

Encounter With Evil

A survivor recalls meeting with Timothy McVeigh inside the Murrah building prior to the bombing

By OMER GILLHAM, World Staff Writer | Tulsa World | April 16th, 2005

When Timothy McVeigh was on trial for mass murder, he would calmly glance across the federal courtroom at Dr. Pau Heath and smile.

McVeigh met Heath on the fifth floor of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City six days before the blast, said Heath, who survived the April 19, 1995, explosion that killed 168 people.

As the 10th anniversary of the bombing approaches, Heath still clearly recalls his chilling meeting with McVeigh.

He remembers McVeigh's voice and his long fingers when McVeigh raised his hand to make a point about his name.

"We had a 15-minute conversation about Veterans Affairs, helping him find work," said Heath, 68, a former VA administrator. "When I asked if he was kin to the McVays near Cushing, he said 'How do they spell their name?' And then he said, 'Remember, Dr. Heath, my name is McVeigh.' "

At the time of the bombing, Heath was the office coordinator of the Oklahoma City VA at the Murrah building and a counseling psychologist. He also served as the building's medical safety officer.

As McVeigh visited with him, Heath suggested he might find construction work on Interstate 35. McVeigh seemed uninterested and waved off Heath when he attempted to call around for work leads.

"Looking back, I now believe he was sending a message that day that he wanted to be remembered," said Heath. "He would make eye contact with me in the courtroom and grin and nod.

"He recognized me."

McVeigh was convicted in 1997 and executed in June 2001 at an Indiana federal prison. Terry Nichols was convicted in both federal and state courts for his role in the bombing and is serving multiple life sentences.

Heath is one of the few people to meet or see McVeigh in the Murrah building and live to talk about it, he said. Heath said he did not recognize McVeigh's description for many days after the bombing.

A reporter's statement during an interview caused Heath to recall McVeigh's visit with a burst of clarity, Heath said.

"I could not believe that anyone would be so ignorant to come into my office and tell all these details about living in Kansas, his name and who he was," Heath said.

"I wasn't really paying attention to the bomber after the bombing and when I told a reporter that the bomber wasn't a veteran, the reporter said, 'Dr. Heath, the bomber is a decorated Gulf War veteran,' " Heath said. "My God, that hit me like a ton of bolts. I picked up the phone and called the FBI."

Heath, who experiences hearing loss, breathing difficulties and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the bombing, retired from the Department of Veterans Affairs in 1999. He maintained a private psychological practice after retiring. He lives in Oklahoma City.

In the years since the bombing, Heath has counseled thousands of veterans and private clients on depression, trauma, career decisions and marital challenges, he said.

Heath said his own experience with post-traumatic stress disorder has enriched his counseling knowledge. The disorder is a physical and mental manifestation experienced by veterans, trauma victims and adults raised in dysfunctional homes.

Heath said he believes talking about the trauma helps relieve its power; however, he also respects those who don't want to revisit traumatic events. Out of respect for his clients, Heath said he rarely brings up his experience in a counseling session, even though it might help build rapport with a client.

"I don't bring it up but my clients often do, and I tell them that it is OK to talk about trauma and to revisit it often to find the positive in it," Heath said. "Revisiting the trauma and balancing the positive and negative allow the person to be what I view as a thriving survivor."

Before the bombing, Heath said he had an intellectual understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder, but he now knows about it at the physical level. Heath said hypervigilance -- a heightened sense of monitoring the environment or people's behavior -- is a classical PTSD symptom. It often manifests itself in body tension, quickened breathing and a quickened heart rate.

"I do just fine, and I can talk about the bombing, but there is no question my body goes into a slightly defensive mode when I rekindle these memories," Heath said.

Heath recalled the moment the massive truck bomb exploded.

"I heard three sounds," Heath said. "I heard the dynamite ignite, and that set off the fuel oil that made a loud humming sound like a transformer. Then I heard the building coming down. Nine floors pancaking on top (of) one another."

The force of the truck bomb scooped out about 40 percent of the Murrah building offices, Heath said, adding he survived the blast because his office was in the westward end of the building, which remained somewhat intact after the blast.

"I was covered with debris from the ceiling and walls and debris blown in from the bomb," Heath said. "I remember thinking, 'God, I don't want to die in this building. I don't want die today or like this. If it's OK with you, God, I would like to die later.' "

Heath said he recalls hearing screams for help from coworkers as he dug himself out of the bombing debris. He freed himself and began climbing over broken desks, twisted ceiling grids and ruined filing cabinets to help his fellow workers.

"I saw Martin Cash, and he said, 'I think my eye is out,' " Heath said. "When I looked at him, I could see he had pulled a large glass shard out of his eye and pulled out the eye with it."

Badly shaken, Heath said he focused his attention and helped fellow workers exit the Murrah building. Many employees working at Heath's office were injured but none was killed, he said.

Heath's instinct to help others out of the Murrah building as it burned and crackled mirrors his life before and after the bombing. In addition to counseling others, Heath keeps a watchful eye for stranded motorists and people needing help. In his car, Heath carries an extra car battery, jumper cables and a gas can to help stranded motorists. "I just helped someone the other day, and I get great enjoyment out of that," Heath said.