

Fifty-one degrees under a cloudless sky, a light breeze out of the northeast: April 19, 1995, was a beautiful spring morning in Oklahoma. It was a Wednesday, and 28-year-old Amy Downs had just started her day as a bank teller at the Federal Employees Credit Union in downtown Oklahoma City.

Downs remembers catching up with coworkers on the way to her desk, reassuring her friend Sonya – on the way to a supervisors meeting in a bright yellow power suit – that she didn't look like a giant sunflower.

"I sat down at my desk ... and one of my coworkers, who was seven months pregnant, came in to talk to me. I turned to ask her what she needed, and I don't know if the words came out or not, because that's when it happened."

That's when a Ryder rental truck loaded with 5,000 pounds of fertilizer and fuel oil exploded in front of the building where she worked.

"I remember just hearing such an incredible roaring in my head, and feeling this powerful rushing sensation, like I was falling," Downs told a TEDx audience in 2020.

She was falling, nearly three floors as the building collapsed around her. In seconds, Downs was buried under 10 feet of rubble. She recalls screaming for help, and not recognizing her own voice.

She spent nearly an hour pinned under tons of concrete and steel before, finally, a team of rescuers found her.

"My hand is sticking out the side of the rubble pile, and I feel them hit my hand. And I'm like, 'It's me, you got me.' And I feel their hands grab mine, and I'm thinking they're getting ready to 1-2-3 pull me up and out."

But her hope was short-lived. As suddenly as help arrived, it was gone again.

"I heard men's voices yelling in the background," Downs said. "'There's another bomb, there's another bomb, everybody get out now.'"

Downs realized they'd never get her out in time. Her rescuers fled to safety, promising they would be back soon, but she didn't believe them.

"I remember thinking, I'm 28 years old, and I'm getting ready to die," she said. "And I've never even really lived. I was filled with so much regret, it was overwhelming."

It was more than a passing thought. That regret would change her life. With nothing else to do, there, in the darkness, Amy Downs began to sing.

"It was a song that I had sung in church years ago," Downs said. "And as I began to sing, it took my mind off the situation. It was the only action that I could really take. ... But when I did that, even though my situation didn't change, I felt peace."

When rescuers realized there wasn't a second bomb, they did return. Pulling Downs from the rubble took six excruciating hours.

"Finally, they said, 'OK, we're going to count to three and pull. This is probably going to hurt.' And they counted to three and they pulled, and every nerve in my body came alive. But I'll never forget taking that first breath of fresh air. Just filling my lungs and promising I'd never live my life the same."

Downs spent eight days in the hospital. Every day that passed, she learned of the name of another friend she'd never see again. In all, eighteen of Downs' coworkers and friends, along with 150 others, lost their lives in the attack, which had been plotted by two white supremacist and antigovernment extremists.

"I remember the last day in the hospital, I found out that they had found the body of my friend Sonya in her beautiful yellow suit."

Through it all, Downs clung to hope. Despite the darkness she felt, she promised to get through the next few days.

Days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years. And Downs did get through it, constantly finding a way to move forward.

"In Oklahoma, we call that pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," she said.

Downs, who had dropped out of college, went back to school to finish her degree. She got her MBA. She started riding a bicycle and lost 200 pounds. And now, she's the CEO of the same credit union where she worked in 1995.

She credits it all to hope.

"I remember, a few years after the bombing, our CEO asked me a question that would change my life. She said, 'If you had a magic wand and could do whatever you wanted, what would you change? What would you make better?'"

Downs thought about it and gave her answer.

"She said, 'OK. Given your current situation and limitations, what are the smallest steps that you can take to make that dream come true?'"

Downs said she was excited because the question gave her hope.

Hope, she said, is believing the future can be better and that you can play a role in making it better.

"I started applying the magic wand exercise to my own life," Downs said. "And there was something I wanted, and it was to go back and get that degree. I remember those action steps I wrote. The first one was to call the college."

From teller to CEO, “355-pound couch potato” to Iron Man triathlete, Downs made over her life.

“If I can make the changes in my life that I’ve made, using this simple framework, you can too,” Downs said. “There is always action that you can take. Instead of focusing on what you can’t do, focus on what you can. Even when I was buried alive and facing death, there was something I could do.”