

Victim of 1963 Alabama church bombing by KKK recalls horror

Sarah Collins Rudolph speaks to YMCA group

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On a normal Sunday morning, five little Black girls were together in the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Until dynamite that was planted by members of the Ku Klux Klan exploded and killed four little girls.

One girl survived that Sept. 15, 1963, explosion. Her name is Sarah Collins Rudolph.

The YMCA of Greater Rochester hosted a conversation with Rudolph on Wednesday during her visit from Alabama. She recalled that fateful day and shared how her mission is to tell her story and preserve the legacy of the four other girls.

She called out for her sister, got no answer

The four girls killed in Birmingham were Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Rudolph's sister Addie Mae Collins.

"Addie and I were very close. I was 12, and she was 14, and we just loved to be together," Rudolph said. "We got along real good together; we never argued or anything."

When the bomb went off, Rudolph said she called out to her sister, calling her name three times, but she didn't hear an answer.

Rudolph said she didn't know what had happened as she was blinded by the explosion. "I was blinded in my right eye and glass got in my left eye, and that same day they had to remove my right eye," Rudolph said.

Talking about the Birmingham bombing

When it first happened Rudolph said she wouldn't talk about it as the situation filled her with fear and caused her to have panic attacks and a nervous



Sarah Collins Rudolph discusses the 1963 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Ala., during her visit to Rochester. The YMCA of Greater Rochester hosted "A Night with Sarah Collins Rudolph" at In Christ New Hope Ministry on Tuesday. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

condition. Rudolph said it was because of God's healing she was able to tell her story.

"I remember the pastor coming up to me when I went to church and he looked at me and said God was showing him that I was very nervous and fearful," Rudolph said. "He laid his hands on me and prayed for me and it all just went away."

For decades Rudolph suffered with hate, pain and trauma, but because of her faith, Rudolph is now in a place where she tells her story to people all across the United States.

When asked what kind of parallels she see between the struggles of the civil rights era and now, Rudolph said it looks like it's coming back. "I see killings that police are doing to Black men and women and back then it was a lot of that going on, so it looks like they are bringing it back," Rudolph said. "I always say we have the same blood, we're just a different color, but we have feelings, too."

When it comes to sharing her story, Rudolph wants people to know how the

deaths of these four little girls have changed the world. "I wish it didn't have to happen that way, but it looks like every time somebody has to die," Rudolph said. "That's sad somebody has to always die for things to change."

Rudolph recalled a night when she attended a tent church service where the church leader was not just a pastor but a prophet. The prophet called out to her and looked at her and said that he saw dust around her. Rudolph knew it had to be the bombing as that was the only time she had dust around her. "He told me I was supposed to be dead, but God sent his angel to catch the beam that was supposed to fall on top of me," Rudolph said.

To this day, Rudolph has not received an official apology from the Alabama government, and she encourages people to write and send letters demanding restitution for her.

At the end of the event, copies of her book titled "The Fifth Little Girl" were available to attendees. The book was published in 2020 and relives that historic day she became the fifth little girl.