

A LITTLE EXTRA

Sometimes tragedy brings out the best in people, spurring the more fortunate to give to others what they've received themselves. After the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, one young man wanted to help the children who had lost their parents. His generosity has made it a little easier for 207 children to get on with their lives.

Ronnie Fields and his parents had always been close. They did everything together: they worked on their fifteen-acre farm, danced the two-step on Saturdays, and went to church on Sundays. On Friday nights they ate Ronnie's mother's delicious homemade pizza.

Carroll Fields was only eighteen years old when she married Ron Fields and started working at the Oklahoma Drug Enforcement Administration—over thirty years ago. Ronnie dearly loved his mother. When he started college, they talked nearly every day. She told him often how much she loved him. What he remembers most about his mother is her laughter. Just two weeks earlier, she'd come to the Mother's Day festivities at his fraternity at Oklahoma University. The pictures they took together that day turned out to be their last.

One morning Ronnie came down for breakfast at his fraternity house, and someone asked him if he'd heard the news. When he turned on the TV, he knew right away it was his mom's office building that had been bombed. The roof to the top floor, where her office had been, was now

flapping in the wind.

Ronnie called his dad and then drove home, the longest fifty miles of his life. As he passed by the building on his way home, he couldn't even look at it. It took over a week to find out if his mother was dead or alive, while rescuers worked around the clock to clear rubble and recover victims. The news, when it came, confirmed their worst fear: Carroll Fields was one of the 168 people who died that horrible day, April 19, 1995.

People all over the country were shocked and moved, and deeply needed to do something to help someone, somehow. They prayed and sent donations, washed cars, wrote letters, and gave blood. In Lubbock, Texas, a young child put a dollar in an envelope and addressed it to "Big Help" in Oklahoma City.

In Santa Clara, California, Chris Gross couldn't stop thinking about the children. "I kept seeing the building and the images of the children who died in the day-care center," he said. He kept thinking about them and the others, the ones who had lost their parents. "Imagine being one of them," Chris thought. "Put yourself in their shoes. They're going to be missing their parents for the rest of their lives."

Like Ronnie Fields, Chris had been close with his own parents. He had grown up knowing he was lucky and feeling grateful for his life. At an early age his parents had instilled in him the Jewish tradition of *tsdaka*, giving to others. Chris remembers how his mother would always buy too many cookies from the Girl Scouts. "When young people are trying, give them an opportunity to succeed," she would say. "Never turn them away."

Chris's parents also fostered an appreciation for learning, and worked hard to put Chris and his brother through college. "I always thought that if most parents had a dying wish for their children, they would say, 'Go to college, make something of yourselves,' " says Chris. He thought the Oklahoma parents would have wanted this for their children, too. He wondered how he could help make this wish come true.

He started by talking with his friends. "Wouldn't it be great if we created a scholarship fund and raised a million dollars to give these kids some hope for their future?" Chris asked them. "Right now, everyone is making them dinners and offering them clothes. But in five or ten years, will anyone really be there to help? If we start now, we could make a big difference in these kids' lives."

Chris searched for ways to jump-start a scholarship fund. Having graduated only a few years earlier, he knew how expensive it was to go to college. As a financial analyst at Applied Materials, a semiconductor equipment company, his yearly salary was \$54,000. It was a good salary for a young man, but not enough to finance the education of so many children. Even if he gave it all, he would only have enough for one scholarship. But what if he could get others to match his salary? Chris decided to share his idea with Tom Hayes, vice-president of corporate affairs, and ask for his help. "What if we could get eighteen other Silicon Valley companies to match my salary?" Chris proposed. "We could raise a million dollars!"

"A couple of years earlier, I wouldn't have had the money. In a couple more years, I'd be married with lots of responsibilities," Chris reflects. "I was at an optimal point in my life." He calculated his

finances: he had \$12,000 in the bank, with no car payments or debt. He figured if he cut way back on his spending and planned things carefully, he could live on his savings for one year. So Chris learned to live with less: he slowed down his fast-paced life, gave up his cell phone, and wore the same clothes instead of buying new ones. He kept up his social life by going out with friends for dessert, instead of an entire meal.

When Chris's employer decided to match his salary, he was on his way toward meeting his goal. For the next several weeks he spent many long days faxing and telephoning people in other Silicon Valley companies, inviting them to participate in the scholarship fund. When he felt tired, he gained strength knowing he would someday be able to help children in Oklahoma City.

His persistence paid off. Chris succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. After about a year, he'd raised \$400,000 from twelve of the eighteen corporations he had contacted. When the press ran a story, hundreds of people across the country wrote letters and sent checks, adding another \$300,000 to the fund. Oklahoma's governor, Frank Keating, was so impressed with Chris's scholarship fund that he added another \$3 million to it from the general donation fund. "Giving people the chance to succeed stuck with me," Chris says. "I just wondered what one person could do."

The Oklahoma City Scholarship Fund is hope for 224 children who know they will receive all the support they need when it's time to go to college. Ronnie Fields was one of the first to receive a scholarship. After the bombing, he didn't know if he could continue his college education. Before his mom was killed, she had paid his college tuition. Ronnie

worked after school, but he couldn't take on any more debts. At times he thought of dropping out of school. When the Oklahoma City Community Foundation called him with the good news about the scholarship fund, he knew his prayers had been answered. He had prayed for something good to come out of the tragedy.

In turn, Ronnie thought long and hard about his future and how he could share his gifts with others. He had enjoyed working with young people as a peer counselor. An easygoing, fun-loving, and patient guy, he connected easily with them. He could also relate. "When I was a teen, sometimes I was a real jerk, thinking I was too cool to be with my parents," he remembers with regret, "and I have a video to prove it!"

Ronnie decided he could help young people build a strong foundation for their lives if he went to graduate school and became a youth minister. He graduated from Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, and now serves a congregation in Texas. He works with youth councils to plan local and statewide youth events. "Live life to the fullest, don't get stressed out about the little things, and don't wait to enjoy your life," he counsels young people. "Do as much good as you can—and have some fun."

After September 11, Ronnie spoke to youth groups in Texas about finding hope in tragic situations. "I still believe more good can come out of bad situations," he told them. "We only have to look for the opportunities."

Ronnie thinks about his mother every day, and often feels her loving spirit with him. "You never know when any of us are going to go," he tells young people. "So appreciate the time you have with your parents."

One day Ronnie hopes to meet Chris and thank him for helping to make all this possible. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him,” Ronnie says gratefully. “It’s done wonders for me. It’s changed my whole life.”

If God is watching us, the least we can do is be entertaining.

RONNIE FIELDS

If you know of some children who especially need more encouragement and support, you could start a scholarship fund. To get started, just call your local community foundation or bank trust department.