

Reparations in Order for 1963 Bombing

Written by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr.
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It was terror that shook the nation. On Sunday, Sept. 15, 1963, a bomb exploded in the basement of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. Four little girls, all dressed in white — 14-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, and 11-year-old Denise McNair — died in the explosion, and are remembered in history.

Congress now is considering offering them posthumously a Congressional Gold Medal.

But there was a fifth little girl caught in the blast — 10-year-old Sarah Collins Rudolph — the younger sister of Addie Mae. Partly blinded, she staggered from the basement bleeding from the nose and ears from a concussion. She spent two months in the hospital, but she survived. To this day, she bears her injuries, and the traumatic stress that does not go away. She doesn't want a medal; she wants justice.

Now she is speaking out, witness to that horrible crime in those mean days. She's angry because her sister's body has been lost. When they went to exhume the body, the grave contained someone else's remains. She wonders why there was no compensation for her injuries, no help for the families.

The Birmingham bombing came days after a court order calling for three schools in Huntsville to open for limited integration had been defied by Gov. George Wallace, who called out the National Guard to bar the students. It came less than three weeks after the March on Washington and Dr. King's "I have a dream" oration. Veterans of the civil rights movement were girding themselves for the reprisals that seemed to follow any sign of progress.

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Dr. King suggested that some had misinterpreted the dignified and disciplined march on Washington — now so seared in our memories — and thought the revolution was over. No, he told the Southern Conference Leadership Convention in September, “We are more determined than ever before that nonviolence is the way. Let them bring on their bombs. Let them sabotage us with the evil of cooperation with segregation. We intend to be free.”

Sarah Collins Rudolph did not choose to be a hero. Her life was scarred by an act of terror unleashed against the most innocent of little girls.

As Barbara Arnwine, head of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, commented, Rudolph has been overlooked because the basic story has not been told. So much of what we remember about the civil rights movement are the victories, the great moments. Too often, Arnwine argues, “we whitewash the history” and shove the victims into a closet to keep them from reminding us of the reality.

Juries eventually convicted three Ku Klux Klansmen in the bombing years later, and one suspected accomplice died without ever having been charged. One of the four is still in prison and the others are dead.

Now Sarah Collins Rudolph has had the courage to stand up and tell her tale. She wants Congress to recognize that lives were lost and scarred, in part because of the failure of the federal government to enforce the laws of the land, and to protect those who were asserting their rights in the face of domestic terrorism.

Congress must act now beyond the symbol of medals to the substance of justice and compensation. The victims of Sept. 16, 1963, and the victims of Sept. 11, 2001, are justly due reparations. Sarah Collins Rudolph is in the lineage of those to whom our nation is in debt.

Keep up with Rev. Jackson and the work of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition at www.rainbowpush.org