
PROLOGUE

In the aftermath of April 19, we found something worth keeping

So much has been written about the April 19 bombing of the Alfred E. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that to add anything more in this space may seem superfluous. But in this state at this time, it is difficult to write about anything else.

Surely journalists throughout the world must be running out of words to describe this tragedy. How many ways can you say "horrible" or "monstrous" or "senseless"? Yet the stories keep coming—stories of miraculous deliverance and heartbreaking loss, of courage, fortitude, generosity and caring. And the what-ifs—what if we had been on time, what if he had taken one more step, what if they had been where they should have been. And then the children . . .

The University of Oklahoma family was not spared. Alumni, faculty, staff, students and friends of the institution were among the casualties, rescuers, medical teams, relief agency personnel and the hundreds of volunteers rushing material, financial and personal support to Oklahoma City.

Some of them you saw or read about, others worked in anonymity—the heroic OUHSC doctors crawling through the rubble to amputate the leg of a young woman inextricably pinned beneath fallen concrete; the apprehensive first-year medical students facing a brutal baptism of fire; an OUHSC photographer and the dental faculty doggedly assisting the traumatic victim identification process; the Red Cross worker operating on nervous energy in lieu of sleep; the governor and his wife making endless rounds of the workers, survivors and grieving families.

Faced with the worst, Oklahoma was at its best. The preparedness, response time, professionalism and class with which Oklahomans handled the ultimate crisis set a new standard. Oklahoma is a small state and not a wealthy one; nevertheless, the flood of assistance in all forms was staggering, from school children's pennies to major corporate gifts.

Disaster teams—both local and those far from home—found their every need provided. Volunteers kept clean sheets on their cots; took their soot-soaked clothing home to launder; prepared hot meals; and when the going got even tougher, dropped by with handshakes and hugs, playful pets and teddy bears. Oklahomans would consider any other response a breach of hospitality, inexcusable ingratitude. Yet one amazed out-of-state rescuer remarked, "We were at the World Trade Center bomb site for 12 days, and no one even spoke to us."

The recovery is marked with irony as well. An Oklahoma City firm displaced from the heavily damaged Journal Record Building received a call from an Eastern business writer. How, the man asked, were businesses managing to restart their operations? When told that, among other things, the employees spent the first weekend moving anything salvageable to new office space, the reporter was incredulous.

"You can't do that," he insisted repeatedly. "And even if you *could* ask them, your employees would *never* do that. You must have hired a moving company."

Wonder what he would have thought about the Oklahoma City police and firefighters unions foregoing

their cost-of-living increases to assist in restoring their city?

But any pride we may feel at the coming together of all segments of Oklahoma's citizenry is tempered by a sense of humility at the outpouring of assistance from across the nation. The examples are myriad, but one in particular put old rivalries in perspective for Sooner fans. At the University of Nebraska spring football game four days after the bombing, the 40,000 Cornhusker faithful passed the hat for disaster relief in Oklahoma.

The outward symbols of our togetherness are beginning to fade as we prepare to go on with our lives. The search and rescue teams have departed; the emergency aid and hot meal stations are closed. The memorial ribbons we wore are less visible now; we have switched off our headlights. In a few days demolition workers will take down the remaining shell of the Murrah Building, leaving its image forever imprinted on our minds.

One vestige of this traumatic time is worth preserving, however: the spirit of unity in the midst of tragedy that so astonished the rest of the country. In letting our concern for each other dominate every other concern, we refused to let the bad guys win.

Even at the State Capitol, observers reported a remarkable absence of political infighting. For that brief time at least, bickering and jockeying for partisan advantage seemed inappropriate, disrespectful of the loss we had suffered.

If all of Oklahoma's problems could be addressed in the same spirit of selfless cooperation, we wouldn't have many problems. Now just how difficult could that be?
—CJB