WORLD & NATION

A grandmother's quest for truth

By Robert W. Welkos

Nov. 24, 2002 12 AM PT

TIMES STAFF WRITER

At 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995, Kathy Graham Wilburn was watching her daughter, Edye, cross the room to blow out the candles on her 23rd birthday cake when a powerful explosion shook the downtown Oklahoma City office building where their co-workers had gathered for an office birthday party.

Someone yelled then that a nearby bank had just been blown up, and Wilburn and her daughter dashed outside as shards of glass rained from the sky and smoke billowed over the city.

But it wasn't a bank. It was the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, and inside was a day-care center with Edye's two children, 3-year-old Chase and 2-year-old Colton, who would perish in the blast.

“I stood and watched my daughter crumble,” Wilburn recently recalled. “She said, ‘My babies! My babies!’ I said, ‘Edye, it’s going to be all right.’ But I knew in my heart it wasn’t going to be all right.”Now, a feature-length documentary titled “Terror From Within” is raising disturbing questions about the Oklahoma City bombing, which claimed 168 lives, including 19 children. It asks whether a more complex mastermind was behind the blast than Timothy McVeigh, who was executed last year, and his imprisoned co-conspirator, Terry Nichols.

A driving force behind the film is 49-year-old grandmother Kathy Wilburn, who, as associate producer, has been on a years-long mission to unearth facts about the event that took the lives of her grandsons.

Like the divorced mother of three who took on a corporate giant in “Erin Brockovich,” Wilburn has been waging a crusade against the secrecy and power of the federal government almost since the day of the bombing.Her quest has taken her to England and Ireland to conduct interviews, and she has befriended relatives of McVeigh and Nichols, hung out of a helicopter guiding cameras over a white separatist settlement in rural Oklahoma that McVeigh telephoned in the weeks before the bombing, and even entered the Aryan Nations compound in Idaho, where hatemongers wearing swastikas shouted “Heil Hitler!” and saluted a life-size bust of the Fuhrer.

“It made me feel sick,” she said of her visit to the compound, but Wilburn still managed to charm Aryan Nations founder Richard Butler into giving her an on-camera interview by telling him: “My name is Kathy Wilburn. I lost both my

grandchildren in the Oklahoma City bombing, and I don't like the story the feds are telling me.' "

Whenever someone balked, Wilburn would "guilt" them into cooperation by showing them a small artist's rendition she carries of her two grandchildren with angel's wings.

Before the bombing, Wilburn had been in charge of employee hiring at the Internal Revenue Service in Oklahoma City. Her husband, Glenn, was a certified public accountant. Two years after the bombing, he would die of pancreatic cancer, a condition, he was convinced, precipitated by stress caused by the bombing and its aftermath.

"We were the kind of people who got up in the morning, we went to work, we came home and played with the babies and worked in the yard," Kathy Wilburn recalled. "Never had a political agenda. I would have never believed this could have happened if it hadn't happened to me."

Now a motivational speaker, Wilburn has been seen on numerous television programs, including "The Oprah Winfrey Show," "CBS This Morning," "The Today Show" and "America's Most Wanted."

Director and producer Jason Van Vleet, 32, credits Wilburn with not only providing valuable research for the documentary, but also with landing key on-camera

interviews from people who normally might shun professional journalists.

“What was unique is, we were able to get into some of the places that most reporters don’t get into,” Van Vleet said.

Wilburn not only worked behind the scenes but is also featured on camera, as is Jannie Coverdale, who also lost her grandchildren in the blast. Visiting the gravesites of the children, the women lend poignancy to an otherwise hard-edged documentary.

“Terror From Within” screened in September at the International Documentary Assn.’s “DOCtober” showcase in Santa Monica, in a qualifying run for Academy Award consideration. The documentary was produced by Colorado-based MGA Films, which has a domestic television distribution deal with Solid Entertainment of Santa Monica and an international distribution deal with Sound Image Broadcast Sales out of London. The documentary won the grand jury award at this year’s Houston Film Festival.

The 90-minute film claims that right-wing extremists had targeted the Murrah building as far back as 1983 and notes that April 19 loomed large in militia circles for several reasons.

April 19 not only marked the second anniversary of the day the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, went up in flames, but also the 10th anniversary of the

day in 1985 that federal and state authorities laid siege to the Arkansas compound of a military group called the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord.

On the very day that McVeigh set off the bomb in Oklahoma, Richard Wayne Snell, a white separatist and Covenant member who had once conceived of a plan to blow up the Murrah building, was executed in Arkansas for murdering a black state trooper and a white businessman he suspected of being Jewish. Snell originally wanted to use a truck bomb to destroy the Murrah building, but the plan was changed to employ a rocket launcher. The plot fizzled after the device blew up prematurely.

‘Truth’ dies with McVeigh

Almost from the beginning, Wilburn and her husband had questioned the official version of events. They wondered, for example, why the FBI had dropped its search for John Doe No. 2, the mysterious, olive-skinned man several people had reported seeing with McVeigh in the days leading up to the bombing.

“To this day, what’s disturbing to me is the fingerprints that were in Timothy McVeigh’s car when he was arrested in Perry, Okla., were never run through the FBI files to be checked,” Wilburn said. “And the 22 security cameras that were downtown around the Murrah building, the judge placed them under seal and they are under seal to this day.... People who saw McVeigh downtown in the Ryder truck that morning said they saw another individual with him.”

Early on, Wilburn and her husband had their critics, including those who believed if she kept asking questions about the involvement of other people in the bombing, it might result in McVeigh and Nichols getting off. At Nichols' trial, she even sat with the defendant's mother and sister. Her reasoning? They hadn't done anything wrong.

On the day McVeigh was executed in Indiana, Wilburn joined the families of other victims in Oklahoma City to watch via closed-circuit television.

"I wasn't in favor of killing McVeigh," she recalled. "However, if anyone ever deserved to die for any one thing, he certainly did. But I thought with the death of McVeigh died the truth."

Yet she was shocked at the look McVeigh gave them just before the poison was injected into his veins. "He deliberately looked at our camera and gave us the most cold, heartless look.... He glares at us and then he dies. We got to sit there in stone silence with his eyes open staring at us."

Until the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon last year, Oklahoma City had been the deadliest act of terror on American soil. In the days after 9/11, Wilburn traveled to New York to console some of the family members whose loved ones died in the attack.

"I knew immediately I had to commiserate with those people," she said. "They needed to know you're going to be all right because right after the bombing was the only time

in my life that I ever considered suicide. It was like, I don't want to live in this world, it's too painful.

But I heard John Walsh of 'America's Most Wanted' [whose son was abducted and murdered] and he said, 'You will grieve, and you will grieve deeply, but you will survive.' And that is the first time that I thought that I will."

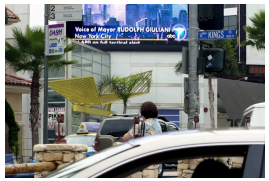
Van Vleet said he doesn't know if the documentary will be nominated for an Academy Award, but if it were and should it win, nothing would please him more than seeing Wilburn join him onstage to accept the Oscar.

Wilburn knows what she would say in her acceptance speech. She would say that the Oscar was purchased with blood.

More to Read

'We were also viewers': On Sept. 11, L.A. news anchors had to balance fear and duty

Sept. 11, 2026



25 years on, they haven't forgotten. How 9/11 changed these TV journalists' lives

Sept. 10, 2026



Voices

Commentary: Twenty-five years ago, television was the only guide through the horror and chaos of 9/11

Sept. 10, 2026



Sign up for Essential California

The most important California stories and recommendations in your inbox every morning.

By continuing, you agree to our Terms of Service, which include arbitration and a class action waiver. You agree that we and our third-party vendors may collect and use your information, including through cookies, pixels and similar technologies, for the purposes set forth in our Privacy Policy such as personalizing your experience and ads.

Login or register with email

Agree & Continue

Copyright © 2026, Los Angeles Times | Terms of Service | Privacy Policy | CA Notice of Collection | Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information