

2<sup>nd</sup> Place

11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Grade

23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Student Essay Contest | Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum

### Continued Generational Empowerment

Standing at the east Gate of Time, with the solemn inscription "9:01" etched above, I cannot help but feel a deep sense of reverence and reflection as I gaze across the reflection pool. The Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum serves as a powerful reminder of the delicacy of life and the devastating events that can occur in the blink of an eye. Kari Watkins, the Memorial's Executive Director, stated, "Horrible things happened on this site, but one thing we do know is that this world holds far more good than bad." Reflecting on her words, I am not only reminded of the tragedy of personal loss but also of the profound impact generations before me have had on shaping my response to such losses, whether they be the loss of a loved one due to the bombing or the collective loss experienced by the community. Amidst the somber beauty of the memorial, I also feel the glimmer of hope. The Oklahoma City bombing memorial stands as a testament to the resilience and strength of the human spirit, inspiring us to rise above tragedy and find solace, healing, and unity in the face of unimaginable grief.

The bombing of the Murrah Federal Building happened ten years before my birth; however, I have heard stories from my Momma, who was in high school at the time. She shared how my Great Grandma, upon hearing the news of the bombing, immediately went into action. Having owned a restaurant, she knew the value of hard work and how to serve people well; therefore, finding a food line to serve was her way of bridging the gap between herself and strangers. As Victor Chavez, Uncle of Zackary Taylor Chavez, put it, "You and I may not know each other, but in the time of need, we would help each other. Oklahoma is like that; we are a loving community, the Oklahoma standard." However, this was hard to fully grasp as a child and teenager until an unexpected tragedy occurred personally for me: the loss of my brother, a United States Marine, to suicide in April 2020. Then, I truly understood the incredible strength and community that can be created through tremendous loss.

I share in the questions of Krista Tippet, Founder and CEO of On Being Project, "How do I change myself so that I can create a new space so that we can meet each other and something new can happen, and we can share life by the questions we have in common as we walk forward?" Her questions resonated with me because four years prior, I was seeking ways to change, grow, and offer significance to others grappling with mental health or grieving the loss of loved ones to suicide. Crafting leather pieces with my brother's fingerprint on each piece, I give them to others who face similar struggles. I yearn to make a difference and find common ground through shared experiences.

While my loss is in no way comparable to the significant loss Oklahoma endured due to the bombing, it was my grief from loss that held my hand as I walked through the Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum with a more profound empathy; it allowed me to realize the full impact and the bigger picture this beautiful museum and memorial conveys. Ryan Whicher, Son of Alan G. Whicher, sums everything up best by saying, "Having a reminder of things that happened in your life is always a positive, always. It keeps you grounded; this museum should keep everyone a little grounded. Tough things happen to kids, adults, everyone, everyday and you can either use all of that pain and agony as an excuse to give up or you can use it as a motivator to know that tomorrow can be better. That's why having a memorialization matters. You can see some of the terrible things, but then you can see all of the great things that happened afterward." The responses to that tragic day in Oklahoma taught me how previous generations shaped my response to personal loss. Despite the pain and lack of

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understanding, we rise, gather the shattered pieces, and extend a helping hand to lift others alongside us until no one is left alone.

The Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum stands as an enduring testament to the resilience of the human spirit, reminding us that even in the face of unimaginable tragedy, hope can rise, and a new beginning can emerge from the ashes when we embrace one another in unity. As I approach the gate of "9:03," I turn one last time, absorbing the profound essence of the Outdoor Memorial, facing the solemn gate marked "9:01." The weight of the gate's representation of peace, forever suspended in time, presses upon my heart and the ache of the loss brought by "9:02" on April 19, 1995, fills my eyes with tears and a profound sense of grief. But as I turn back to the western gate, I take a step toward the recovery and healing meant for all humanity; the Memorial reveals its purpose – to bring our shared experiences and stories to the surface and unite us in our journey from 1995 to 2024. The sun will set on our tragedies, and a new dawn of hope will emerge. It echoes the words of the Bible, which tell us that "weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning." Watkins' challenge to my generation and those that follow rings in my ears; "now it's your turn – what's your call to change your life, your school, your world?" We, the next generations of Oklahoma, carry the torch of legacy to build community, strive to uplift and support strangers, and ensure that those who have lost their lives and those who sacrificed so much will never be forgotten. We bear the responsibility to empower future generations to respond in such a way during adversity that more havens of hope, resilience, and unity are built.