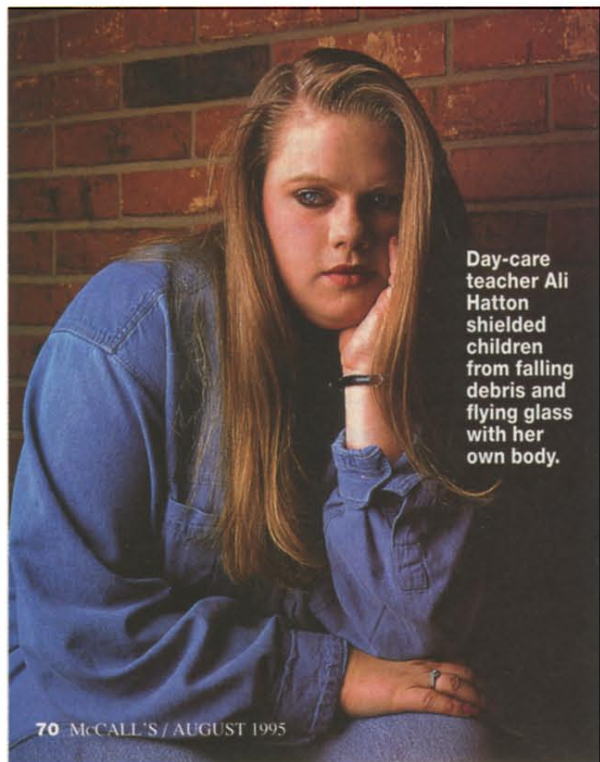
I grabbed the children around me and bent over them until the ceiling stopped falling on us. When everything quit moving, I started digging up the kids who'd been partially buried by pieces of ceiling. They were either crying hysterically and bleeding or they just wore blank stares and were deadly quiet. I got them out of the building by putting them through a hole in what was left of the door.

One little boy was so cut and bloodied I wasn't sure he was going to make it. His whole body was trembling. I ran to him and picked him up. I was worried that if he fell asleep, we'd lose him, so I began to talk to him

glass in my back. Parents kept coming up to me because they heard I was a teacher at a day-care center—they just didn't know which one. They'd pull out a picture of their missing child, and I'd have to say, "Sorry, I'm not with the day-care center in the federal building." You could see their faces drop, every ounce of hope wiped away.

I called my mom from the hospital. She was fine. I talked to my husband. He was fine. Even though I was covered in blood from carrying out the children, I was fine too and could be released that day. The little boy I had handed over to the medic had to get a lot of stitches, but he was okay.

Two days after the blast, the Y threw a party for the children, because the last time they had seen one another, everybody was crying and bleeding, and we didn't want that image to stay in their minds for long. At the party they got to see that everybody was okay and that life was going to go on. All 52 children had survived because my co-workers and I did everything in our power to get those kids out of that building. Everybody forgot about themselves and thought about one another; mostly, we thought about the children. Less than a week after the blast, we reopened at a new location, five miles from where the downtown Y had been. We were ready to get back to normal. ■



Day-care teacher Ali Hatton shielded children from falling debris and flying glass with her own body.