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INSIGHT ON DIVERSITY

## 'An Example of Tolerance and Resilience': Birmingham Bombing Survivor Shares Story

BY PAUL FIRES

*Special to the Legal*

In celebration of Black History Month (last month), the men and women of Weber Gallagher Simpson Stapleton Fires & Newby's diversity committee considered various guest speakers to emphasize the importance of the African-American experience in the United States, and how that experience can inform our client relationships and our business strategies. They made their pick. But no one who attended this event, including firm personnel and invited guests, was quite prepared for the influence exerted by the petite—though giant—Sarah Collins Rudolph.

For those of you unfamiliar with her history, Rudolph was an ordinary, everyday little



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girl in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sept. 15, 1963, headed to the 16th Street Baptist Church with her sister Addie Mae. They walked and talked, they tossed their purses back and forth to each other as children do, and entered what they thought would be the welcoming embrace of their family's house of worship. Shortly afterward, at least 15 sticks of dynamite linked to a timing device went off, killing Mae, along with three other girls: Cynthia Wesley, Carole Roberson and Carol Denise

McNair. Twenty-two others were injured in the bombing. Eight year-old Condolezza Rice, at her father's church nearby, heard the explosion. Secretary Rice hears it to this day.

Martin Luther King was right to call this horrific day "one of the most vicious and tragic

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crimes ever perpetrated against humanity." The criminals behind these murders were four known Klansmen, who went on to live normal lives (if bragging about racial murder, which they did, is

in any way “normal”) until the first set of prosecutions began in 1977, 14 years later.

Rudolph’s lecture to our group was an intensely personal one. To paraphrase the author Evelyn Waugh, she spoke with a voice as quiet as a prayer and just as powerful. She described her months-long ordeal in the hospital, the loss of one eye, the damage to the other, the shards of glass and debris lodged elsewhere. She described her return to “normal life” in a day and age without counseling, and where a conspiracy of silence descended like a rancid fog over the entire Birmingham community. She described her use of substances to help her cope with her pain. She described her path to salvation through her religion. And most importantly, she described her ability to forgive those in the community responsible for this act of white supremacist terrorism.

Along with the guilty, there were the silent witnesses, those everyday citizens who tolerated hate and violence in their midst, as long as they were spared the effects of both. There was the abrogation of responsibility by responsible government

officials and the look-the-other-way prosecutors. There was the evil persistence of Jim Crow laws throughout her childhood. For Rudolph, there was a lot to forgive.

In a sense of defiance that surely exceeds the grit of any trial lawyer, Rudolph built a life. She married, and became a speaker. Strikingly, she remains a citizen of Birmingham, refusing to be intimidated or chased into leaving. And, encouraging and heartwarming for all of us who listened to and watched Rudolph, we learned that her husband remains by her side, both at home and in her travels. A Vietnam veteran who served his country well, George Rudolph also carries the distinction of being a passionate, life-long Philadelphia Eagles fan.

Many of us are in the business of achieving our clients’ goals, managing law firms, running in-house operations or serving in the judiciary. Rudolph’s example of tolerance and resilience is an important piece of guidance for how we can carry ourselves in terms of our colleagues, our goals, and our compassions. Each of us has a responsibility to ensure

inclusiveness in our professional lives, in our communities and most of all, in our society. And it is in each of our interests to root out prejudice, while at the same time, share these stories with our communities to ensure that the ugly side of our history is never repeated. Without cooperation and comity, without diversity and inclusion, we not only miss out on life’s richness, we confine ourselves to a narrow existence. •