

feature»

Having a Blast

TEN YEARS AFTER A
TERRORIST'S BOMB NEARLY
KILLED HER, EMILY LYONS
IS LOVING LIFE

BY KIM HILDENBRAND
PHOTO BY KRISTIE LAROCHELLE



EMILY LYONS NEVER WANTED TO BE FAMOUS. She didn't set out to be a hero or an activist, to have her face splashed across television screens and her innermost thoughts published in national magazines. "I was always very quiet," she says. "I was a private person."

Then Eric Robert Rudolph's bomb changed everything.

"I went to work one day," Emily says, "and woke up a month later."

Clad in a t-shirt and casual cotton pants, with her golden brown hair pulled back in a clip, Lyons sits on the large couch in her eclectic living room, chatting comfortably in her soft voice; when her boisterous dog licks your face, she laughs and exclaims, "Ah, you got the sugar!"

But unlike most women, Lyons can pull up her pant leg and stick magnets to the spots where nails are embedded.

On January 29, 1998, at 7:33 a.m., domestic terrorist Eric Robert Rudolph bombed a Birmingham women's clinic to protest abortion,

advocate for women's reproductive rights. "A switch was turned that day," she explains. "I was very quiet before, but the bombing made me defiant. It made me a lot more stubborn."

The couple, who credit top-notch medical professionals for Emily's survival, relied on humor during their darkest days. Phrases like "You have rocks in your head," "You look dynamite," and "You're on my blind side" took on a whole new meaning. While Emily was still in the hospital, the couple came up with the title of the memoir they knew they'd eventually write: *Life's Been a Blast*.

"We don't take this lightly," Jeff says, "but we were going to get on with living."

Lyons was in the hospital for eight weeks. The day a smiling Emily was released, she had the limousine driver take her directly to the clinic. "I wasn't afraid before," she says, "and I'm not afraid now."

DON'T CALL HER A VICTIM. IF YOU DO, SHE WILL CORRECT YOU IMMEDIATELY. "I'M A SURVIVOR," LYONS SAYS.

killing police officer Robert Sanderson and critically injuring Emily, who was a nurse.

His bomb, filled with nails, was 12 feet from her when it exploded.

A TRIUMPHANT RECOVERY

Lyons' injuries were devastating: When she reached the hospital, she'd lost two-thirds of her blood, but was, incredibly, still talking. In the end, Lyons lost her left eye, endured 22 surgeries and had to learn to walk all over again on her shattered legs. The pain was agonizing.

"Emily," her husband Jeff says, "was absolutely amazing."

And along with her physical recovery, the formerly private Emily became an outspoken

LIFE AFTER THE BOMB

In the days after the bombing, Lyons became a hot commodity. She appeared on *The Today Show* and *Larry King Live* and was featured in dozens of magazines and newspapers, and still receives e-mails from around the world.

"There's no privacy," she says, a wistful note in her voice. "At the store the other day someone came up to me and said: 'Aren't you ...' I know the rest of the sentence. 'Aren't you the nurse, the one that got blown up?'"

Around the Lyons home are mementos of the bombing. Along with the pleasant ones, such as a photo of Emily with Bill Clinton, they have a small vial of rusty nails that were removed from Lyons' body. They also keep a small tool chest — a replica

A POWERFUL READ
On July 18, 2005 — the day Eric Rudolph was sentenced to life without parole, as well as Emily's 49th birthday — Emily and Jeff Lyons released their self-published memoir, *Life's Been a Blast*. "It's definitely not a 'poor me' book," Jeff says. You can order signed copies at emilylyons.com.

of the one Eric Rudolph purchased at Wal-Mart to house his bomb. To make a point, they will sometimes casually pull it out during speeches or interviews, place it somewhere and see if anyone notices. I didn't after Jeff placed it on the coffee table.

"You see that tool chest?" Jeff asks suddenly. "You're dead. Blown up."

JUSTICE?

According to Emily and Jeff Lyons, the justice system failed them. Eric Rudolph, who also bombed the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, a lesbian night club in Atlanta and a women's clinic in Sandy Springs, Georgia, is currently serving a life term in prison.

What should have happened to him? Lyons doesn't pause: "He should be dead."

"He knew what he was doing," she says. "He intended to kill. He should've been given the death penalty."

The Lyons have never confronted Rudolph, though they've asked to. But once, in a courtroom in Huntsville, Emily inadvertently came face to face with her near-killer with only a pane of glass between them. "He walked by and turned, and his face was right there. His eyes were just so ... black. I was looking at just black eyes — there was nothing in there, nothing that was right in there. We were just — so close."

Lyons refuses to consider the "what if" scenarios. "I was doing what I was supposed to be doing that day," she says, quietly but firmly. "I was



The women's clinic after the bombing (above) and two of the nails removed from Emily's body during one of her many surgeries (at left). Photo at left by Rachael Pongetti.



where I was supposed to be."

But Lyons is also pensive, and she does, at some level, question why Rudolph did this to her — a nurse doing her job. Why would a man she'd never met purposely inflict such grievous pain on her? "I didn't put a gun to his head or put a bomb under his trailer or anything," she says.

Lyons would like to ask Rudolph one question: "Why did you think you were important enough to take this into your hands — to kill these people?"

The last time she saw him in court, Lyons directed a gesture at Rudolph that she'd been waiting to show him — a recently healed injury. Lyons showed Rudolph the newly repaired joint of her middle finger. "I'd been waiting so long to do that!" she exclaims, a hint of laughter in her voice.

LIFE'S A BLAST

Jeff and Emily have a whole story separate from the bomb ... a story of a relationship that nearly never was. They dated during college, but Emily broke up with Jeff. They both went on to marry — and eventually divorce — other people, but Jeff never forgot Emily. He tracked her down 15 years later using an early version of the Internet

and then drove 450 miles to see her.

"Let's just say," Jeff says, "that she was not overly pleased to see me."

But against all odds, the couple made their peace. They were married about four years before the bombing, and their new marriage continued to thrive as he took care of her, protected her and advocated for her. "Bad things happen to people, whether [it's] a bomb or a car wreck," he says. "You either let it come between you, or you decide it's the two of you against it."

So it's no surprise that today, when asked what makes her happiest, all Emily does is point — at her husband. She also loves Esca, Tex and Puppies, a motley crew of rescued dogs whom she and Jeff lavish attention on. They're still private people, and they're enjoying life — going on dates, traveling when they can and just being together.

"Every time Emily smiles or we enjoy watching a movie," Jeff says, "we win."

How will Emily celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the bombing? She pauses to think, then smiles at her husband.

"I'll have a good steak."

Money's more fun when it does what you want

The Women's Fund empowers women to take control of their financial health. Learn how to speak the language of money — how to spend it, how to save it, how to track where it goes. Visit www.languageofmoney.org.



THE WOMEN'S FUND

www.thewomensfundbham.org • 327-3820

The Women's Fund is a component of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham

