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The story of the man in the cowboy hat who helped rescue a Marathon bombing victim

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 25, 2013 10:05 AM

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(Charles Krupa/Associated Press)

Carlos Arredondo, 52, and two others help rush Jeffrey Bauman Jr., 27, of Chelmsford, to get medical aid after Bauman was severely wounded in the Boston Marathon bombing.

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By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

The story of how Boston resident Carlos Arredondo helped save the life of a man severely wounded in the Marathon bombings began nearly nine years ago.

Arredondo, now known worldwide as the man in a cowboy hat photographed wheeling an injured bombing victim on April 15, saw his life change dramatically -- on his 44th birthday, Aug. 25, 2004. On that day, Marine officers in a government van arrived at the driveway of his home in Florida.

Arredondo thought it was a surprise birthday visit from his son, who had been serving in Iraq. Instead, he was told that his 20-year-old son was dead. Lance Corporal Marine Alexander Scott Arredondo had been **fatally shot** by an enemy sniper while he checked on the security and well-being fellow soldiers.

Carlos **lost control** of his emotions. He picked up a sledgehammer, smashed the windshield of the government van, poured gasoline on the van and himself, and lit a torch, causing an explosion.

Arredondo suffered serious burns on more than 20 percent of his body before Marines rescued him. He has since described his reaction as an accident, not a suicide attempt.

After nearly a year of recovery, he and his wife Melida, who is the stepmother of Alex and his brother Brian, began travelling the country. The couple teamed up with other families, speaking publicly at rallies, memorials and directly to politicians in the nation's capital to raise awareness "about the cost of war." They've protested rules, laws and other issues with military service they feel are unjust either for soldiers and their families.

Over the years, the Arredondos have experienced highs: In 2006, Carlos Arredondo, a native of Costa Rica, **became a US citizen**; and on Aug. 7, 2011, a post office near his son Alex's childhood home in Jamaica Plain was **named in Alex's honor**.

And there have been lows: On Dec. 19, 2011, Arredondo's other son, Brian Luis Arredondo, **committed suicide** after battling depression. He was 24.

But Carlos Arredondo, despite struggling with his own depression, has pushed

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But Carlos Arredondo, despite struggling with his own depression, has pushed onward. Around Boston, he has become known for his patriotism, peace activism and, most recently, for his heroism and that distinctive cowboy hat.

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On April 15, Marathon Monday, Carlos Arredondo was at the race, near the finish line.

He was there, along with his wife to cheer on members of the National Guard who ran in memory of fallen soldiers, including one guardsman who ran for Alex. He was there to cheer on a group of women from the Samaritans organization who ran in support of suicide prevention efforts. And, he was there to hang up and hand out American flags to spectators on behalf of an organization called Military Friends.

At about 2:50 p.m., he learned there was one other reason: to help save the life of 27-year-old Chelmsford resident Jeffrey Bauman Jr.

"I was meant to be there. I had a lot of reasons to be there." Arredondo said in an interview Wednesday. "God put me in a path where I was supposed do what I did to help others and to honor my sons. Thank God he gave me strength to help others."

He said he was handing American flags out in front of bleachers that were set up by the finish line along Boylston Street. Then, an explosion went off directly across the street from him.

"The loud noise, the bolt of fire and the big cloud of smoke was very frightening," he recalled.

"I was looking at a group of people across the street cheering, laughing and having so much fun. Suddenly it was all smoke. And no people there no more. I didn't see what happened to these people. What happened to all these people? Then suddenly another explosion occurred. A second explosion."

Amid the chaos, he couldn't help but think of Alex and Brian.

"Being in a situation so dramatic on Monday it came to my mind what my son and many of his comrades were going through in Iraq because so many IEDs

have taken the lives of our sons and daughters overseas," said Arredondo, who on Wednesday wore a T-shirt with two pins that held photos of both of his late sons.

"And being at that site with so much devastation, I was thinking of my sons," he added.

Arredondo is Catholic. He made the sign of the cross to bless himself and said "God protect us."

"And, immediately I was on my way over there to try to help in any way I could," he recalled.

He jumped the blown-down, street-side fence that had divided spectators and runners.

On the other side, "it was a very traumatic site."

He helped clear some of the fencing to make room for first responders. He went to the ground to lean over an injured young woman to comfort her. He told her not to move. He told her she would be OK.

Then he saw a gravely-hurt young man trying to move around. Both of the man's legs, from the knee down, had been blown off.

Days later, Arredondo learned the man was Bauman.

But at the time, he was just a stranger in need.

"I leaned over him to try to comfort him by letting him know, 'help is on the way, stay down, don't move,'" Arredondo recalled.

Arredondo used his hand to put out flames still burning Bauman's T-shirt. He helped tie tourniquets on each of Bauman's legs.

"He was bleeding so much," said Arredondo. "I was concerned for him."

He and a few others helped get Bauman into a wheelchair and rushed to get medical aid.

A medical tent intended for weary marathoners became a trauma ward

A medical tent intended for weary marathoners became a trauma ward. Arredondo said the proximity of the blasts and that tent was a blessing.

“Thank God because a lot of people made it alive because of the first aids, the first responders,” he said.

But, because of Bauman’s condition, Arredondo wanted to make sure he got Bauman to a hospital fast.

Arredondo rushed from one side of the tent to the other, ignoring some shouts by first responders who offered to treat Bauman on medical beds inside the tent. At the other side, Arredondo picked Bauman up and lifted him into an ambulance.

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Bauman continues to recover in the hospital. According to [a report by Bloomberg](#), Bauman had locked eyes with one of the suspects just before the explosion. Bloomberg, citing Bauman’s brother Chris, reported that Jeff Bauman has described that man and other things he saw to FBI agents.

Arredondo reunited with Bauman in the hospital on Monday, one week after they first met. Arredondo said they did not talk about what Bauman reportedly saw before the explosion or about his conversations with federal investigators.

“He was in pain. But he had a big smile,” Arredondo said. “He was happy to see me and I was happy to see him doing so good.”

“Thank God that he was so strong himself and that he had the willingness to live,” Arredondo said. “He’s a very beautiful young man who had the willingness to survive. That’s what makes him my hero.”

Naturally, Bauman, and most others see Arredondo as a hero.

But, Arredondo said he has struggled to come to terms with the recognition he’s gotten since.

“I find it a little bit difficult to say that because it was my responsibility to be there and help out,” he said. “I know danger was around there but nevertheless I was supposed to be there for a reason. And I’m glad I got to help Jeff.”

Arredondo and his wife live in Roslindale. But on Wednesday, he was at the Milton home of a publicist who is helping him handle interview requests from media. The publicist said Arredondo has done upwards of 50 interviews for print, radio, and TV media from every major news outlet around, including [The New York Times](#) and [CNN](#).

His story has garnered so much attention not just because of his heroism, but also because of the headlines he made after Alex's death in 2004 and because of a photo that was prominently displayed on online, on TV and on the front of newspapers nationwide.

The widely-circulated Associated Press photo shows Arredondo and two other people escorting Bauman in a wheelchair away from the blast scene. Bauman's gruesome injuries are captured in the photo as well as an intriguing cowboy hat atop Arredondo's head.

Arredondo's bravery to help victims immediately after the blasts is captured in other photos, including [some shot by Globe staff](#). He has become known to some as "the man in the cowboy hat."

Arredondo wore a different cowboy hat Wednesday than the one he wore to the marathon. He said he worked in the rodeo business for years.

And now, "It's just a tradition in a cowboy's life," he said.

Arredondo said he has been meeting with psychiatrists to try to heal from the trauma of what he saw at the marathon. Nine days after the deadly afternoon, he said he was feeling "much better" but knows he will need continued counseling and urged others who feel distressed by the day's violence to seek help.

"It was a beautiful, beautiful day that was taken away from us," he said.

For the latest and complete coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings, visit [Boston.com](#).

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