

Terror in America's Heartland...25 Years Ago: Oklahoma City a look Back/Forward

April 19, 2020... the 25th Anniversary of a terrorist's bomb that killed 168 people in America's Heartland! However, the bombing did not kill the spirit of the citizens of Oklahoma City who impressed the world with their courage and resiliency...and the Oklahoma Standard was born!

An Article by Charles H. Van Rysselberge, CCE, IOM (Written for April 19, 2020)

The fourth floor of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce building, is where I was, when the explosion went off with such force, that I thought it was an earthquake. It wasn't an earthquake, as all the world would soon know, but it was a terrorist bomb that destroyed half of Oklahoma City's Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, just four blocks away, where 550 people worked and 20 small children attended day care.

As head of the Oklahoma City Chamber, at that particular time, one of my first thoughts was to get to the site of the explosion. But police stopped me less than a block from the federal building, and when I returned to my office, I was told we would have to evacuate because of possible gas leaks in the downtown area.

None of us knew how high the death toll would ultimately climb. But judging from the severity of the explosion, the news was sure to be bad. To make matters worse, scores of businesses were crippled and journalists from all over the world were about to descend on Oklahoma City, making it clear that at a time when we were hurting badly and our infrastructure was at its worst, we somehow needed to be at our best.

What is amazing, judging from what I saw and heard, at that time, is that I think we were definitely at our best! In fact, the term..."the Oklahoma Standard"...was coined as a result of that period!

The bomb went off at 9:02 AM on the morning of April 19, 1995, and within 24 hours our Chamber of Commerce had set up a news media center, dealt with conventions that had to be canceled, and organized an emergency business assistance center with a relief fund that early on generated, from unsolicited contributions, nearly \$250,000 to help business owners restore service. Included in those donations was a very generous \$500 check from a very small Chamber in Three Rivers, Texas (pop. 3,000, chamber staff: of one). One of our roles, we felt, was to minimize the disruption of payrolls, for impacted businesses.

In addition to the cash, phone calls made from our emergency business assistance center generated in-kind contributions of furniture, equipment, and temporary office space which totaled over \$400,000 in value. So, we became a clearing house for needed business resources.

I don't know how many cups of coffee or dozens of doughnuts we served, beginning at 5 AM every day in the makeshift media center we set up in the lobby of the Medallion Hotel! However, it had to be a lot, considering that everyone from Geraldo to the Swedish News Service came to Oklahoma City to cover the worst terrorist act committed on American soil in history, at that time. We recorded that our Chamber Staff dealt with 800 of the 2,000 news media folks who came to town over the weeks that followed.

For example: ABC sent in seven private planes and 100 people to produce segments for Good Morning America, World News Tonight, 20/20, and Nightline. CNN, sent in more than 100 people from six bureaus all over the country, was still there weeks later, and had plans to stay on the story for the rest of the year.

Fire fighters and federal rescue teams came there from New York, Virginia, Florida, Arizona, Washington, California and Maryland, and team members said their experiences there were most unusual. They recalled that at the scene of disasters in other parts of the country, they had to buy their own coffee and the price of bottled water tripled on them.

Whereas, in Oklahoma City, our goal was to prevent rescue workers from spending any of their own money. This culture and attitude is what caused us to be known as the Oklahoma Standard! Long distance calls to their families were free. When combing through the wreckage of the federal building depleted their supply of work gloves, droves of people went to hardware stores and bought batches at a time. The same was true for knee pads, underwear and portable heaters. When rescue workers' clothes got dirty, they were washed; when they ripped, they were bought new ones, etc. When the Rescue Teams left OKC, they gave Governor Keating a One Dollar Bill they signed, and said that "this is the dollar we never had to spend here!"

For inspiration, they were given thank you notes from school children. And when they laid their tired heads down for the night on cots set up in our convention center, they found a mint or a rose on their pillow. Exhibitors from the Oklahoma Restaurant Association, whose convention had just been cancelled, stayed on to cook meals for the rescue workers! It may sound corny to some, but we wanted these rescue workers to know how much we appreciated them risking their lives to save some of ours.

The final death toll from the federal building bombing was 168, including 15 children at the day care center. In addition, nearly 600 were injured by a bomb made from fertilizer and fuel that weighed nearly 5,000 pounds. One very generous rescue worker was killed in the recovery, and therefore, the final toll was 169 people who lost their lives in this tragedy. Over 300 buildings and 2,000 cars sustained some kind of damage! One thousand fire personnel were rotated through the disaster area over 15 plus days, and it was reported that it would have taken a typical fire fighter 15 years to generate that volume of experience, from the degree of exposure they received!

With a catastrophe of this magnitude, everyone at the OKC Chamber knew someone who was killed or injured in the blast, or who was related in some way to someone who was. As the death toll continued to mount, we were particularly concerned with the fate of a 21-month-old infant who was one of five children in the day care center who survived the blast. His mother worked for the Chamber, and he spent three weeks in intensive care before he was allowed to go home. His mother decided not to return to work, because she felt her day-to-day interaction with him was critical to his continued recovery.

Our Chamber Board Chairman that year, Dr. Bill Thurman, who was a medical doctor, former head of the OU Medical School and current head at that time of the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation, ended up on the front lines! He pitched in to help with the triage units that were quickly established.

Looking back on April 19, 1995, and the days that followed, I am so very proud of how Oklahoma City

reacted. Consider the following testimonials:

...Dan McGraw, U.S. News and World Report: "I never thought too much about the place, but after seeing 300+ people standing in line for hours to give blood, I quickly changed my mind about Oklahoma City."

...Peter D'Oench, WPLG-TV in Miami: "Before now, I only knew Oklahoma City from a distance. I passed it on my way to my first TV job. I should have stopped."

...President Clinton: "If anybody thinks that Americans have lost the capacity for love, caring, and courage, they ought to come to Oklahoma."

...Further testimony to Oklahoma City's resiliency is the fact that not even a terrorist bomb could derail Oklahoma City's \$400 million public infrastructure building program, which was started 15 months earlier, with the passage of a temporary one cent sales tax. This vision went on to result in a new 12,000 seat baseball park for the Triple A franchise Oklahoma Redhawks, a 20,000-seat indoor sports arena that was designed to attract an NBA franchise, and later did so with the team from Seattle becoming the OKC Thunder!

In addition, it went on to build a new library, a riverwalk/canal similar to San Antonio's, remodeling the civic center music hall and the expansion of the convention center where rescue teams were once housed. Also, the Oklahoma River was transformed into a chain of river lakes, approximately seven miles long, that has attracted numerous Boat Houses and has become a US Olympic Team training site, to complement local University Rowing Teams. These are just a few of the original projects that have all come to life.

Years later, the expanded convention center became so successful, that it was out grown and in 2009, it triggered citizen support for **MAPS #3** which included a brand new convention center and 600+ room hotel, a 70 acre downtown park (think NYC's Central Park), and five others. In December 2019, citizens approved **MAPS #4** (by 72%) for 16 new projects, with a new one cent sales tax for 8 years that will generate an estimated \$978 million dollars. Downtown hotels have grown from one in 1993 to over 25 in 2020!

Since 1995, this public infrastructure vision which received citizen approval in December 1993, has led to more than \$5 Billion dollars of public and private funds being spent in downtown OKC alone. Known as **MAPS #1** (Metropolitan Area Projects), it is a national model for public/private partnerships! **MAPS #2** was exclusively for education with the passage of a sales tax and bond referendum for public schools.

At the time of the bombing, our OKC Chamber was preparing to kick-off a multi-year funding campaign (Forward OKC: the new agenda) for \$10 million, to support economic development activities. The successful campaign was led by Clay Bennett, today's Oklahoma City Thunder Chairman. Kick-off was postponed only a few weeks, and has continued ever since, repeatedly with new five year cycles of renewal. Today OKC enjoys a track record of low unemployment, a diversified economy, and is truly a "cool place" to be!

I mention these projects not to trumpet the urban renewal and economic development initiatives of OKC, but to spotlight the fact that Oklahomans are a special breed of people. They bent a little in the wake of the terrorist's bomb, but they didn't break, and they were not about to let the events of April 19, 1995, have a long-term negative effect on the quality of life in Oklahoma City!

There has been a long string of outstanding public and private leadership in Oklahoma City, that continues to this day with Mayor David Holt. In 1995, even if we had gone to central casting, we could not have had a better Mayor (Ron Norick) or Governor (Frank Keating), to lead the efforts of our recovery, at that time.

The images that will remain in my mind the longest are not of the victims being carried from the rubble of the federal building, as tragic as it was. What I remember most is the generous support that was displayed...such as the lady who drove up one day with 1,000 sandwiches in her car, that she and her neighbors had made for the rescue workers. The TV Stations telling local citizens..."OK, thank you, we now have enough gloves, we do not need any more!" This was repeated when other products were requested and then squelched, as the need was quickly filled.

A local newspaper (Daily Oklahoman), let a competitor, whose building was severely damaged in the explosion, use its presses to print. The scene at a local bank where everyone was ordered to evacuate the building immediately after the bomb blast, leaving cash exposed at the teller windows. When bank personnel returned five hours later, not a single dollar was missing. A child mailed in three band-aids and included a note, "I hope this will help!" Also, the local TV station that announced it would take drive-up donations for victims' families, created a traffic jam of good Samaritans. Cars were lined up for hours... incredible scene!

Some of the Lessons Learned at the time included:

1. At our Chamber...we realized the need for a Crisis Management Plan, that includes information as to where to meet and how to communicate with staff when you have to instantly evacuate your building for several days. Also, the realization that staff needs a stress debriefing from a professional counselor, to help channel their emotions and feelings...even if they have not been impacted personally by a tragedy.
2. In the Community...the need for public emergency equipment to be compatible, such as having a common communication system in place. This was soon addressed with a state-of-the-art system for fire and police!
3. All Businesses & Citizens...the need for a Personal Crisis Management Plan, and to review the fine print of property insurance policies, to insure one knows exactly what extent of coverage they have & don't have!

Today, in OKC, one finds the Oklahoma National Memorial and Museum! Following 1995, three official projects were planned and developed, related to the bombing: the Oklahoma City National Memorial which is supported by national park rangers and has visitors showing up 24 hours a day/night, a Museum located next door in a building that was significantly impacted by the bombing, and then Oklahoma's gift to the world for all the global support it received was the...Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. The Museum has undergone over \$8 million of remodeling for enhancements of museum exhibits, interactive stations, and tells the final pieces of the story, including the investigation, journey to justice, etc.

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