

UT TOWER SHOOTINGS -- ONE SURVIVOR

UT Tower shooting survivor still grieves

Claire Wilson James survived Charles Whitman's bullet; the baby she carried did not.



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Claire Wilson James lost her baby in a most public and lurid way.

Forty-two years ago, Charles Whitman shot Claire's pregnant womb from his dreadful skybox atop the University of Texas Tower.

Now, Claire loses her baby in private, in her sleep, when the world no longer is watching.

"I so wanted a baby, and I so missed my baby," she says. "For years, even now, I have dreams that somehow I found my baby and I do something really stupid and I somehow lose it. I misplace him.

"I'm with the baby, and I'm holding a baby and turn around and make a mistake, and he's gone."

Claire James, who recently moved to Wyoming from Colorado, is in Austin this weekend to face her past and the tremendous loss caused by the high-caliber rampage of Charles Whitman on Aug. 1, 1966. He not only killed her unborn baby; he killed her boyfriend, the love of her life.

Claire and her boyfriend, Tom Eckman, were the first people felled by Whitman's rage. They were both 18 and lay helpless on the scorching concrete of the wide-open South Mall for an hour and a half while the city listened on the radio and froze.

She is in Austin to thank the men brave enough to climb the tower steps and stop Whitman's spine-chilling rain of bullets. On Friday, she met with many of the Austin lawmen who climbed the tower to confront Whitman. They gathered first at the Travis

County Precinct 3 building in Oak Hill, which was renamed the Tower Heroes Building, and then at the memorial turtle pond near the UT Tower. For the officers, it was a chance to hug a survivor of their worst crime case. For Claire, it was a chance to say thank you and to talk about the experience with others who understood..

Claire also came to Austin to try to find her baby. She was told that her son was buried, but she doesn't know where or even whether he was.

This 60-year-old woman, who was an outspoken civil rights activist in high school in Dallas before she came to UT and joined the leftist Students for a Democratic Society, now teaches in one-room Western schoolhouses run by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a religion she joined after spending years in the Colorado mountains searching for spirituality. She is twice divorced and has a 23-year-old son adopted from Ethiopia who is a classical pianist preparing for music graduate school.

What she doesn't have are all the answers to what happened to her life that macabre Monday in 1966. She spent more than three months in Brackenridge Hospital, longer than any of Whitman's other victims. While in bed, she missed the rituals of funerals, the solace of condolences and official details about how the two most important people in her life died.

On Aug. 1, 1966, Claire James was a UT freshman and free spirit passionately in love with Eckman, a fellow student and aspiring poet who had recently graduated from high school in Toledo, Ohio. Her name was Claire Wilson then, and she was eight months pregnant. But Tom was not the father. (She had a brief relationship with the father of her baby, and they had not remained friends.)

Claire and Tom had been together only two months. Yet they were soul mates, discussing every thought and idea until they ran out of words.

Tom had just finished an anthropology exam, and they met for lunch at the Chuck Wagon restaurant in the student union on the leafy West Mall.

Their borrowed car was parked on the eastern side of campus, and the meter would soon expire and require another 5 cents. After eating, the couple set out for the car with a few nickels.

"I'm worried whether or not you're getting enough orange juice and the things you need for your baby," Tom said, his bushy eyebrows punctuating his concern.

Just then, at 11:52 a.m., they left the shade of the West Mall, sidestepped a construction site and entered the sun-drenched South Mall. Jackhammers thundered.

More than 230 feet above them, a yet-to-be-noticed Charles Whitman watched.

An unfamiliar "pop" sounded. Claire was hit.

"I thought I'd stepped on an electric cord because when you get shot, it feels like this huge jolt," she said.

Tom reached out. "Baby!" he said, his term of affection for Claire.

"He didn't say anything else. And we both just fell to the ground. I had no idea he'd been shot. I just knew he didn't talk again."

Tom was shot just below his neck on the left side.

Claire was shot in the hip, leaving a fist-sized hole. The bullet entered her stomach, rupturing her colon and uterus.

Her nearly full-term baby, an active kicker, went still.

"I thought I felt something fall or slide down," she said. "And he didn't move anymore."

A man in a suit and tie walked by, and Claire pleaded: "Please help me!"

"Get up! What are you doing?" he snarled. Claire assumed that he thought she and Tom were playing a joke or protesting the Vietnam War. "Get up!"

Claire had no idea what was happening. She heard shots, screams and sirens. It would be 90 minutes before anyone would come to carry them away because, just above them, Whitman was picking off students, visitors, shoppers on the Drag and even a newsboy on a bicycle. He would kill 13 people and the fetus before law officers raced to the top of the tower to shoot him dead.

At 12:30 p.m., a small plane with a sharpshooter flew over the tower in an attempt to shoot Whitman. The plane, piloted by a man who later would serve as Williamson County sheriff, Jim Boutwell, was hit by Whitman's guns and couldn't get close enough for the marksman on board to hit back.

Claire heard the plane but mistook it for a helicopter.

"I thought Vietnam had broken out into the United States," she said. "Everything was about Vietnam. Every kid ... Tom was terrified that he'd get drafted. That was the big thing that was going on."

She knew she was losing dangerous amounts of blood. Her new beige maternity dress, which Tom had helped her choose, was soaked to red underneath her.

"It felt just like melting, when you lose all that blood," she said. "I thought there had been some kind of space gun that was turning me into nothing. It's just so kind of otherworldly."

Tom didn't move, didn't talk. The young poet sporting his first mustache and a new \$10 plaid shirt was dead.

As Whitman's spree went on, students gathered in doorways and other sheltered spots and shouted warnings to Claire.

"We need to help that pregnant woman," someone said.

"No," someone else replied. "We've got to help the ones there's still hope for."

"Don't move," they told her more than once.

A student named Rita Jones ran out and lay down next to her, talking to Claire so she would stay conscious.

The pavement, heated by the sun in the 99-degree weather, burned Claire's legs as she lay on her back. She placed her right foot flat on the concrete and slid it toward her stomach, cocking her right knee into a bend.

Onlookers gasped.

"It was just so hot I couldn't take it anymore," she recalled. "I was in a lot of pain."

She stared at the bright blue sky, empty of clouds. "I was thinking mostly about Tom."

At 1:15 p.m., several young men rushed up the steps of the South Mall. One wearing shorts picked up Claire by the ankles and dragged her but stopped after a few feet. He switched to her wrists, and another man grabbed her ankles. They carried her off like a bag of garden soil.

A husky young Vietnam veteran picked up Tom but faltered under the dead weight. He managed to lift him a bit higher and then, turning his back on the tower, limped off with his heavy load. Tom's lifeless arms swung at his sides.

At 1:23 p.m., Austin police officers Ramiro Martinez and Houston McCoy shot Whitman.

Claire and Tom were taken to Brackenridge Hospital, where Tom was declared dead on arrival at 1:35 p.m.

Claire lay on a gurney next to a high school student named Karen Griffith who was shot by Whitman as she walked up the Drag. Griffith died several days later.

Hospital workers prepared to X-ray the wounds of the two women, but surgeon Brian Forrister grabbed the gurneys instead. "There's not time to X-ray them," he said. Claire had lost so much blood that doctors could not get a blood pressure reading.

Claire's baby boy was delivered by Caesarean section. He was dead on delivery, says an Austin police report, contained in the official Whitman case files at the Austin History Center. The baby received a fatal skull fracture "due to concussion of the shell," the report said.

But the files also contain a hospital list of victims with a handwritten note at the bottom that says the baby "was alive when extracted but died later." However, that handwritten notation has a line through it to mark it out.

Either way, the doctors and nurses in the operating room cried when they realized that the baby boy was dead, according to a history of Brackenridge Hospital called "Admissions."

Claire doesn't remember discussing her baby's death with hospital staff members. She spent three months in the hospital, including seven weeks in the intensive care unit.

"Nobody ever said anything about the baby until I was getting an X-ray right at the end of my stay in the hospital. This young man told me that he had X-rayed my baby. I said, 'How was he?' And he said, 'He was perfect.' "

Claire endured five surgeries while in the hospital. Doctors removed the shattered tip of her pelvic bone, several feet of her small intestine, one ovary and some leg muscle. A wound on her side took eight months to heal.

Claire enrolled at UT for the spring semester of 1967. But her wounds proved too difficult to manage, and she dropped out. It was a strange and difficult time for her because the university hierarchy and fellow students didn't want to talk about the Whitman massacre.

"I was in the hospital so long I didn't get to talk to anyone or hear about it or anything," she said. "I would go to the library and see pictures, like the famous Life (magazine cover of the shooting).

"The hardest part of it is nobody talking about it. I guess everyone was too shy to ask about it. I would have been happy to talk about it. Even my family never talked about it. And I asked them once, and somebody said, 'We figured if you wanted to talk about it, you would have brought it up.' All I can say is, to be perfectly honest, since nobody else talked about it, I always felt kind of embarrassed to talk about that."

She missed Tom every day and had no one to turn to in her grief. Her family (she was the eldest of five children born to a lawyer and homemaker) had never met him, and she had not met his family. Her parents had divorced a year earlier, and she had no one to lean on.

She was still in love with Tom.

"I think he had a real chance to be a serious poet, and that is what he wanted to do. He was really a remarkable person.

"It was incredible to me just to fall in love like that and have someone love you so much."

At some point, Claire gathered her emotions and wrote a four-page condolence letter to Tom's father, professor Frederick Eckman, who at the time was teaching English at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. He had taught at UT in the 1950s.

"I would like very much to write to you about the time when Tom and I were together. At the risk of sounding melodramatic I would say that it was renaissance for me ... I learned more in those two months than perhaps in any other period of my life — I came into myself. ...

"In those two months that we spent together we talked about everything to the point almost of exhaustion. We were very hungry and eager to know about each other.

"I don't talk about Tom to most people, practically never to my close friends who never met him because I think there would be little understanding. The sort of things that were between Tom and me happen so rarely in this world that most people don't even understand the language, terms of reference. And the circumstances surrounding Tom and me are too bright, too dramatic, they tend to obscure one's mental vision, to numb or jade."

The undated letter is contained in the Frederick Eckman Collection in the archives at Bowling Green State University. When a reporter read a copy to Claire over the phone last week, it seemed to take her breath away. She was silent for a long moment and then spoke in a hush, her voice quivering.

"Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness," she said, at last. "That is so moving. Thank you. You gave me back a piece of myself."

After Claire dropped out of UT in 1967, she attended several colleges and finally graduated from Tarleton State University in Stephenville with an education degree.

She visited with several counselors after leaving the hospital but calls the sessions "horrible" and won't talk about them today.

She moved to Colorado in 1969 and spent seven years in a Seventh-day Adventist community in the mountains near Loveland, north of Denver, learning to garden, sew, cook and devote herself to God. She joined the Adventist church and began teaching in the church's one-room schoolhouses around the country. She just moved to Worland, Wyo., a town of 5,250, where she will teach this fall.

She was married twice, once to an art teacher and once to a Wal-Mart employee, but divorced because of the men's drinking problems, she said. In 1989, she adopted a 4-year-old from Ethiopia named Sirak, and he is the joy of her life.

Even though she has a delightful son who still lives with her, she can't forget the baby she lost. Her relatives told her that they had buried the baby.

"I recently started to try to do a search so I could get a death certificate. I never received anything," she said. "My mom's dead. Everyone's dead that would know (where the baby was buried). I have no idea. I have thought of that for many years. I don't know why I didn't ask my mom. I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't even bury the baby."

She sometimes questions her search.

"It seems kind of pointless. I don't know how to explain it. That's over. I have a wonderful boy, and he's always been very sweet. I think he thinks of that boy as his brother."

"I never really did get to grieve for my baby. Poor little baby."

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