

HUMBLE OKLAHOMAN OF THE YEAR HEROES



THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE OKLAHOMA CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT

By Maura McDermott

WE ARE NOT HEROES. That is what the Oklahoma city firefighters tried to tell us during the sixteen days they rescued the survivors and recovered the victims of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. Firefighters tried to point out who they considered the real heroes of the tragedy. The innocent dead. The families of the victims. The survivors. The unnamed, untrained folks who ran into the building minutes after it fell to pull the shocked and bleeding out of the dust. The Red Cross and other volunteers. The police, emergency medical workers, doctors, nurses, soldiers...

As for why practically everyone but they were heroes, the explanation was simple: "We were doing our job." They were right. If the bombing was the biggest event in the history of the Oklahoma City Fire Department, it was also just a more intense version of what firefighters deal with every day—scenes of destruction where some people are saved, and others are lost. It was one of about forty thousand calls or rides that Oklahoma City firefighters take each year—to fires, to car wrecks, to heart attacks, to chlorine spills, to hot air balloons fallen out of the sky. "Anytime the light kicks on, we are expected to take care of it," says Corporal Rick Harris of Fire Station I, located just five blocks from the site of the Murrah building. So, on the morning of April 19,



Above from left, John Williams, Carl Glover, Bob Edwards, Tim Farmer, and Ed Koch.

THE HIGHEST HONOR

In 1995, the International Association of Fire Chiefs awarded the fire department the Ben Franklin award for heroism and valor.

1995, Harris and others on the red shift at Station I made a ride to the worst terrorist attack ever on American soil.

Because of the magnitude of the attack, the world, however, insisted on thinking of the rescuers, especially the firefighters, as heroes. Figures in smudged helmets and baggy brown coats and pants, OKLA CITY in big block letters on their backs, appeared daily on our television screens and on the front pages of our newspapers. Mostly nameless, often faceless, they did

tasks no one should ever have to do. From time to time one of these figures would take off his helmet and tell us a story—of carrying a lifeless infant into the light, of clutching a living hand sticking out of the rubble like a battered flower, of finding a toy fire truck among the fallen walls—and then go back to his work. They downplayed the dangers to their bodies and minds, but we knew better.

No matter how much they denied it, they were our heroes, symbols of sanity amidst a landscape of madness. And of course we were right, too, if you define a hero as someone noted for feats of courage or nobility, as my dictionary does. Agreeing with the public, the International Association of Fire Chiefs awarded the Oklahoma City Fire Department the Ben Franklin award for heroism and valor. Usually given to an individual, the medal is the highest honor the fire service bestows. "I couldn't be prouder," says Fire Chief Gary Marrs of his firefighters. In a letter of commendation each firefighter received in June, Marrs wrote: "You have shown this community and this country the best part of human nature: the willingness to help others in time of great need...You have proved that this is the best fire department in the nation."

Opposite page, clockwise from left, police Sgt. John Avera, Baylee Almon, and Chris Fields; Homer Jones; firefighters at the Murrah building; and Brian Arnold.

The Working Life

DINNER WAS READY. THE FIREFIGHTERS WORKING the red shift at Station I were about to load their plates with chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, baby carrots, and black-eyed peas when suddenly the overhead lights flashed brighter for an instant and a signal sounded. There was instantaneous attention. As the dispatcher ran through the address and the reported problem, four firefighters abandoned their plates and just like in the movies, slid down poles to their truck. In the space of a minute, the rescue squad was making a ride—siren on, red lights flashing—down the quiet dinnertime streets to Pathways, a nearby residence for the mentally disabled. Over their heads, a Christmas tree shone in green lights on top of a downtown office building.

Carrying orange boxes of medical gear, the four bounded out of the truck and into the building and a room painted with a bright tropical scene of palm trees and pounding surf. A thin gray haired man sat alone at the end of the room, and though he was surrounded by palm trees, he was shaking as if he were frozen to the marrow. Drops of blood dotted the linoleum floor. The squad was all calm efficiency: pulling on gloves, taking the man's blood pressure and pulse rate, getting his medical records, questioning the staffer who had called 911. The sick man would not speak and could not stop shaking; before long, Rick Harris, the lead emergency medical technician on the call, gently strapped an oxygen mask across his face. A minute passed and the man laid his head back and began to wail like a heartbroken dog on the end of a chain. Frightened, an onlooker began to cry. "These people know what they're doing," the staffer reassured her. "They're A number 1!"

Before long EMSA arrived to take the man to the hospital, and the squad was able to leave this small scene of misery and return to dinner. Citywide, seventy percent of fire department calls involve medical emergencies. The squad stays busy, called out on the average about seven to nine times per twenty-four hour shift. In contrast, there were two fire calls that day. Because of better building codes, heating systems, and public education efforts by the fire department, the number of fires has gone

down in the last twenty or so years, says Dick Miller, assistant fire marshal. Fire deaths, too, are way down, because of increased use of smoke alarms.

Consequently, firefighters in the Nineties have to do more than "put the wet stuff on the red stuff," or in laymen's parlance: put out fires. All firefighters know basic emergency medical techniques, and many have advanced skills. There is a special team at Station V for the handling of hazardous materials

(there were four hundred "hazmat" calls last year), and a special team at Station VIII for underwater rescue. Some firefighters have also trained in the techniques of confined space rescue and high angle rescue (using ropes)—both critically in need in the Murrah building rescue. Firefighters with specialized training are scattered among the city's thirty-seven fire stations. "We've tried to evolve into a full service organization," says assistant fire chief Kenneth Bunch. His firefighters have to be prepared for everything, because, as Bunch explains, "In the majority of incidents we roll up and don't know what it is."

Today there are one thousand firefighters in Oklahoma City, up by about two hundred in the last

five years. They ought to borrow "the few, the proud" slogan from the Marines because competition for a spot in the fire academy is fierce—for each class of twenty, three thousand have applied. After written and physical exams and an interview, the chosen go through sixteen weeks of training and then a year of probation.

This is a far cry from thirty years ago, when Dick Miller became a water squirter. After a rudimentary screening process, he was on the job a month before acquiring any formal training. His first day was memorable: just as the station officer was about to sound a test alarm so Miller would know what to expect, a real alarm went off. The officer said, "That's it—jump on," and Miller did, one arm stuffed in his coat sleeve, the other holding onto the rescue squad truck for dear life. Upon arrival at the fire scene, "I had no idea what to do," he recalls. He learned by watching the old hands. Those were the days of the mighty smoke eaters, firefighters with leather lungs who regularly entered burning buildings without air masks and usually came out—tops of ears sizzling, tips of the fireman's trademark mustache singed—to tell the tale. The long-term results, however, were not so inspiring: high rates of lung and heart disease caused by smoke exposure.



In most instances, firefighters arrive on the scene with no clue as to what they will find there.

THE DAYS OF NAKED HEROICS ARE OVER

Firefighters still enter burning buildings, but they wear a breathing apparatus and are clothed in protective gear made of space-age fabrics good to over 800° F.

The days of naked heroics are over. Firefighters still enter burning buildings, but they must wear a breathing apparatus similar to what scuba divers use. They are clothed in bunker gear made of space-age fabrics that protect at temperatures of more than 800° F.; whereas the smoke eater made do with cotton or polyester. Hazardous materials teams wear even more specialized protective gear nicknamed moon suits. The safety upgrades extend to the fire trucks: firefighters ride inside now, and there are doors on the cabs. These days chain saws have replaced axes, and even computers have infiltrated the stations.

Despite the modern accouterments, a day at the fire station is still a mix of routine and excitement, as it always has been. Shifts are twenty-four hours long and start at 7 a.m. First thing, firefighters check all their equipment and apparatus, clean the station, and do stretching exercises together. They eat breakfast together, too—firefighters at Station I take turns fixing meals and draw for clean-up chores. Each day there is a mandatory two hours of school in fire or rescue techniques at the fire station, or alternatively, practice sessions of fire or rescue tactics, sometimes with other companies. Fire companies also make safety inspections and draw up pre-fire plans of businesses in their districts as well as test each of the city's ten thousand fire hydrants each year.

These activities are in addition to calls. Despite their busy schedules, the camaraderie traditionally shared by firefighters remains strong. Twenty-four-hour shifts make the firehouse more like a second home than a place of employment. The atmosphere around the firehouse is jovial, and practical jokes abound; firefighters at Station I liken it to summer camp or a slumber party. The enthusiasm for the job gets passed down; firefighters often follow in their father's or uncle's or cousin's footsteps. Chief Marrs himself is a third-generation firefighter.

The allure of the shiny red fire engine, it seems, is hard to resist. And while the modern firefighter may be a renaissance man (or woman), expected to know how to both comfort the hurt and clean up toxic chemical spills, down deep what really gets his or her heart pumping is a good, working fire. Despite the risks, or perhaps because of them, fighting fires is a thrill. Lt. Tommy Phillips of Station I compares fighting a fire to taking a roller coaster ride. "When you kick in the front door, it's scary," he says. Inside a burning building, it is usually pitch-black with smoke-filled air, and it can be difficult to

DEALING WITH THE PRESSURE

The flip side to the adrenaline rush is how hard it can be to turn it off... firefighters see things that make it hard to come back and eat dinner—no matter how good the firehouse cook.

On-duty firefighters spend two hours a day on fire and rescue techniques.

locate the fire. Fires are also unpredictable animals—one moment apparently tamed, the next, springing on you like a wildcat. But after the fire is out and everyone is safe, he explains, there is euphoria: "You're jumping up and down, hooting and hollering 'Let's do it again!'" Such moments, he says, make firefighting "the best job in the world."

The flip side to the adrenaline rush, however, is how hard it can be to turn it off—especially for rookies. A case in point: Fire alarms used to be accompanied by a distinctive click, which sounded just like the click of an electric light switch, says eighteen-year-veteran Oliver Moore of Station I. This made an afternoon nap on days off nearly impossible; with the flip of a switch in the next room a firefighter was up and running (the solution was installing silent switches). The longer you are a firefighter, on the other hand, the harder it is to get the adrenaline flowing—especially in the dead of night, when the firefighter has to go from "gumbyland" to "full tilt-boogie," as one firefighter put it, ready to rush into a burning building or aid a heart attack victim. One older firefighter confesses to having awakened at the wheel half-way to a call.

Psychological strain adds to the pressure. On Captain Nathan Shipman's first day on the job, he was faced with a mother who had just strangled her child. Fire-

fighters see things that make it hard to come back and eat dinner—no matter how good the firehouse cook. The stress takes its toll: firefighters reportedly have higher than average rates of divorce and suicide. While once firefighters tried to cope by holding emotions in, in the last few years the macho approach shows signs of going the way of leather helmets. Even old-timers like twenty-eight-year-veteran David Bowman have embraced talking it out. The new attitude, Bowman hopes, will keep young fire-



fighters from quitting and others from taking early retirement, as well as keep marriages intact.

While talking is a good strategy for coping with the horrors of the job, it cannot beat the boost that comes from actually saving someone's life. And rescuers often forge strong emotional bonds with those they rescue. Oliver Moore and other firefighters from Station I went to the hospital to visit bombing survivors they helped rescue on April 19, including a seriously injured man Moore found in an alley pinned under pieces of the Journal Record building roof. "I needed to see

that he made it," Moore explains. "It helped me out a lot." Echoes Harris, "If you can help somebody, that's about as good as it gets."

Making A Difference

NINETEEN EIGHTY-NINE WAS A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR the Oklahoma City Fire Department. In retrospect, one can see that the events of that year prepared the department for what was to be its greatest challenge thus far, the rescue and recovery at the Oklahoma City bombing.

Nineteen eighty-nine was also the department's centennial. In 1889, the department began as a volunteer bucket brigade. Its first piece of apparatus was an old beer wagon equipped only with ladders and buckets, pulled by hand to fires. By 1891 finances had improved to the point that two horses, Babe and Jumbo, were purchased to do the pulling. Firemen were justly proud of their horses, who reportedly could distinguish the ring of the fire phone from the local phone and were always in place before the firemen had time to slide down their poles.

The horses did some heavy work—including hauling a 1907 water tower, a platform that extended sixty-five feet into the air. But by 1910 the department had its first piece of motorized equipment—a dazzling white chemical and hose truck with fancy gold lettering,

complete with a perfect silver bell in front (now on display at the Oklahoma Firefighters Museum in Oklahoma City, a toy Dalmatian in the driver's seat). Over the years the citizens of Oklahoma City consistently passed bond issues and sales taxes to finance the modernizing and expansion of the fire department. By 1951 the department counted twenty-two stations and five hundred-gallon-per-minute engines; by 1971, the number of stations had reached thirty, and the engines were pumping a thousand gallons per minute.

Along with equipment changes came social changes. The first black firemen were hired in 1951, and their station, Number VI, subsequently earned the most efficient station award three years in a row. (Fire stations have been integrated for some time.) Firemen became firefighters in the mid-1980s with the hiring of the first women (today there are about twenty-five in Oklahoma City). By its centennial in 1989, the OCFD was a thoroughly modern department with a good safety record.

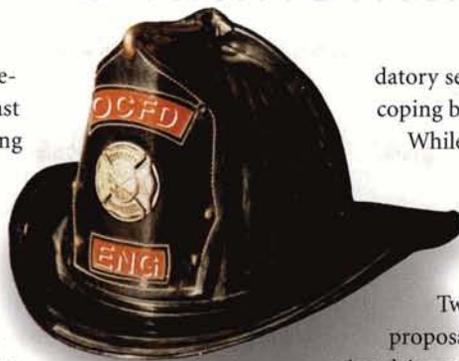
THE ALLURE OF THE SHINY RED FIRE ENGINE

The enthusiasm for the firefighter's job gets passed down; firefighters often follow in their father's or uncle's or cousin's footsteps. Chief Marrs himself is a third-generation firefighter.

Chief Marrs' grandfather is the second Oklahoma City fireman from the right.



Oklahoman of the Year



Though eleven firefighters had been killed responding to or battling fires since 1911, the last had been Dan McQueen, who had died a long thirty-nine years before battling a lumberyard blaze.

The department's fortunes, however, were about to change at a modest one-story frame house in southwest Oklahoma City. On March 8, 1989, a four-year-old playing with a stick in an open flame heater started a fire. Before the fire was extinguished, three firefighters—Jeffrey Lindsey, Bennie Zellner, and Jimmy Ayers—were killed in a flashover, a fireball created when flammable gasses become superheated and explode into flame. The fire, which reached temperatures approaching 1000° F., was so intense it burned away the men's protective clothing and breathing apparatus.

The death of the three was a shock to the whole department. The trauma prompted the later formation of the peer counseling groups called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) teams, which proved to be so helpful during the long Murrah rescue. Firefighters on the teams provide a sympathetic ear and advice on how to recognize symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder and what to do about it. The CISD teams enabled firefighters to hold on to their humanity during the sixteen-day Murrah ordeal, writes assistant fire chief Jon Hansen in his book *Oklahoma Rescue*. Bowman suspects the man-

datory sessions might be why OCFD firefighters are coping better than some predicted.

While the department was recovering emotionally after the fatal house fire, community leaders stepped forward. They began a petition drive to put a new sales tax referendum for the department on the ballot.

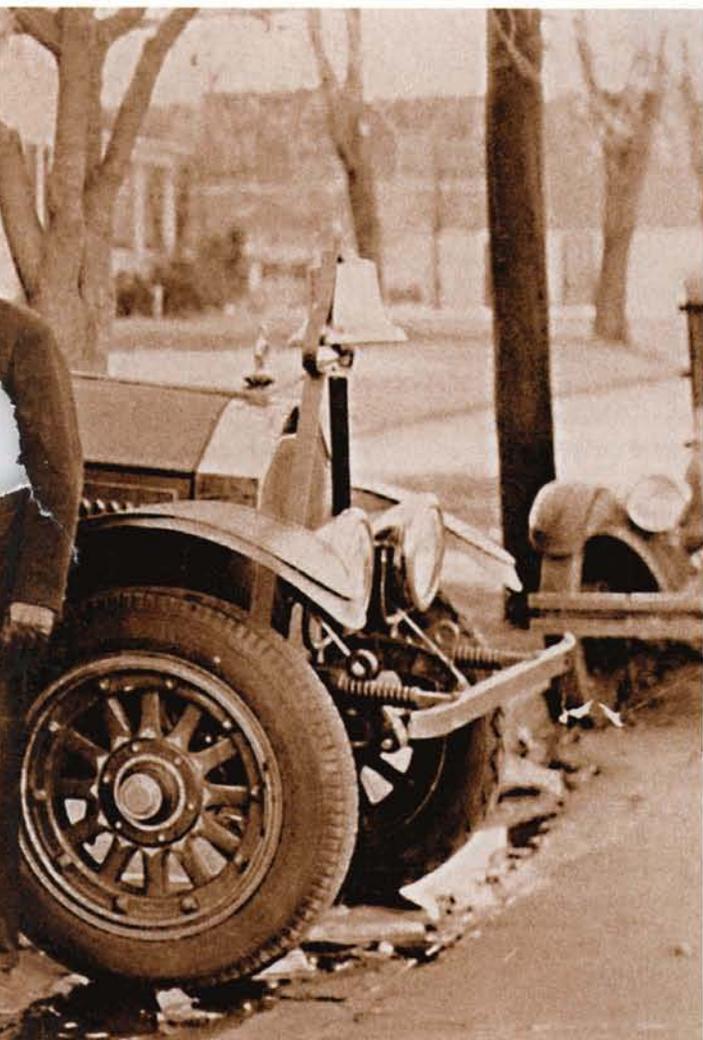
Two months before the fatal fire, a similar tax proposal had been defeated by 105 votes. The petition drive was successful, as was the vote, and the subsequent increase of 3/4 of a cent was split between the police and fire departments.

Hansen is still emotional about the deaths of the three firefighters; he was on the scene and comforted Jeffrey Lindsey's brother Mike, who was fighting the fire when his brother died. "Those three guys gave their lives for the community," he says, "and the community repaid them by passing the tax." Firefighters would later credit the sales tax as a crucial variable in the department's successful handling of the Murrah rescue. For the sales tax revenue bought new equipment, engines, and other vehicles, including a one-hundred and thirty-five-foot ladder truck, the only ladder long enough to reach survivors in some parts of the Murrah building. Perhaps most importantly, the tax bought new firefighters, making possible the dual manning of fire stations and the bombing recovery effort. "Those three guys were with us in that building," says Hansen. "They made a difference."

The Oklahoma Standard

THE OKLAHOMA CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT BEGAN AS A bucket brigade in 1889; so perhaps it is fitting that in the department's finest hour, it again embraced the lowly bucket—this time not as a vessel for water, but for rubble. This is not the kind of work that earns you a cover photo on *People* magazine, but it was essential: hundreds of firefighters, working in teams, removed by hand some four hundred and fifty tons of the shattered Murrah building, while what remained of the building shifted and swayed in the wind. While the process was tedious, firefighters derived satisfaction from watching the rubble pile slowly shrink. "We felt like we accomplished a feat that hasn't been done anywhere else in the U.S.," recalls Bowman.

The rubble was removed in order to recover the dead, a labor of love and duty that the Oklahoma City Fire Department took upon itself. By May 4, 1995, all but three of the 168 victims of the bomb—those buried near a dangerously unstable support column of the Murrah building—had been recovered, and the recovery effort ended. The rescue had begun sixteen days earlier when squads, engines, and trucks from a number of stations, shook by the blast, dispatched themselves to the bomb site; before long, Chief Marrs ordered a general alarm—calling in all on-duty units and the off-duty shifts—the first in the history of the city. By the end of the first day, all of the survivors trapped in the building had been rescued, with the Oklahoma City Fire Department having a hand in nearly all of the rescues.



In an initial report analyzing the rescue operation, investigators from the International Fire Protection Association gave the department high marks for speedy recovery of survivors (most were rescued in the first hour and a half). They praised firefighters for making decisions that “were almost universally correct and were instrumental in saving lives—which reflects well on the level of training and preparedness of the companies and command officers.” They also praised the department for its safety precautions. Save for Rebecca Anderson, a nurse who died of head injuries after hurrying to the site to help, the firefighters were able to prevent other serious injuries among the hundreds of rescuers despite extremely dangerous conditions. And as help from around the state and country poured in to downtown Oklahoma City, it fell to the Oklahoma City Fire Department to coordinate the extensive rescue and then the recovery operation. “It was a learning experience for all of us,” says Hansen, who points out that the effort was marked by exceptional cooperation between a large number of local, state, and federal agencies. This high level of cooperation has since been dubbed “the Oklahoma standard” by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials.

The department’s successful management of the rescue effort earned it new respect. Recently Marrs and assistant fire chief Bunch gave a presentation at a conference in Virginia attended by fire officials from such terrorism hot spots as Tokyo, Israel, and France. Bunch confesses that prior to April 19 they probably would not even have attended such a conference. These days Marrs finds himself fielding calls from other chiefs impressed by the way his department handled the bombing and curious about how they run other programs. One telling observation: they are never content. Despite accolades that would make a sailor blush, Marrs and the department continue to look for even better ways to be prepared for the worst that might hit their city, whether the disaster be natural or man-made. Plans call for the department to add specialized search and rescue teams, modeled after the urban search and rescue teams that flew in to help at the Murrah building.

Marrs has also made community involvement a high priority. Soon firefighters may be attending neighborhood meetings, teaching CPR classes in the station, and working with businesses and community groups to prevent arson fires. The public education staff has already been beefed up. Two large-scale public education programs target children, who are responsible for fifty percent of reported arson fires and a million dollars worth of damage each year. These same children are often victims of the fires they set.

Many kids who set fires do so simply because they are curious, says Major Sheila Hays, who is part of a particularly innovative program called Operation FireSAFE. Matches and lighters (which Hays com-

BUCKET BRIGADE

Firefighters (with some help) removed by hand some 450 tons of shattered building.



pare to loaded handguns) are left out, and children experiment. But about forty percent of child arsonists are children in crisis. Hays’ job is to interview children who set fires, do a fire-safety program with them, and if need be, refer them to a mental health professional who decides if they need further help.

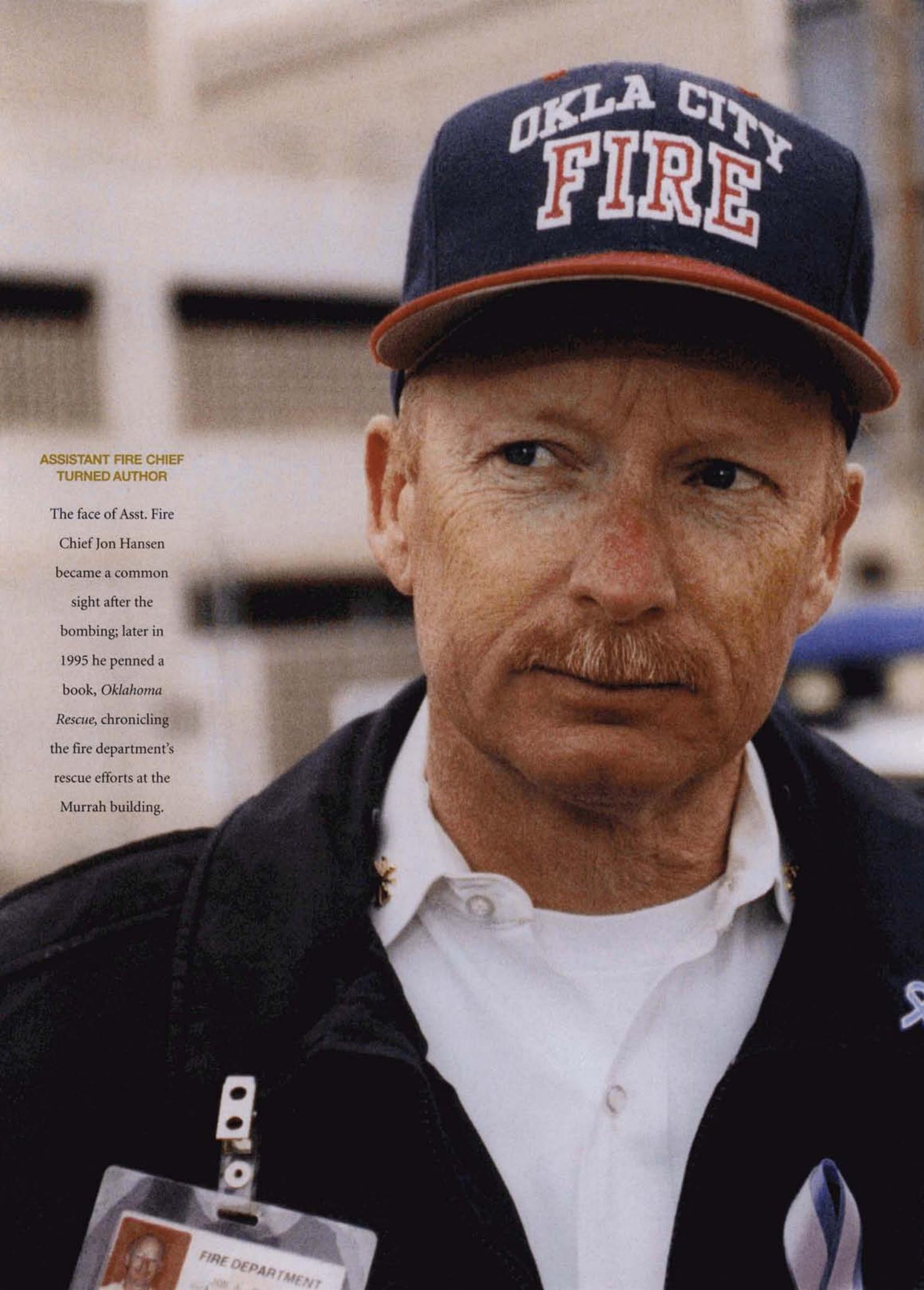
Hays was the second woman in the department, and during the five years she worked on the rigs, she went through some tough times proving that she could do the job. But listening to the stories some children tell, she says, is every bit as hard on her emotionally.

Some of the children she interviews have been abused physically or sexually. One little girl used fire as a way to stop family violence. Knowing the fire department would be called, the six-year-old set fires whenever her father began beating her mother. Hays contends that troubled children who play with fire don’t stop until there is an intervention, and she is proud that her program has achieved a low recidivism rate (fifteen percent). “As a fire department we want to stop that fire-setting behavior, but we also want to help the child as a whole,” she says. “We’re talking about a better community, a better society.”

The Real Heroes

SHORTLY BEFORE CHRISTMAS, AMY PETTY KEPT A promise she made on April 19th, 1995, to four firefighters from Oklahoma City’s Station VIII. The men formed the core of a group who worked for five hours to dig her out of a black hole of mangled office furniture, concrete, electrical wire, and rebar, while a refrigerator dangled in the air over their heads and cantaloupe-sized chunks of concrete fell around them. Petty couldn’t see the four (Allen Hill, Chris Thompson, Mike Roberts, and Vernon Simpson) who would eventually free her, but she could talk to them and listen to them discuss the problems to be overcome. “I could tell it wasn’t an easy thing,” she recalls.

It wasn’t. At 9:02 a.m. Petty had taken a slide in rescue parlance; that is, she fell from the Federal Employees Credit Union on the third floor to what had been the ground floor of the building. After that split-second descent into what must have seemed like Hell, Petty at times was terrified. She would say “I’m going to die, aren’t I?” recalls Hill, and he would promise her, “No Amy, you’re not going to die.” At other times throughout the ordeal, everyone did their best to keep the conversation light; in one such attempt Petty said, “Well, I guess when I get out of here, I’ll owe you guys a cup of coffee,” to which she got the reply: “Well, I sure do like chocolate-chip cookies,” and then after a



**ASSISTANT FIRE CHIEF
TURNED AUTHOR**

The face of Asst. Fire Chief Jon Hansen became a common sight after the bombing; later in 1995 he penned a book, *Oklahoma Rescue*, chronicling the fire department's rescue efforts at the Murrah building.



Oklahoman of the Year

pause, another voice cracked, "I like chocolate-chip cookies and beer." Petty recalls laughing and saying she could probably handle the cookies.

But it was awhile before she felt she could handle seeing the firefighters and talking about what had happened to her on April 19. Finally, two kinds of chocolate-chip cookies in hand and husband in tow, she walked into Station VIII. "It was so wonderful to meet and talk to them," says Petty. "She looked a lot different," jokes Hill. Looking at pictures of where she had landed, Petty was filled with gratitude. "Tons of people," she says, helped to free her, but she feels especially grateful towards those four—they risked staying with her during the second bomb scare (she was left alone during the first), and they made the right decisions, she says, hard choices about what to cut and what to move that eventually freed her. "I really do owe my life to them," she says. "I will always support that fire station."

"The citizens of this community have been behind us for a long time," comments Hansen, but even he was surprised by the outpouring of support in the days following the bombing. There were ten thousand volunteers by Friday, he says with amazement—and there would have been more had radio and television stations not urged folks to stay away. "I couldn't go anywhere without being offered a drink or a meal," he says; donations of food also flooded fire stations. In fact, he believes a lot of firefighters actually gained weight during the rescue. At a final meeting for volunteers, Chief Marrs summed up the department's attitude: "From the men and women of the Oklahoma City Fire Department, we love you and thank you very much."

The feeling was mutual. Messages poured in from around the world: almost two hundred thousand pictures, posters, banners, signs, wreaths, paper chains, and, of course, letters, many of them illustrated with hearts and rainbows and flowers. Most were from children. "Dear heroes," many of them began. "I love you," many of them ended. The children who wrote seemed to be able to bore right to the heart of the experience. One child from Waco, Texas, wrote: "I think y'all are the bravest people on earth. It must take lots of courage to go into a building that had just been bombed." Another letter, neatly typed on a computer from a sixth grader in Wisconsin, addressed the firefighters of Station I: "I can't even imagine how sad it was to see all those hurt people...I hope you can get over this terrible incident...When I grow up I would like to be a firefighter just like all of you."

Little did the children realize that their hope and faith was fuel desperately needed by the men and women in yellow, as it became ever more clear that what had started out as a rescue effort was fast becoming an effort to retrieve the dead. "The kids were the ones," said Hansen, "who helped us keep our faith in a situation that could have sent us into the depths of despair." The missives greeted rescuers as they ate and rested and were distributed around to the fire stations. At Station I, firefighters plastered the usu-

FIREFIGHTERS TO THE RESCUE

'If you can help somebody, that is about as good as it gets.'

From left, Mike Roberts, Vernon Simpson, Allen Hill, Amy Petty, Christopher Thompson.



ally Spartan station walls with the colorful letters. At Station XXXI, Lieutenant Gary Thurman found that he couldn't get enough of the letters. Thurman, though off duty, had arrived at the Murrah building early on. The scene was surreal—at one point he found himself sitting down waiting for help to remove four victims when hundred dollar bills began raining down around him; not long after he noticed "the baby doll with blood all over it, the teddy bear, a little tricycle..." and it dawned on him he was near the day-care area.

After the rescue was over, Thurman says he had a nagging feeling that there was something left for him to do. He also worried that firefighters, anxious to get back to normal, would set aside the letters and might eventually throw them away. He shared this concern with Monte Baxter, who had entered the Murrah building within a few minutes of the explosion. Baxter had already retrieved some of the mail from a station dumpster. The mail had historical significance, Thurman believed, and should perhaps become part of the planned bombing memorial.

So Thurman took it upon himself to gather everything up. It took three trips in his van to gather items at the Myriad Convention Center, where rescuers had been fed and housed and cheered by the letters; then he made a sweep of the fire stations. In the end he filled up a two-car garage and a spare bedroom in his house. "It was overwhelming," confesses Thurman. He and retired firefighter Harold Colbert nevertheless dug in, laughing and crying over the precious messages. "It's letters from kids that make you appreciate your job," Thurman says. "I wasn't throwing nothing away."

He noticed that many of the cards asked firefighters to write back, and he was eager to do it. But how? Help came from the Oklahoma Historical Society. Archives director Bill Welge rounded up volunteers to sort the items by state and compile a list of names and addresses. On December 1, 1995, the fire department's public education office unveiled its Answering the Call campaign. A line drawing of a firefighter holding a teddy bear (taken from a photo of Thurman) illustrates the reply cards and envelopes sent out to fire stations along with the first thousand of about 50,000 names OHS was able to compile. The program is voluntary, but Thurman, who has written almost two hundred letters thus far, is optimistic his fellow firefighters will take time to write some thank yous. "We will be the first fire department to write back the world," he predicts. For Thurman, a soft-spoken nineteen-year veteran, the letters have already worked their magic, leading him away from the horror of the Murrah building. "The letters woke me up and made me feel good about life again," he says. "There is more good out there than people realize." W

Maura McDermott of Checotah is a contributing editor for Oklahoma Today magazine.