

The Orphans Of Oklahoma City

On the morning of April 19,1995, a 4,800-pound bomb
detonated in the parking lot of a federal office building—and
took away their parents forever

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TODRICK HARDING WAS 8 YEARS old when he finally heard the news, and at first he didn't understand it. For weeks, rescue workers had combed the rubble of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building for signs of Ron Harding, 55, who worked in the Social Security office on the first floor. Todrick's mother had died of a heart attack shortly after he was born, and Ron was the only parent he had ever known. "Is he dead?" Todrick would ask his sisters, Kim, 27, and Rhonda, 29. "Can he get out?"

"No, Todrick, he can't get out," Kimberly would tell him. "It's just like when you got stuck in that closet that time." When rescuers at last identified Ron's body, the sisters broke the news to Todrick. "Daddy's been identified," one told him. Todrick looked puzzled. "What's 'identified' mean?"

As Oklahoma City observes the first anniversary of the April 19 bombing, downtown still shows the scars of the blast. The site of the Murrah building – ripped apart by 4,800 pounds of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil housed in a Ryder van – has been fully cleared; fresh sod is turning brown in the sun behind a wire fence. But many of the surrounding structures are still in tatters. Meanwhile, the city is awaiting justice: alleged conspirators Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols won't be tried for the 168 murders until later this year or next in Denver. Recovery here, for both the people and their city, is going to take a while.

Todrick Harding is one of at least 10 minors orphaned by the blast. Others, the children of split families, endured the death of the only parent in their lives. In all, more than 150 kids under the age of 23 lost a parent in the bombing. These young people aren't the most famous victims; they weren't the innocents in the America's Kids day-care center on the second floor. But in a city permeated with grief – nearly 40 percent of locals knew someone killed or injured in the explosion – the orphans are among the hardest-hit survivors, trying to make the best of their tangled lives.

In his bedroom in Oklahoma City, Justin Day has a stack of drawings. A cherubic 12-year-old with sandy brown bangs falling softly on his rounded face, Justin is a quiet boy, always has been. "I don't know where he gets it," says his grandmother Frankie Day. "His mother was very outgoing." But Justin's drawings are vividly expressive. Most show X-Men or other comic-book heroes, in meticulous colored pencil. But there's also a rough black-and-white sketch in the stack. The left-hand side depicts a pastoral landscape with the sun cresting the horizon beneath the word HAPPY. On the right side a young boy is crying beneath the word SAD. Justin drew this picture around Christmas, a time when he relapsed into grief over his mother, Diana Day, who'd worked in the HUD office. A nun asked him to draw a picture of his feelings. Now he offers the sketch without comment, except to note its crudeness. It isn't so good, he says. He did it in five minutes, just before the nun was due to visit again.

From Frankie and William Day's backyard, in a development of uniform ranch houses on the southwestern edge of town, the flat horizon offers mostly telephone poles and wind. A trampoline out back has become a magnet for kids in the neighborhood; the Jacuzzi and pool are still under wraps, waiting for spring. Justin and his mother moved in with her parents around the time he was born. The boy's father was never a

part of his life; he died of a drug overdose when Justin was 6. In the first few days after the explosion, while they waited anxiously to hear whether Diana Day was among the survivors, Frankie remembers Justin's saying, "It's just not fair. I've already lost my dad, and now I've lost my mother, too."

In the early weeks and months, Frankie says, Justin couldn't sleep at night. The insomnia returned over Christmas, his first without his mother. Now Frankie is worried about Justin's attending the upcoming anniversary memorial service, where Vice President Al Gore will pay tribute to the dead and the survivors. "I don't want him to go through that again," she says.

Tim Hearn, 29, probably won't be taking his brothers and sisters to the memorial, either. He'll be too busy. On a blustery day last week, Tim stood watering the stubbly patch of dirt in front of the home he has been heading since his mother, Castine Deveroux, 49, was killed in the explosion. The prospects for the grass seem dubious. But the house, a modest one in the largely black northeast section, is scrupulously neat. "I have a big responsibility now," he says.

On the morning of April 19, Tim's mother called him from her job in the HUD office in the Murrah building. She wanted him to tape her soap opera, "Days of Our Lives," and make sure his sister Cathy, 13, got to school on time. Tim was at the house for a short visit. After years of frustration, wanting to get clear of Oklahoma City, he'd finally moved to Albuquerque. His dream was to play Division I college basketball; that fall, at the University of New Mexico, he expected to do it. "I was ready to start my new life," he says. "A lot of my friends were proud of me." Then the bomb went off.

These days, Tim and his brother Ronnie, 23, are doing their best to take care of their siblings Erick, Hurtis and Cathy. Tim went to court to get custody of the two younger children, whose father (Deveroux had kids by two husbands) had long since disappeared. Castine Deveroux was a powerful, resourceful woman; she'd raised the six children almost entirely by herself. Now she was gone. "I didn't know it took all this responsibility," Tim says. "Paying bills, food, clothes. I'm glad I didn't have kids already." Charities are still helping with the bills. Tim, who is in training to sell insurance, makes sure the kids keep up at school and, though he was never too religious, that they go to church. "I know my mama was a righteous woman, and I owe her that."

TIM STILL WANTS EVENTUALLY TO get out of town. He's given up hope of playing Division I ball. If he ever gets time, he'll go to the University of Central Oklahoma, where they play Division II. "I put all my goals on hold," he says. A year after the bombing, he isn't much interested in the McVeigh-Nichols trial. He has too much else to do. But a month and a half ago, Tim had a dream about his mother. He lights up when he describes it. "Me and my mom were out in the street, and we heard this roar over our heads, like an airplane. When we looked up, it was a cross. My mom was real happy, because God was coming." Later, he told his aunt about the dream. "She said it was my mom's way of letting me know she finally made it to heaven."

Where Tim Hearn's family has pulled together after the attack, others have blown apart. The family of Bobby and Donna Luster were deep in poverty last April, with a broken sewage pipe and an eviction notice over their heads. On the morning of April 19, Bobby and Donna went to the Murrah building for government assistance. When the bomb exploded, their six children, ages 6 to 22, were orphaned. Their landlord, who never liked them anyway, still wanted them out. He even suggested to reporters the parents might have been faking their disappearance to avoid paying rent.

In the days following the bombing, news accounts glowed with images of a community valiantly joined together by catastrophe. The Feds, the Red Cross and private donations paid for the orphans' immediate needs, and scholarship money awaits. But over the past year, some survivors have bickered over relief funds, and the Lusters have been in the middle of it. A troubled family before the bomb, they haven't really shaken their dysfunction. Robbie, now 23, drifted into crack cocaine, and eventually into jail. Jackie, 19, left the state. The three youngest siblings went to live with their aunt, Barbara Powers, 35, a single mother already raising two kids. Here, they found a more solid home – they'd arrived with head lice and medical problems – but also scandal. In just four months, Powers ran through more than \$55,000 in charitable funds donated, the older children charge, for the benefit of all the kids. Her legal guardianship of the three children was just revoked. They remain with her for now, afraid they'll lose yet another home.

Todrick Harding, now 9, seems to have adjusted well. He takes turns living in the homes of his two sisters, and is uncannily sharp. When he watches TV and Tim McVeigh comes on, Todrick says, "That's him. That's the man who killed my dad." On Good Friday, when President Clinton came to town for a memorial service, Todrick pulled his sister through the crowd, trying to get close enough to introduce himself. When he reached Clinton, he offered sympathy for the death of Ron Brown. "I'm so sorry about that friend of yours that died on that plane crash in Bosnia."

But Todrick, too, has his problems. After the bomb, he became obsessed with death. A year later, he has planned out exactly what he wants for his own funeral. "Todrick can tell you the music he wants, the suit he wants to wear, everything," says Kimberly. The city will rebuild its downtown. Last week heavy machinery scratched at one newly razed site north of the Murrah building, preparing for new construction. But for the children left behind by the most devastating act of domestic terrorism in American history, the damage will take much longer to repair.

Seven families of Oklahoma kids lost their only remaining parent in the blast

Todrick, 9; Kimberly, 27; Rhonda, 29. Parent: Ron Harding, 55, worked in 1st-floor Social Security office

Carol, 7; Roy, 13; Liz, 16; Jackie, 19; Tina, 21; Robbie, 23. Parents: Robert, 45, and Aurelia Donna Luster, 43, customers in Social Security office

Justin, 12. Parent: Diana L. Day, 38, worked in 7th-floor HUD office

Cathy, 13; Hurtis, 16; Erick Hearn, 20; Ronald Hearn, 23; Cedric Hearn, 25; Timothy Hearn, 29. Parent: Castine Deveroux, 49, worked in 7th-floor HUD office

Maureen, 30. Parent: Olen Bloomer, 61 worked in 5th-loor Dept. of Agriculture office

Jose Luz, 12; Armando, 16; Manuel, 18; Maria de Jesus, 20; Maria Guadalupe, 26; Juan, 27. Parent: Emilio Tapia, 50, customer in 1st-floor Social Security office

James, 15; Michael Jr., 16; Amber, 18. Parent: Michael, 44, director of Dept. of Transportation office.

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