

Iconic Oklahoma City photo caused twists and turns



Melanie Eversley, USA TODAY 8:32 p.m. EDT April 19, 2015



(Photo: Charles H. Porter IV, AP)

It was an iconic photo that captured the essence of one of America's most dramatic tragedies of that decade - a firefighter clutching a bloodied young child, fatally wounded in the April 19, 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. The photo's startling image touched a chord throughout the nation.

And in the years that followed, the lives of everyone involved with that photo seemed to have been embroiled in as much controversy and tumult as the tragedy that it captured with the lens.

Perhaps finally, they may all be in a peaceful place.

The mother of the battered baby being carried out of the rubble is married and lives in suburban [Choctaw, Okla.](#), with her husband and two children. The fire captain who carried tiny [Baylee Almon](#) out of the aftermath of the blast that killed 168 people has successfully conquered his post-traumatic stress syndrome and now counsels other first responders who witness disasters. The two amateur photographers whose lives became a roller coaster after their near identical shots circled the globe appear to have settled down.

Maybe this calm would have been a gift for little Baylee, who would have turned 21 on Saturday, April 18, if she had not died in the explosion.

For Chris Fields, now 50 and a major in the Oklahoma City Fire Department, life has settled in as he and his wife raise their two sons, 16 and 22. He is a year and 10 months from retirement.

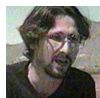
"I'm working towards being an empty nester," Fields said. "I have a 16-year old that plays basketball and baseball. I'm following both kids in sports and trying to get one out of college. My wife is a personal secretary at an elementary school in the school system. We're just a normal, everyday American family."

Every couple of months he and Baylee's mother, Aren Almon Kok, will text one other to check in, or Almon Kok will text Fields' wife. "This time of year I talk to her moreso now," Fields said. "It's always a tough time of year."

Fields' picture of life is quite different than what it was 20 years ago, not only for him but also the others. The explosion that destroyed 324 buildings in a 16-block radius ripped through more than just downtown Oklahoma City and the [Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building](#).

At first, Fields thought he was dealing with everything. Though he struggled, he moved up within the fire department. For awhile, he and Almon became the public face of a foundation that outfitted day-care centers with safety renovations.

But years later, everything seemed to change.



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"I don't know what happened," Fields said in a telephone interview with USA TODAY. "Eight or nine years ago some triggers went off. I felt out of sorts and started not being the father and husband I needed to be. I started talking to a couple of counselors."

Fields wound up going to the West Coast Post Traumatic Retreat, a program for first responders based in San Rafael, Calif. After working through his own pain and figuring out his triggers, Fields began working with the center to help other first responders as a peer counselor.

"It's good therapy for me just going to be a counselor," he said.



Twenty years later, hear from those who lost family members in the Oklahoma City bombing and those who aided in victims' rights. USA TODAY

Almon Kok, who did not respond to a request for an interview, appears to be in a happy place surrounded by family these days. Images of puppies, smiling youngsters and a family fishing outing are among the photos she posts on social media.

But immediately after the tragedy and the loss of her daughter, she was alone. In fact, the reason she was at the federal building that day and her daughter in the nursery was because she was trying to compel Baylee's father to make child support payments. In her grief, she reached out to Fields and would occasionally call him on the telephone to talk. Connected by tragedy, they became friends. But in the following months, the tensions from the tragedy seemed to bring out the worst in some.

A British tabloid asked to interview Almon Kok and Fields together, and asked to interview Fields' wife, Cheryl Fields, separately, Chris Fields recalled. As buzz and gossip generated around this, Fields says he learned that this was the tabloid's attempt to make it appear as if he and Almon Kok were having an affair.

"We kind of got wind that was their angle and put the kibosh on it pretty quick," Fields said.

And the photograph itself caused tension.

At first, the image that became the face of the emotion and tragedy of the Oklahoma City disaster was well received by the world. People seemed to feel it took them to the heart of what happened that day. But after a while, mothers whose children who also were on the scene and at the nursery that Baylee attended began to express frustration with all the attention that the photo drew to the late Baylee. They suffered, too, they said.

The FamousPictures.org website reported that one woman said on television, "Aren isn't the only one who lost a child in the bombing. Why should Aren get all the publicity – and most of the donations?"

That period "wasn't everyone's finest moment," Fields recalled.

"There were some parents that felt like their child wasn't getting the recognition," Fields said. "Aren said, 'I'll gladly take my baby back alive.' "

Other tensions came from the photo too.

On the day of the tragedy, as Fields carried little Baylee away, her tiny legs dangling down from his arms, he knew life had already left her. He handed her over to other first responders who would transport her to the hospital where she was officially pronounced dead. He wasn't aware that two amateur photographers had snapped his picture during his death march.

Life would take two very different directions for both men because of that image.

The tragedy took place before the age of cell phones and instant cameras, and Charles Porter IV took his photo to a nearby [Walmart](#) to have it developed. A friend, moved by what he saw, encouraged Porter to submit it to the Associated Press. Porter thought the local paper might run it. Instead, the image traveled around the world.

The following year Porter would win a [Pulitzer Prize](#) in spot photography for the image.

Porter, who now works as a physical therapist in Texas, did not respond to a request for an interview.



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(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2015/04/19/obama-white-house-pennsylvania-avenue-bill-clinton-oklahoma-city-bombing/26027711/>)

Lester Larue, a safety coordinator for the Oklahoma Natural Gas Company, also happened to be on the scene that day, he with a company camera because he initially thought the blast was a gas explosion. Later, a Moto-Photo clerk telephoned him to say Newsweek wanted to buy his pictures. Larue earned \$14,000 for that photo and more money poured in after that from other sources, according to FamousPictures.org.

At the suggestion of his wife, Larue had T-shirts made. His wife urged that the proceeds could go toward a statue depicting the image, according to the Famous Pictures website. But matters turned south when Larue learned Almon Kok had been on television condemning the making of money from her daughter's image.

Oklahoma Natural Gas Company raised issue with the fact that the photo now attracting negative publicity was taken with the utility's camera. The company demanded Larue turn over what he'd earned from the photo or leave. He chose to leave the company.

Larue did not respond to a request for an interview.

As for Fields, looking at the photo has gotten easier over the years, and with each anniversary, it appears less and less, he said. At first, he didn't quite get why people were so drawn to it but he believes he understands some now.

"I'm so glad there's that picture of them raising the flag at Iwo Jima," Fields explained. "It represents those guys struggling. I guess what people tell me is the photo represents the city of Oklahoma City, the rescue effort, the innocence that was lost."

In an odd way, he also has been able to help comfort Almon Kok about the photo.

"Let me put it this way, she knows that Baylee didn't suffer," Fields said. "Baylee had already passed when she came out of the building and in a weird way, that did comfort her (Almon Kok), that she wasn't laying there screaming and crying. That's one of the things she's grateful for."

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