

# THE OKLAHOMA CITY EXPERIENCE : AN INTERVIEW WITH MARSHA KIGHT



Marsha Kight

Marsha Kight's 23-year-old daughter, Frankie Merrell, was one of the 168 people who died in the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. Spurred by grief, depression, and a judicial ruling barring the testimony of survivors at the offenders' trials, Mrs. Kight founded Families and Survivors

United to advocate for victims' rights, and later compiled the personal accounts of 81 surviving families into *Forever Changed* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998). Kight currently works as a public policy assistant for the National Organization for Victim Assistance in Washington, DC. One of her responsibilities involves meeting with and being a companion to survivors of homicide to validate their feelings of anguish and offer guidance. "I have walked in their shoes," Kight says. "The message from people who have not experienced tragedy is too often, 'Get on with your life.'" NETWORKS spoke with Marsha Kight about the lessons of the Oklahoma City bombing for September 11 victims.

### Victims need ways to empower themselves.

"The sight of people walking around holding pictures following the Trade Center attack brought it all back," said Marsha Kight. "Hoping against hope that your loved ones are just missing... You feel a horrible, overwhelming sense of powerlessness, as if your life is completely out of control." Founding

Families and Survivors United several months after the disaster was a way of expressing what she terms "active grief"—a process helpful to overcoming the loss of control that sweeps over victims. One of the group's activities involved inviting organizations that had donated money on the victims' behalf to explain their guidelines. Not only did this mobilize survivors, it had the prac-

tical effect of dealing with the perception they were being revictimized by the financial process. "Like accusations that arose in New York, a lot of [Oklahoma] victims felt the charities were exploiting the deaths of their loved ones to raise money for their own purposes." Ultimately in Oklahoma, a special committee made up of a variety of agency and victim representatives was formed to coordinate donations. The victims' group also made their own thank-you video to firefighters and rescue workers after an official event failed to include victim representatives. "We fought to get victims on committees...it felt like the bureaucrats had taken over, had taken things away from victims. Victims need a sense of involvement."

### High-profile cases delay the grieving process.

Shock, denial and disbelief first delay the process of grief, but the loss is compounded when the media and public seize upon the victims' loss as public property. Kight recounted a boat trip on the Hudson with survivors of September 11. "There were 50 other people on the boat who were well aware their fellow passengers were survivors. Family members were forced to push down their emotions because everyone knew." It takes years, some-

times a lifetime, to get off the emotional rollercoaster, Kight said, calling the media's continual replay of violent images of the events "abusive." Emotional public reactions magnified by media coverage often minimize the suffering of the actual victims. "In Oklahoma City, strangers were con-

stantly coming up and putting their arms around you. It felt so invasive. I wanted them to go away!"

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### Separate counseling groups for people with similar losses.

People feel a hierarchy of grief, Kight observed. Victims can relate better to those who have suffered a similar loss and shouldn't have to be in sessions where they hear others say or imply,

"my grief is greater than your grief." Kight recommended that victims be separated into subgroups—spouses who have lost a spouse, parents who have lost a child, siblings who have lost a brother or sister, rescue workers, individuals who have lost friends, brothers and sisters who have lost parents, and so forth.

### Equal treatment for all crime victims.

The disproportionate distribution of resources for crime victims, victims of domestic terrorism, and victims of foreign terrorism makes no sense and creates "a lot of sideways anger among victims." Is a parent whose child was murdered yesterday less deserving than a parent whose child was lost in a national tragedy, Kight commented. "How can you put a price tag on people's lives? It incenses me to think in terms of more or less deserving victims."

### The toll of victimization.

Substance abuse, depression, physical ailments, and myriad other fall-outs of victimization often beset survivors. In Kight's case, she lapsed into uncontrolled spending. "I turned to shopping to fill the void. I tried to make myself feel better by buying things." Financial ruin, she said, is an often-ignored product of grief and loss.

Having lived through a mother's worst nightmare, Marsha Kight now can look toward the future with some hope. "I am still paying off bills, but there is light at the end of the tunnel," she says. "I am proud to say that I have even done plastic surgery by cutting up all my credit cards."

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