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TO KEEP THEIR MEMORIES ALIVE

Helen Stiefmiller '85 is the 'Keeper of the Stories' at the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum

by Cindy Shaffer, Director of Planned Giving

Fifteen years ago, at 9:02 on the morning of April 19, 1995, the United States was rocked to its core when a bomb exploded at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The worst act of domestic terrorism in the history of the country; it killed 168 people and injured many more. Defiance College alumna and Oklahoma resident, Helen Stiefmiller, was at work as the Curator of Collections at the Guthrie Museum Complex (Oklahoma Historical Society), 30 miles away, at the time of the attack. She remembers well the sound of the explosion and the way her building's windows rattled.

In partial response to the attack, Oklahoma City Mayor (at the time), Ron Norwick appointed a 350 person task force representing a cross-section of the community to create a tribute to those who died. In the Memorial Mission Statement, the Task Force called for the creation of a memorial to "...remember those who were killed, those who survived and those changed forever..." – in short, all who were touched directly or indirectly by the bombing (www.oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org).

This collective effort resulted in the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum, located at the site of the Murrah Building. The striking tribute consists of an Outdoor Symbolic Memorial, that is a place for quiet reflection and the Memorial Museum, a 30,000 square foot interactive learning space built to tell the story of April 19, 1995, and how the chaos turned to hope in the days following the terrorist attack.

Helen is now the Collections Manager for the Memorial Museum. Since 2006, her life has been deeply embedded in the activities "to help keep the memory of these people, (the 168 who died), alive." The



Helen Stiefmiller '85 shows DC President Mark Gordon an artifact from the April 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building during his visit with her in February 2010.

Memorial Archives, a 4,000 square foot, climate controlled storage area, has more than one million items including documents, artifacts and photos. Referring to herself as the "Keeper of the Stories," Helen is responsible for cataloguing and preserving items such as parts of the Ryder truck that contained the bomb, evidentiary material from the FBI, unclaimed personal possessions from those who were in the Murrah building at the time of the explosion and cards and letters sent to the city from all over the world. When the Murrah Building was torn down, a fence was erected around the site. This fence has been incorporated into the Memorial and to this day people visiting the Memorial leave expressions of love and respect at the fence. These are brought in and become part of the permanent collection.

In her role, Helen works not only with the tangible memorabilia, but often has the

opportunity to interact with rescue workers, survivors and family members of those who were killed in the bombing. For her, this adds a personal element that isn't always experienced in a museum setting, a quality that enriches her work. Helen also is part of the team at the Memorial that develops exhibits, educational material and facilitates learning about the impact of violence, which is a main tenet of the Memorial mission.

Helen graduated from DC in 1985 with a double major in History and Museology and earned a Masters of History from the University of Central Oklahoma. She has fond memories of her classes with professors Eugene Andrews, Bob Boehm and Randy Buchman. Helen lives in Norman, Oklahoma, with her partner, Tina, and their two children, Zachary and Alexandra. ♦