

A mother reels as two sons lose legs

BY PATRICIA WEN | GLOBE STAFF

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THE BACK STORY

At about 8:30 p.m. on April 15, the Globe's Patricia Wen was stationed outside Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, one in a pack of reporters sent out to the city's hospitals within moments of the bombings. There she found Liz Norden, whose two sons had each lost a leg. Produced on tight deadline, Wen's story was the first to identify and tell the tale of those most grievously injured by the attacks.

Liz Norden, a mother of five, had just finished hauling groceries into her Wakefield home Monday afternoon when her cellphone rang.

"Ma, I'm hurt real bad," said her 31-year-old son. He was in an ambulance, he told her, being rushed to Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

It was her second boy, who had gone with his older brother to watch a friend run in the Boston Marathon.

On the phone, her son said his legs were badly burned in an explosion. His brother had been next to him, but he didn't know where he was.

Within the next two hours, amid frantic phone calls and a panicked drive into Boston, Norden pieced together the horrific truth that will forever change her two sons' lives — and her own. Each of the brothers lost a leg, from the knee down. One was taken to Beth Israel Deaconess, while the other was at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

"I'd never imagined in my wildest dreams this would ever happen," Norden said, sitting on a bench outside the Beth Israel Deaconess emergency room Monday night.

As she looked at her feet, with socks mismatched because she had dressed so quickly to leave the house, tears fell to the sidewalk.

"I feel sick," she said. "I think I could pass out."

She had yet to see either son, because doctors had not authorized visitors. Both are graduates of Stoneham High School and had been laid off recently from their jobs as roofers. The oldest, age 33, still lives in Stoneham, the younger in Wakefield. Both are avid fishermen.

Norden didn't want to release their names without talking to them. As she tried to absorb what had happened to her two oldest children, she was surrounded by family, including her sister and brother-in-law, as well as Mike Jefferson, her sons' friend, the one they had gone to watch run the Marathon.

Jefferson, a Somerville firefighter who had graduated from Stoneham High with Norden's two sons, shook his head at the surreal events of the day. He was close to finishing the Marathon when he saw race officials abruptly stopping runners. Little did he know then that it was because of an explosion that had seriously injured two of his closest friends.

"I was a quarter-mile away from the finish line," said Jefferson.

Also on their minds was the younger son's girlfriend, who they said suffered serious burns and other injuries and was hospitalized at Tufts Medical Center.

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PATRICIA WEN/GLOBE STAFF

Liz Norden leaned on Jim Casey, her sons' uncle, as they awaited word on Norden's sons.

Norden braced herself for the moment when she would be allowed to see her boys. She said her sons were apparently standing next to the 8-year-old boy who died in the blast. As FBI officers and local police left the hospital, having finished rounds of interviews with patients and family members, Norden's head sank onto the shoulder of her brother-in-law.

A relative approached her, handing her some Tylenol she had asked him to buy at a nearby pharmacy.

"Thank you," she said, burying her face in her hands.

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