

HER STORY ::

Sarah Collins Rudolph is a carrier of history. In fact, she remembers every detail of that Sept. 15, 1963.

For decades, people claimed to have come downstairs earlier that morning to see the girls in the bathroom-- also known as the ladies' lounge--laughing and combing each other's hair.

Rudolph says that isn't true, because the girls were only in the bathroom for a few minutes. She says other people have claimed they saw all five girls playing together outside of the church that morning. Rudolph says that never happened, because that meeting in ladies' lounge was the first time all five girls saw each other that morning. In fact, she says that morning started out with she and her sisters taking a jovial walk to church.

"I remember we were coming to church. It was three of us. It was my sister Janie, Addie, and myself. We walked to church that morning. We were having so much fun. We were throwing around Janie's little purse. She had a purse shaped like a football. We were throwing it and we laughed all the way."

Later that morning, she and Addie were waiting in the basement bathroom. Rudolph says she was looking out of the bathroom door, wondering when the next Sunday school class was going to let out.

"So that's when I seen Denise McNair and Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson. And they came on in to the ladies lounge."

When the girls came out of the bathroom stalls, Denise walked over to Addie, who was standing near the couch, and asked Addie to tie the sash on her dress. Rudolph remembers standing near the sink.

"We all stood there. You know, looking to see her tie it. And she reached her hand out like that. And that's when the bomb went off... boom! So we didn't get a chance to see her tie it. And I heard a cry call out: 'Someone bombed the Sixteenth Street church!' It was so clear, it seemed as if that person was in there."

Rudolph said she took a couple of steps, but didn't get very far away from the sink. "I started walking like, you know when the bomb went off, I was calling Addie. I was saying 'Addie, Addie' and she didn't answer. So I thought the girls had ran back to the Sunday school."

That image is burned into Rudolph's memory. Blinded by the shattered glass, Rudolph was rescued by church deacon, Samuel Rutledge, and hospitalized. She says she thinks about it every day, and still sees the scars on her face every time she looks at her reflection in the

mirror. She ended up losing an eye in the bombing. While she was hospitalized, a Life magazine photographer snapped an iconic photo of Rudolph lying in her hospital bed, her eyes covered in fist-sized gauze pads. She says she had no idea that the photo had been taken, nor that it polarized a nation that suddenly turned its focus to the civil rights issues rocking the South.

At the time, she says, "The police was involved. The mayor, the governor. They just hated our color. We couldn't even call the police if we wanted. All of them in the office was Ku Klux Klan. So we were having a rough time."

Despite the severity of her injuries, Rudolph received no counseling, little recognition and no restitution.

"You know, you go into church to praise God, and you come out without your sister," Rudolph says.

"And today, we still haven't gotten an apology from the city of Birmingham. Nothing. Nothing. [We're] still paying bills for doctors for my eye."

Sarah says Addie Mae was a sweet girl who she knows is now in heaven. She regrets not having gone to Addie Mae's funeral because she was in the hospital — and not having met Martin Luther King Jr., who eulogized her. But she takes some solace in the memories of the time she spent with her sister.

"We had some good times," Sarah says. "I still miss her."

HER WORK TODAY ::

For years, Sarah has been working to reveal herself to the world and preserve and take control of her narrative, the results are paying off.

In 2014, [ESPN brought Outside the Lines](#) to Birmingham for a round table conversation about race and the 'n' word. During the round table, she spoke with rapper and actor Common, who played James Bevel in the movie, "Selma." In 2018, ESPN returned to Birmingham for a taping of a Black History Month special called "Dear Black Athlete." Rudolph and other key figures of the civil rights movement in Birmingham were invited to sit in the front pews of the historic Sixth Avenue Baptist Church.

She also speaks to youth around the city. In June 2019, she spent the evening at Revelator Coffee House, sharing her story with Bham Stands, an organization devoted to connecting the citizens of Birmingham and the young people who will inherit the city.

Rudolph has returned to Sixteenth Street Baptist Church a few times. She says the church mails her a letter to remind her of the memorial service every year. But her first time

actually speaking at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing memorial service was in 2017, when Pastor Arthur Price invited her to say a few words.

As for what she wants people to know about her, Rudolph says she is happy to live and to do God's will.

She worked in the foundries for years, a job that enabled her to get social security when she got older. The jobs were more than an income. Looking back, says Rudolph, she's glad the jobs kept her active.

"I thank God that I was able to do something besides just sitting on my behind, doing nothing. Feeling sorry for myself. 'Cause I wanted to get out there and do something in life. Just sitting at home {thinking} 'I'm blind... I can't see out of one eye.' I wanted to do something, so I went and I did that. Now, I'm able to get social security. And travel, and do what I want to do."

After her work at the foundries, Rudolph started working for a cleaning service. She still works part time.

"I work for a lady. A little old lady, just as sweet as she could be."

When she's not traveling and speaking, she says she's happy to go to church and spend time with her husband.

"I just sit around and we go to the movies now and then. I'm just pleased to be at home to tell you the truth," said Rudolph.

And in a city that's taken so much from her, Rudolph is reclaiming her time, her story, and her life.

"That's what I want people to know. I'm trying to live so I can live again."