

Nichols writes to 'prayer partner' - Bombing survivor ready to testify to support him when the trial resumes

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Author: Nolan Clay | Page: 1A | Section: NEWS

Terry Nichols has become a "prayer partner" with a federal employee who survived the Oklahoma City bombing, writing that he has "truly ... come to know God" since the 1995 attack.

"We all would be much better off if we would learn to control our emotions with our minds," Nichols, 48, wrote in one letter. "By allowing God to truly enter our hearts is the first step in achieving this goal."

Sharilee Lyons, an employee of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, believes Nichols is sincere.

"It sounded sincere. It really did," she said from her home in a Cleveland suburb. "I know he's a Christian. ... I have no doubts. If he's not, then he sure is putting on a good false front."

Change of heart

Lyons is listed as a defense witness for Nichols' state trial, which resumes Monday in McAlester after a recess. Jurors first will hear opening statements.

Defense attorneys want to call Lyons in an effort to save Nichols' life, should jurors convict him of first-degree murder. Prosecutors are seeking a death sentence.

"I will definitely speak out," Lyons said. "I think he has a lot to give, a lot that God's given him that he can give to humanity."

Lyons once hoped Nichols would be executed. The two began corresponding in 2001 after she wrote to him and bomber Timothy McVeigh of her decision to forgive them.

"I just had a change of heart," she said. "God was working on me. ... I had to let them know that I forgave them for what they did to me. ... I wrote a letter. I put a bunch of stuff in it. I shared the Gospel with both of them. ... McVeigh, he never did respond, but I was very shocked ... I heard from Terry Nichols."

She now has 15 to 20 letters from Nichols and has met with him once at the Oklahoma County jail. She read parts of the letters to The Oklahoman.

Defense attorneys confirmed at a pretrial hearing that the two correspond. Lyons was referred to at the pretrial hearing as his "prayer partner."

She missed bombing

Lyons said she still believes Nichols is guilty of a role in the 1995 bombing. She said Nichols never writes about his case. He is claiming in his trial that he was framed.

Lyons was not at work on April 19, 1995, when a truck bomb ripped apart the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. She said 38 friends were killed in the explosion and the blast "cut a path through" her work area. Her desk fell seven stories.

She believes she would have been killed, too, if she'd been there. She said she was so overcome by guilt at surviving that she transferred to the HUD office in Cleveland.

She testified about her ordeal at Nichols' federal sentencing in 1998. Nichols was sentenced in his federal case to life in prison without the possibility of release.

Nichols wrote in his first letter to her about her testimony.

"I have never held any anger, bitterness or resentment towards you or any of the other victims or survivors for anything that may have been said towards me," he wrote. "I have learned that holding such ill feelings does one no good and only brings self-destruction."

She said Nichols' letters are spiritual. Nichols calls her his "beloved sister in Christ."

He closed one recent letter — written after his move to McAlester — with the words: "With loving kindness and blessings."

"I'm lifting him up in prayer, and I'm ministering to him," said Lyons, who described herself as in her 50s. "At the same time, he shares things that he's been learning in the Word. ... And he's ministering to me, if you can believe that."

Also corresponding with and visiting Nichols has been Kathy Wilburn, whose two grandsons died in the day-care center at the Murrah Building during the bombing. She has investigated on her own the possibility that others were involved in the attack.

Wilburn said she contacted Nichols as part of her mission to find out the truth but has been frustrated so far.

"I haven't found out who those people are," she said.

"I feel like that if he were to be executed, that he might tell me before he's executed."

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