

Strong Medicine Interview with Kimberly Mills, 25 September 2014

JOAN ILACQUA: [00:00] This is Joan Ilacqua, and today is September 25th, 2014. I'm here with Kimberly Mills at Children's Hospital, Boston, and we're going to record an interview as part of the Strong Medicine Oral History project. Kimberly, do I have your permission to record?

KIMBERLY MILLS: Yes, you do.

ILACQUA: Excellent, so my first set of questions are background on you, so could you begin by telling me about yourself, where you're from, where you went to school, how you ended up at Children's?

MILLS: Sure. So I grew up in western New York, in Rochester. I'm the oldest of three, by far, the oldest. I was sort of the "oops," so I was born, and then my middle brother is five years younger than me, and the other one is eight years younger. My mother grew up in South America, my father grew up in New York City, so we sort of had a little bit of a different growing up. My mom was sort of a house mom -- domestic engineer -- and my dad was an engineer at Kodak for a good majority of his life.

I went to high school there. I grew up in the same house for my entire life, essentially, and then decided that I

wanted to move far away for college. So my parents restricted me to east of the Mississippi, so I decided to go to South Carolina, and I went to Clemson University in South Carolina for my undergrad. And then I grew up and decided I wanted to be around when my brothers were growing up. So I went back up to New York for medical school, and then I went to the State University of New York in Buffalo for medical school, which was just an hour and a half down the road from home.

I was there for four years. My husband is a fellow Clemson Tiger, and we started dating and got married during medical school, so after college. He is a pilot in the Air Force, so it made it a little bit difficult, as he was in North Dakota while I was in New York. And lucky for us, the Air Force was somewhat understanding and put us together for residency. So I moved to St. Louis, somewhere I didn't think I'd ever move before, because it was one of the best children's hospitals in places he could live. So I went to residency at Washington University in St. Louis for pediatrics and spent three wonderful years there. And again, the Air Force was nice enough to move us together, and I matched here for a pediatric cardiology fellowship, and I am now in my third year. In 2013, it would have been

the end of my first year of pediatric cardiology, and both of us are living up here now.

ILACQUA: Excellent, and so what is your title here at Children's?

MILLS: Pediatric cardiology fellow.

ILACQUA: OK, excellent. And so on a typical day for you at Children's Hospital, what would that look like?

MILLS: It varies widely. But, I would say I probably get up around 5:30 in the morning, get here somewhere between 6:30 and 7:30. Normally, there's some type of education in the morning that I participate in, and then you just work in whatever area you're in for the month. I'm going to do critical care in the future, so I have another fellowship ahead of me, but this year, mostly it's just me working in the ICU up here or over in the lab. So this can range from getting out at five o'clock, or getting out at 10:00 p.m., or spending 24 hours in the hospital. It sort of depends on the day. There's no real rhyme or reason to our life, so there's no schedule. I would say a normal schedule is probably the wrong way to describe our life. So it depends if the husband is home and not deployed; then I try to spend as much time as I can at home because he is. Only a few months here and there, so those months, I try to be around more in the evening. And then when he's gone,

everyone's a little bit happier at work because I am more successful at getting stuff done. So, I guess that would sort of be a normal day, which doesn't sound normal at all, but there's no schedule to it whatsoever.

ILACQUA: A lot of people answer similarly. A typical day is not typical.

MILLS: If I can get two meals and I can get in some type of physical activity, that's a good day. So that would be the only scheduled stuff, I think.

ILACQUA: Excellent. So had you ever worked at Children's on Marathon Monday before? Can you describe what that would be like?

MILLS: No, that was my first marathon, my first Boston Marathon completely. I had never come as a child. My dad did graduate school here when I was in high school, so we still lived in New York but used to visit quite often. So Boston was always sort of a second home to us growing up, [05:00] but we never spent Marathon Monday here, so it was my first experience.

ILACQUA: So, on Marathon Monday, 2013, were you at work?

MILLS: No, I was at home. My husband was there in the morning, and then I took him to the airport because he was leaving for work. My parents were actually in town because they had also not gone to Marathon Monday. I live two

blocks away from Boylston, and probably four blocks away from the finish line. So, we went down to the race for the elite runners to watch them come in, which was a lot of fun. And then, they decided to get on the road, so we walked all the way because, everything was closed down all the way from our place to the hospital, where their car was parked. I'm probably not supposed to say that; their car was not parked there. (laughter). They went on their way home.

I had a few friends that were running in the marathon from Children's, and so I was sort of keeping track of where they were on the phone. I sort of took a weird route on my way back, so that I could walk along the race and just see everybody running. And then when I had gotten back to close to home, there was enough time for my last friend running that I said to myself, oh, I'm going to go in and then eat some lunch, and then I'll go out and I'll cheer on at the end, the last few hundred yards. And so I was at home.

ILACQUA: And so, when did you know that something had happened at the Marathon?

MILLS: So I was sitting at the table eating and working on a paper, and I heard a loud boom or bang or explosion or

something, and I was sitting like right in the front windows that look out onto Comm Ave. So I walked over, and then the second noise went up, and I could see there was smoke coming up from above the building, or buildings. And then, there was just an onslaught of people running from Boylston, I presume, on to Comm Ave screaming, and so I knew something had happened. And fortunately, I'm not naïve enough that having experienced things similar -- I've done a fair amount of overseas work, and then with my husband being in the military, it's just sort of puts a different perspective on everything. So at that time, I thought, either that there was an explosion or a bomb, or like something happened in the subway system or the T and it had like come up.

So I was standing at the window and saw everyone running and figured that I should go down to see if there was anything I could do to help. So I grabbed my phone, and called my husband while I was running down the stairs, and told him that I was OK and that I was going to go see if there was anything I could do, and to give my parents a call to let them know that I was OK.

ILACQUA: And could you describe what was going on outside when you got downstairs?

MILLS: So there were just hundreds, probably thousands of people running from Boylston on to Comm Ave. Most of the people, for whatever reason, felt safe on the mall there on Comm Ave, so they had all sort of congregated out there. And then, I ran down Fairfield to Newbury, and that's the first time that I saw anybody that was injured. It was an older gentleman. It looked like he had his wife and daughter, two daughters, and he had sort of a deep penetrating wound to his upper left leg and it looked like a piece of metal shrapnel, but he was able to walk. So at that time, they had already tied a tourniquet above with a belt, and we just told them to continue walking to Comm Ave and that somebody would be able to help them there.

At that time, I met up with an ER physician, I believe from MGH. I mean, all of this is like, nobody had names that day. You just like identified your role, who you were, did you know what you were doing, and maybe where you were from, and I think he said MGH. A lot of the stuff is sometimes fuzzy. And we proceeded from Newbury on to Boylston, where there was a cop who wasn't obviously just letting anybody go by, and we identified ourselves as physicians and asked if they needed assistance, which of course they did. And then, we moved from that direction

towards the (inaudible) second site, or the site in front of The Great Atlantic Fish Company or that area.

And then from there, [10:00] the next person that I saw was somebody, an older gentleman with multiple lacerations from top to bottom on his body, but he was also walking, so again, the ER physician and I instructed him to continue towards Comm Ave. And then, the ER physician and I parted ways. He ran towards the finish line and I ran towards the second site.

At the second site, I came upon a group of people that were on the ground. The first person I came up with had a lower leg injury, almost amputation, like open tib-fib fracture, nothing really there, and we were trying to find a tourniquet or a belt, again, to tie around his leg, and he looked at me and said, "My son, my son, can you find my son for me," and so at that time, I started looking around and probably, I don't know, five or 10 feet away from him was a seven or eight-year-old boy who was lying on the ground, and that's more of my age group, so I went towards him to help, and that ended up being Martin Richard. When I got there, I unfortunately had the pleasure of seeing lots of children near death or dying, or dead, and I had the

impression already, just looking at him, that he was no longer with us. He had a large piece of metal shrapnel that was embedded in his chest, sort of mid chest, right where your heart and lungs would be. There was somebody there already doing rescue breaths. I went over and felt for a pulse. I didn't feel a pulse in his femoral. They thought they felt a carotid pulse. I felt there and I didn't feel anything. I assessed the situation and had decided it was unsafe to do chest compressions because of the location of the metal and that it was unsafe to remove the metal because he would most likely bleed, and at that point, the person continued to do rescue breaths for an additional probably 30 seconds. I probably spent less than a minute, maybe a minute, with them and decided that at that point, I thought everyone was near death or dying and there was nothing that we could do for him, and we would not be able to stabilize him long enough to get him to the hospital, so I pronounced him and moved on to the gentleman that I was taking care of before. I think that the person there continued to do rescue breaths until the EMS arrived and the EMS agreed that he had passed.

And then, I went back to work on the gentleman and we got a belt, finally, as a tourniquet and was able to stop the

bleeding. At that point, I still thought that that was the gentleman's son, so I was trying to tell him I hadn't found his son, we're still looking, we'll continue looking for him. Luckily, that ended up not being his son. A police officer had picked his son up and had carried him to the other side of the street, and his son was fine. I didn't know that at the time, but so we were trying to redirect him. And then, EMS arrived at that point, and obviously, while we were standing there, you could hear all of the police officers and whoever else, law enforcement officials, I guess, in the background, it was definitely an improvised explosive device, it was definitely this, and you don't think about that when you're like running down there. You just run down and you think, like OK, this is what I do, I'm going to like focus, focus, focus, (chuckle) and then you have a minute to like not focus, like wait a minute, what's going on here (chuckle) like nobody knows what happened, nobody knows if it's going to happen again, and so when the EMS got there, the police had told us, you know, you can leave. We have people here, so we had gone down to the second -- or the first site, the finish line, to make sure everything was OK and they obviously had more than enough people down there. And so then, I went home after that.

I'm sure there's a lot of things in between that I can't remember because my husband says that I was down there for over -- probably just under an hour, over an hour, but those are like the things that stand out to me. The other things, just like the clips that I remember, [15:00] there was a gentleman when we were first running from Boylston to the second site -- there was like a gentleman with his younger son. He had him covered in his jacket, trying to turn him away, running away from the scene, so he didn't see anything, and that's like one of those vivid things I'll never forget.

And then, the other one was when we went down to the finish line, we ran up to a female officer and had asked her is there anything we can do, can we help, and she said, "Do you have a cell phone? I just need to call my husband," and so she had called her husband in front of us and just sort of broke down, like everything's fine, everybody's OK, but, you know, so those are like the little things that will stand out forever, but I'm sure there's a lot in between that I can't remember.

ILACQUA: So two follow-up questions, I'm not sure which one to ask first, but you had mentioned that your husband's in the

military. Had you ever dealt with a first response in an event like this before? Had you ever done that sort of work?

MILLS: So, I haven't been in like a military setting doing overseas work. I've seen some pretty gruesome motor vehicle accidents. I've seen riots in different countries where there is like machete incidents and things like that. It's different. I obviously have the training to be able to sort of triage things like that and manage them. It's when you're in a setting where you expect things like that, say when you're in a Third World country during an election, (chuckle), but you expect things like that to happen and you're sort of on guard, on your game. You have people who are there to help you and support you, and you're in somewhat of a protected setting where you're in a hospital, where if I can't do something or I can't figure something out or, if I'm making a tough decision like OK, everyone's dead or dying, we need to move on, then there's someone there that's like going to back you up.

On Marathon Monday, it was like the safest place I can imagine, like we always joke around that we live in a bubble, essentially, in downtown Boston because I can walk home at two in the morning and I always feel safe. And you

have something like that happen, and you have none of your support staff, nobody you know or trust, and you're making life or death decisions on the fly, based on I'm not a trauma doctor, I'm not an ER physician, I'm not a trauma surgeon, but you just -- based on like your innate understanding of the basic things that you've been trained, and it's completely different.

ILACQUA: So after you spent about an hour down there, how did the rest of the night go for you?

MILLS: (chuckle). So I went back. It took forever to make a phone call out at that point from your cell phone, so I called my husband, which reportedly I was incomprehensible to him. He had no idea what I was saying, so he actually arranged for a flight back that night.

The news always says that there were just the two explosions, but there were like two other explosions after it, and I think it was probably then just setting off the devices to make sure that they had actually exploded, so I heard the first one go off on the phone with my husband.

Then, there's the whole JFK Library thing that's going on, and all this stuff, and then I'm talking to him and like I don't know, I don't really feel like I want to stay here

right now. I know it's probably the worst decision to try to leave, but I sort of want to leave. My little brother and my middle brother lived a mile away. He goes to BU Med School, and so my like somewhat mother instinct was all right, we're going to get in the car, we're all going to get out of here, and we're just going to let everything settle down, so after the second what I presume was controlled explosion, that was sort of it. OK, we're just going to go. My husband flew into Providence or something, so we went down to a friend's place down in Providence for the evening until he had flown in that night. And then he drove us back.

(inaudible) something I always forgot, my wedding rings. It's like a random thought, but when I had gotten back, they were covered in blood, [20:00] obviously, and so I had taken them off and had set them on the counter in the kitchen, and so we come home and he looks down and he's like why are your wedding rings there and they're like covered in blood? It's like oh, never mind, (chuckle), so that was one of the other things that I remember from that day.

The next day, I actually woke up. He drove me to work that day, and I was quasi-fine, I guess. I like came in and went to work, didn't say anything to anybody because there wasn't really a point to, and then, I had like consented families for procedures and things like that, and sort of halfway through the afternoon, my husband, being the military person he is, had stopped by someone on the street from CNN, asking, what was your experience, and decided to tell them about my experience, which then started an onslaught of phone calls, and then everybody knew. So at that point, I left, sort of midafternoon, to go home.

And it wasn't really until probably the next day, and maybe it's because everyone knew and they give you that look or they like say things that are always awkward (laughter) and you don't know how to respond. But the next day, I remember driving to work and it's like my one and only panic attack, like difficulty breathing, my heart racing, I need you to stop the car right now, I need you to get out, like no, I can't do this, I don't want to go in (chuckle), and going into work, I had gone in really early that day, probably because I couldn't sleep, and I was down, actually, in the cath lab, which is like one of our more difficult areas to be in, looking at pictures, and I

remember the head of the department -- who is not like your most touchy-feely, emotional kind of guy coming in, and like giving me a side hug (laughter) and that just sort of like started the end, where it's just sort of lots and lots of tears, and then everybody sort of coming in because obviously, the interview sort of circulated through the department and everybody knew about it.

I tried to still work that day. I went in and did a few procedures, assisting, and then, then (inaudible) I got called out by the Boston Homicide Police Department, so I'm probably the only fellow who can ever say they were called out of the OR (laughter), for the homicide department, and because I had pronounced Martin, I needed to send a death certificate before the morgue was willing to release his body to his parents, so they were trying to find me to sign the certificate so that could happen. Kind of after that, the rest of the week, everyone sort of just did not expect me to come in or do anything (chuckle). So I came in every day until Friday. I tried to come in Friday, and then the lockdown happened. And at that point, my husband came and got me and we left again and went to Philadelphia for the weekend so that I could get away. It's sort of like a surreal week, definitely a surreal day. And the best thing

for me was to just get away and sort of try to do things that made me not think about it.

ILACQUA: So, a lot of times, we think about this event as the event as the Marathon was on Monday and the lockdown was on Friday, and then, that's that. Could you talk about maybe how long it took for you to get back to a sense of normal, what went into that?

MILLS: Yeah. We're probably a little bit different. So the Marathon happened on Monday; two and a half weeks later, for the first time, one of our very close friends in the military died in a plane crash in Afghanistan, and then a week after that, three acquaintances of us who fly the same airplane my husband did, died in a plane crash in Russia, trying to go to Afghanistan, so normal wasn't for a while (chuckle). But it was sort of -- it was a rough month, good and bad, you know. It definitely tests your relationship and your ability to support one another where it sort of changes from focusing on trying to support me to focusing on trying to support him and trying to support each other at that point. So normal was a while, [25:00] I don't know, probably not until July or August, maybe, because getting people over from Afghanistan takes weeks, and then you have the ceremony, and so it was a dragged-out

process, and all of it sort of had a unifying theme with them. So for us, it took a while.

ILACQUA: And in that time, were you trying to get back to work? Were things around here markedly different, the week of the bombing, the weeks after?

MILLS: Things around here were probably different for me. I came back to work the next week, like after Friday happened, the lockdown happened. I was back to work on Monday and had a pretty easy day in the operating room. The rest of the month, though, even like still today, like everyone sort of -- nobody wants to talk about it around you, but it's like the thing that everybody wants to talk about, and so at least for a good month after that, that was sort of awkward coming to work and talking about it.

And then, we actually went on vacation, which was probably a great thing. We had scheduled a vacation with my family and good friends of ours were getting married down in the Caribbean, so that helped a lot because that sort of took us away from everything, and just with friends and support. But you know, we had like a Boston Red Sox hat on and like a Boston Strong shirt or something, and then, you know, we're in a boat in the middle of the Caribbean and someone says, "Man, I'm so sorry about what happened," and it's

like you can't escape it (chuckle) no matter where you are, you know. So that was probably a good thing. But work, they made us -- made me go talk to someone and make sure that I was cleared to work after two visits. The thing that made him realize, like person realize that I would be OK was when I was talking and saying, "You know, what really made me upset was the video they show of Dzhokhar like turning the corner on Fairfield. I'm like running probably past him, you know, three minutes later, and I'm running to the scene as he's walking away. He's like yeah, you're going to be fine, you can go back to work, if that's what you're thinking about, (chuckle), so yeah, I went back to work, and it just sort of picked up, normal life again.

ILACQUA: So I'm curious. As we turned toward the 2014 anniversary, was there anything that you were doing, that you were involved with, with any of that memorialization?

MILLS: I tried to stay out of it. Obviously, this is the first time I've talked to anybody about it, aside from my statement to the FBI and stuff. So for me, I'm a physician, I take care of thousands of patients, and that's what I want to do with my life. I didn't want it to be -- the day is most certainly not about me or anybody that was there caring for those -- like that's our job, like poets write, artists paint, like I'm a doctor and I take care of

patients, like that's what I do. And for my husband, it's more like you did something, and I want to tell people about it, and for me, it's just -- I mean, it's not every day, but like our ICU up here is its own little battlefield, and that's what I do. And so, it wasn't me talking about it or doing anything, it was sort of the opposite, I'd rather not. But one of the ICU attendings here and his wife, who is a nurse practitioner down in the Seven South ICU, had sort of made sure that I had been a part of like some of the things to help me heal, so I went to the one year memorial. I finally met, briefly, Martin Richard's family then, because I hadn't met them officially before then. And then, originally, I thought I didn't want to be here the day of the marathon, again, but then, I think everybody sort of said the same thing like, if I can't do the things that I want to do, then they've won. And so we went to the marathon, [30:00] and my husband wasn't here for the first one, so this was his first one, so we did all the like usual things, and then saw all our friends run in, and things like that. So it was just a normal day for us, again, which was great. Obviously, the security sort of changed it a little the way it was (chuckle) like the first one. But it was a good turn of the year for me to sort of be able to go down and do it

again. I think having it like sort of a week later from the one the year before was really nice because that whole week was sort of just making sure everyone was OK and then, like a celebration, so that was nice.

ILACQUA: Do you think there's been any lasting impact from this event on your professional life? Do you see things differently?

MILLS: Definitely, yeah, especially right after, and still like every day, it's just could be like the last day, so you make sure that it matters and it counts and you're doing the things that are important to you (teary voice), and that was probably like stressed, with our friends who had died a few weeks later, so it changes your personal life definitely. From a work standpoint, I don't know from like a work standpoint, probably not. It's just that work is a good way to get past everything (chuckle) so but from a life standpoint, sure.

ILACQUA: So, I'm basically at the end of my list of questions. I have one question, and you can skip it if you want to, but do you have a reason why you didn't talk about it for so long?

MILLS: No, I just -- we take care of patients from all over New England, all over the country, all over the world, and the last thing that I want them to like think about is like

oh, you're Dr. So-and-so who did this and I saw you on the news. It's not what I want people to know me for. It's not something that I want them to feel burdened by or happy or sad, or anything like that. And even like here, working with the people who know, it's always this awkward like "Oh, I saw you on the news," or "I saw you," -- the things that I want to be known for were not what happened that day, and what happened that day is not defined or important because I was a part of it, or any one of us who responded were part of it. For me, it just sort of detracted from the real things that we should talk about and discuss, and so I just didn't talk about it because of that. Everyone knew about it, and the reason I agreed to do this was just so it was more in history, so 20 years down the road, someone can piece it all together in whatever way they need to so that we can learn from it. But yeah, I don't know, that's my best answer. (laughter).

ILACQUA: That's a great answer. Don't worry about that. So, really, finally, are there any other thoughts or stories that you'd like to share, things that I didn't ask you about that you think should be recorded?

MILLS: I don't think so.

ILACQUA: And it's OK if you don't. That's just the...

MILLS: I'm trying to relive things and try to remember if I

forgot something, but I don't think so. Yeah.

ILACQUA: OK, great. Thank you so much for taking the time to
speak with me today.

MILLS: No problem, thank you.

ILACQUA: You're welcome. [34:29]

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