

Victim of 1963 Alabama Church Bombing Wants Restitution, Not Medal

A woman who survived a 1963 Alabama church bombing that killed her sister and three other black girls in one of most heinous crimes of the civil rights era said she will not accept a medal that Congress may award posthumously to the victims.

Instead, Sarah Collins Rudolph says she wants millions of dollars in restitution for her sister's death and for the injuries she herself suffered as a result of the September 15, 1963 bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, which was carried out by the Ku Klux Klan.

Rudolph, 12 at the time of the bombing, lost an eye after being hit with shattered glass in the church basement and spent two months in a hospital. She said she was nearly blinded in the other eye and has post-traumatic stress and memory loss.

"I am not going to go get the (medal) until justice has been fulfilled," said Rudolph, now 62, during an interview on Friday at her home in a Birmingham suburb.

Two U.S. representatives from Alabama, Democrat Terri Sewell and Republican Spencer Bachus, introduced legislation in January to give Congress' highest civilian honor to the girls who lost their lives in the bombing.

The lawmakers said awarding the Congressional Gold Medal would recognize their sacrifices as well as those of others in Birmingham in the quest for equal rights for blacks.

The church bombing shocked Americans and helped spur the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits

discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

"We should never forget those who marched, prayed and died in the pursuit of civil rights and change," Sewell said in a statement. "The four girls were emblematic of so many who suffered and lost their lives."

The measure has received backing from two-thirds of House members, or 290 signatures, as required to bring it for a vote, Sewell said.

Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley, all 14, and 11-year-old Denise McNair were in a basement washroom with Rudolph preparing for a service when the bomb exploded just after McNair asked Collins to tie her sash, Rudolph recalled.

Survivors Divided

Rudolph and family members of the other girls are divided over the appropriate way to mark the deaths, for which three Klansmen were convicted decades after the crime.

McNair's family is hoping Congress will approve the medals to bring attention to the tragedy. More than 20 other members of the church congregation were also injured in the explosion.

"We feel that this honor given by Congress means that our great country recognizes the sacrifices made for freedom in our country," said Lisa McNair, 49, the sister of Denise McNair.

The Addie Mae Collins, was last awarded to those who died in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Wesley's brother, 61-year-old Fate Morris, agrees with Rudolph that the families deserve restitution instead.

"That medal won't do us any good. Only the politicians will

get anything out of it," said Morris, who remembers helping to pick through the rubble after the bombing to look for his sister.

Morris also wants his sister's name corrected in the history books. He said she was living with a family whose surname was Wesley at the time of her death, but her real last name was Morris.

He said a price cannot be put on death. Rudolph suggested \$5 million would be fair compensation for her sister's death and the injuries and medical bills that she has incurred.

The family members are unlikely to get money from Alabama, where compensation for crime victims is capped at \$15,000 and must be claimed one year after a crime occurs, said Lauren Thompson, a claims assistant for the Alabama Crime Victims Compensation Commission.

Montgomery-based lawyer Jere Beasley said the federal government's failure to protect blacks during the civil rights era could make it responsible for Rudolph's injuries.

"By inaction, you encourage the violence," Beasley said.