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— Photo by Ringo

Oklahoma City National Bombing Memorial co-designer Hans Butzer walks among the 168 chairs that honor those who died in the 1995 terrorist bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The memorial opens April 19 with a series of events.

Five years after the greatest of tragedies, bombing memorial set to open in one week

by Shelly Hickman

It's hard to believe it's been five years. But it has — nearly five years to the day that most citizens of the state were glued to their televisions and radios, shocked to the core by the frightening images and sounds being broadcast.

Perhaps it was from a gas line break or some type of boiler explosion, some initially speculated.

Even when it was reported that the carnage at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was the work of terrorists, the thought that someone was capable of slaughtering 19 innocent children and 149 mothers, fathers, sons and daughters was too horrible to face.

Grief for the city soon was replaced with anger when the deed was identified with a particular face. However, five years later, determination has triumphed over anger — determination that a tragedy such as that of April 19, 1995, shall never again be repeated.

"The easy thing would have been to leave things as they were, but the city thankfully chose to deal with the tragedy in this way," said Cari Watkins, executive director of the Oklahoma City National Bombing Memorial.

Standing at the memorial site, she said of it: "It will forever teach people that terrorism cannot be tolerated and that there are other ways to solve problems other than with bloodshed and terrorism."

It has taken more than \$29 million and hours, months, and years of work and sheer will, but the memorial will open one week from Wednesday with President Clinton attending.

The dedication of the memorial will begin the morning of April 19 with a private ceremony for bombing survivors, family members and

rescue workers.

The names of the 168 deceased will be read, and a children's choir will perform.

Following the morning service, a luncheon sponsored by the national memorial's Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism will be held near the grounds. Ambassador Prudent Bushnell, the former ambassador to Kenya, will speak on "Terrorism Beyond the 21st Century."

The public dedication of the national memorial will begin at 5 p.m. U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno will speak at the ceremony, along with U.S. Sen. Don Nickles, R-Ponca City, Gov. Frank Keating and Mayor Kirk Humphreys. Watkins said she expects most of Oklahoma's other congressmen to be in attendance, as well as every agency head of state government. Nick Harris, a local Methodist minister, will give the invocation.

At the beginning of the service, "we will have three messages, one from a family member, one from a survivor and one from a rescue worker. They will be speaking on behalf of everyone, for all of the families, survivors and rescue workers," Watkins said.

In addition, the mayor will give a message on behalf of the city, the governor will speak on behalf of the state, Nickles will speak on behalf of Congress and Reno will speak on behalf of the federal government.

A 168-member voice choir, comprised of boys from the Oklahoma City area, will perform a special anthem written for the occasion.

The details of the president's visit are unknown, but the White House confirmed late last week he would be attending.

Watkins said that with construction blockades lining the perimeter of the memorial and hindering the view for months now, she thought citizens would be surprised and

awestruck by the finished work.

After next week, the grounds will be managed by the National Park Service and can be visited by the public for free.

The focus of the memorial is 168 bronze and granite chairs. They have been placed in nine rows, representing what were the nine floors of the Murrah Building, on the grassy area where the building once stood.

Nineteen of the chairs are smaller than the rest and represent the children who died. Each chair has a glass base that will be lighted at night. This will give the effect of them being suspended in air, Watkins said.

A reflecting pool, measuring 320 feet long and 53 feet wide, is located next to the Survivor Tree. The elm tree is damaged but miraculously survived the bombing and appears healthy. A wall surrounds it with the names of survivors inscribed on it.

The chain-link fence that has surrounded the site since the bombing and has become the home of countless letters, flowers, stuffed animals and other sentimental items will remain in place for a time.

Eventually, it will be housed in the bombing museum, once the museum is completed. That museum and the Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism will be adjacent to the memorial in what used to be the Journal Record Building. However, construction hasn't yet begun on those projects.

The projects still need about \$2 million in funding, Watkins said, and the memorial foundation has yet to purchase the property, but it is in the process of doing so and in soliciting designs.

"By the end of November, everything is going to be done, and those components will be open as well," Watkins said. ■