Toledo-area Jewish community relieved after attack thwarted

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More than 400 Jews packed a Toledo-area temple Dec. 11 to hear about a Holland, Ohio, man's plot to attack two synagogues.

“We all had questions,” said Barry Himmel of the Toledo suburb of Sylvania, who belongs to Temple Shomer Emunim in Sylvania Township, where the meeting was held. “This is some guy that's gone off the grid mentally. And apparently, that happens a lot.”

Damon M. Joseph, 21, who used the alias Abdullah Ali Yusuf, was arrested Dec. 7 and accused in federal court of planning an attack on two synagogues after he took possession of two AR-15 rifles. He was charged with one count of attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State group.

“I felt more assured after I knew that they were on top of it,” said Himmel, who grew up in Shaker Heights and has lived in Toledo since 1959.

The meeting was called for members of the Jewish community. Speakers included Justin E. Herdman, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, FBI assistant Special Agent in Charge Jeff Fortunato of the Cleveland office, and Sylvania Township Police Chief Paul Long.

“In the weeks leading up to his arrest, we worked very diligently to ensure that we knew what he was doing, who he was talking to and what he was doing in the community to make sure that there was a mitigated threat to the Jewish community.

Burn victim finds ‘Hope’ through recovery

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Four years ago, Andrea Hope Rubin woke up in MetroHealth System's Burn Care Center in Cleveland without any memory of the fire that had burned more than 50 percent of her body.

The fire-inducing incident happened on her way home during a wet October night in 2014, she recalled. The Westlake resident pulled her car into an asphalt parking lot in Eastlake to turn around when the tire got stuck in a rut. She attempted to dislodge her car, but the motion caused by alternating between drive and reverse caused a spark that set the car on fire. Carbon monoxide quickly filled the inside of the car, causing her to lose consciousness while flames engulfed the vehicle.

As first-responders pulled her out of the burning wreckage, she had suffered third-degree burns to her face, ears, head, chest, arms, back and legs. Her lower right arm suffered fourth-degree burns and her arm was subsequently amputated just below the elbow.

The journey of recovery has been filled with emotional and physical pain, guilt, faith – and as her name would suggest – hope. The accident that left her half blind and disfigured had broken her at first. But looking at life now, Rubin, 53, said she's a better version of herself.

“I have more confidence and more hope

Andrea Hope Rubin speaks during MetroHealth’s 2018 gala Oct. 6, where she shared her story in front of 600 people of surviving a car fire. | Submitted photo
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four Toledo-area synagogues where his family held memberships.

“Just because you leave a community doesn’t mean you’re not connected,” he said.

INVESTIGATION CONTINUES

The FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force, which is comprised of members of the FBI, Homeland Security and Investigations, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Ohio State Highway Patrol and Toledo Police Department, is leading the ongoing investigation.

“We commend and thank the FBI for their ongoing and thorough work on behalf of the safety and security of the Jewish community, as well as our country,” said Michael Masters, national director and CEO of the Secure Community Network, the official homeland security and safety initiative of the organized Jewish community in North America.

Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz issued a statement on Dec. 10 thanking law enforcement agencies.

“On behalf of the citizens of Toledo, I would like to thank the FBI, Homeland Security, the Toledo Police Department and all law enforcement agencies who played a role in helping to prevent a potential catastrophe,” Kapszukiewicz said. “We cannot tolerate hate directed toward people of Jewish faith, or of any other religion, and last month’s mass killing at a Pittsburgh synagogue is a reminder of just how real this threat is.”

Dick Greenblatt, who belongs to Congregation B’nai Israel in Sylvania Township, said he left the Dec. 11 community meeting with a lingering concern about how authorities will be able to identify those who might commit anti-Semitic acts of violence but don’t communicate their intentions to anyone. Still, he said he wouldn’t let the possibility of a so-called lone wolf attack disrupt his way of life.

“I don’t go every Shabbat by any stretch of the imagination,” he said, “but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let these people intimidate me.”

To see the full statements from the Department of Justice, Secure Community Network and Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz, visit bit.ly/DamonJosephFBI.

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in my life than I did when I looked the part, when I seemingly had everything,” she said. “Now I really have everything.”

LEANING ON FAITH

Immediately following the incident, Rubin was placed in a medically induced coma and underwent 19 surgeries. After nearly two months, she was pulled out of the coma but had trouble comprehending what was happening around her or the injuries she sustained.

She couldn’t recall the incident. To this day, she has no memory of it other than the information she’s been provided by officials. The last thing she remembered was being at a wedding two weeks prior to the fire.

After waking up, she was in and out of a state of sedation due to the medication to ease the “incredible amount of pain” she endured. She said it took an additional month before she could make sense of what was around her:

“When I first woke up, I didn’t remember what was going on,” she recalled. “It felt like I was paralyzed, I couldn’t move anything.”

Her body healed faster than anticipated. By January 2015, she was sent to rehab and physical therapy.

There are no mirrors in MetroHealth’s burn center; something for which Rubin said she was grateful. Leading up to her early release in March of that year, the MetroHealth burn team decided it was time Rubin knew what she looked like.

“If I knew what I looked like (at the beginning) – how bad it was – I would’ve given up at that moment, that early on,” she said. “I knew it was going to be bad but my wildest imagination could not come close to what I saw staring back at me that day. Unrecognizable, not one feature of the old Andrea was there.”

At that moment, she broke. She didn’t think there was a way to go out into the world “like this disfigured person that I am.” Anger and sadness swirled within her and she continuously questioned why God had let her live.

She was confirmed at Brit Emeth Congregation, which has since merged with Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights and Pepper Pike, but didn’t practice often, aside from celebrating the holidays and occasionally going to synagogue with her father. However, she did lean on her faith and looked to scripture, among other literature, to find answers.

“I did cling to faith a lot,” she said. “I was angry ... and then I let go of it and I was like, ‘God is giving me an opportunity’ And the opportunity is right here. Do something with this, make something out of this, help people learn from what you’ve been through.”

A week since being reintroduced to herself, she decided she wasn’t going to curl up in a ball and recede from the world. Instead, she decided to appreciate what she has, and that mentality began changing her life.

“All of a sudden, something came into my life that I always had but never had it the way it processed that day – and it’s gratitude,” she said. “The second I honestly appreciated all I still had, all these amazing things started happening. ... It was like a freight train of goodness.”

A MESSAGE OF HOPE

The hardest part of the experience, even ahead of the disfigurement, is the guilt Rubin feels for putting her friends and family through the frequent visits to the doctor; emotional turbulence and the choices they faced when she was on life support. Because of it, she’s driven to give back to the world through speaking engagements, which she wants to make into a career:

“For me, the scales are never going to be balanced,” she said. “No matter how much good I do in this world, it will never be worth what I’ve been through, and more importantly, what my friends and family have been through. But if I can even it out a little bit, I’m going to.”

Her first speaking engagement took place at the American Society of Bioethics and Humanities in April 2017 in Kansas City, Mo. She hopes to be able to do more speaking appearances to burn-care providers to describe what she thinks is a comprehensive treatment of patients physically and psychologically.

At the time of the incident, she was a sales representative for a health insurance company.

“I don’t think patients like me are getting the full service that they actually deserve,” she said.

She also wants to be an inspirational speaker for those who are struggling or to encourage women to stop focusing primarily on looks, something she did before the fire.

Rubin explained she was brought up thinking she needed to “look the part to play the part.” She had hair extensions, worked out daily and thought her success was partly based on her looks. Once she lost them, she was worried she’d never be able to connect with a room full of people. Now, she’s not afraid to step on stage in front of 600 people, something she couldn’t imagine herself doing five years ago.

“I’m still connecting with people the same way as before,” she said.

To watch “The Story of Andrea Hope Rubin” from MetroHealth’s 2018 gala, visit bit.ly/2BclAtU