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|| ESSAY

25 Years Of Moving Forward, And Back

An awkward balance between the tower of remembering and the tower of forgetting.

By DAN BARRY

THE CIRCLE LINE boat churned toward an altered Manhattan before pausing halfway across the Hudson River. On this sightseeing vessel that could hold 600, there were only a half-dozen people aboard, including the captain, a distraught man clutching a paper bag — he said he needed to bring his wife her lunch — and me.

We bobbed in silence, staring at the charcoal plume mushrooming from where two sky-piercing towers belonged. Only the slapping of waves against the hull disturbed the quiet.

A quarter-century later, moments submerge and re-emerge in the bruise-colored Hudson of my mind. The cortege of exhausted firefighters carrying another body from the wreckage. The refrigerated trailers packed with human remains. That dining-room table on Staten Island, where a grieving father told me his dead son “sits right there, where you’re sitting,” for Sunday dinners. “That’s his spot.”

All of us who were around then have our stories. They might be stories of loss, of heroism, of close calls, of bearing witness, of remembering exactly where we were when. We might talk about it too much, or not at all. But there exists among us the stipulation of a shared experience. A faint nod of recognition: Sept. 11.

When telling my small stories of witness to those then too young or not born, I can feel my words falling short; the stipulation isn’t there. Still, if asked, I will tell these stories again and again, if only to wage a private war against the inevitable erasure of time.

But the passage of 25 years can test the memory of what you’d rather not remember. In poor

Dan Barry is a senior writer for The New York Times. He was a general assignment reporter for the Metro desk on Sept. 11, 2001, and visited the site regularly after the attacks to chronicle the aftermath.

imitation of the high-wire artist Philippe Petit, I am balanced between the tower of remembering and the tower of forgetting, sometimes having to remind myself that yes, all that happened. The Circle Line, for example.

AFTER TERRORIST ATTACKS reduced the World Trade Center to a funeral pyre and forced Manhattan into lockdown, a half-million people were evacuated by a makeshift fleet of tugs, ferries and pleasure boats. As hundreds rushed off one of those Circle Line boats and onto the solid ground of New Jersey, where I lived, I shouldered through the disembarking crowd to ask for a ride back, and took the captain’s shrug as a yes.

Then there we were, strangers being gently rocked by the Hudson, suspended between the before and the after on a sun-bright Tuesday morning.

The days that followed became an endless deadline of typing out unimaginable combinations of words. Thousands dead. Vital documents of commerce fluttering in the air. Medics with no one to save, emergency workers collecting scattered human remains, a cadaver-sniffing police dog overwhelmed by the smell. All in Lower Manhattan.

Journalists tend to compartmentalize their emotions when covering tragedy, boxing away personal feelings to remain as clear-eyed as possible. This was the mode I assumed, focused and matter-of-fact, barely aware of the acrid whiffs wafting through the south-facing window beside my newsroom desk.

That is, until the Friday after the Tuesday, when my telephone rang.

“Danny?”

Hearing that name rocketed me back three decades to my Long Island boyhood. The caller was my lifetime friend Brian McShane, comrade in arms through a dozen years of Catholic school-

ing. Funny. Bright. Tough on the football field. Always pressed his black Bic pen too hard on loose-leaf paper.

“Danny? They can’t find Terence.” His younger brother, a New York City firefighter assigned to Ladder 101 in Red Hook, Brooklyn, had raced with six colleagues to the World Trade Center, so.

I told Brian I was sorry, and would call first thing if I heard anything at all. I hung up the phone, crawled under my desk and wept.

SOME MOMENTS are permanent in the national memory. The hijacked planes slamming into the twin towers, crashing into the Pentagon, going down in a Pennsylvania meadow — all within 77 minutes. But also the falling man. The missing posters wallpapering Manhattan. The Pietà-like image of the Franciscan priest Mychal Judge being carried from the rubble.

We remember, too, the fleeting communal bond that followed in tragedy’s wake: the prayer vigils and donation drives, the benefit concerts and vows to rebuild. Springsteen’s “My City of Ruins” as a haunting soundtrack to it all.

But the disaster became so all-consuming that, looking back, it seems we could retain only so much. Often forgotten are the many 9/11-related scams, and the virulent anti-Muslim xenophobia, and the protracted arguments over how best to honor the dead, and — oh, what about the jet-liner that crashed in Queens just two months after Sept. 11, killing 260 people?

Sometimes lost, too, is how inescapable grief became. Grief expressed in car decals, in tattoos, in the veneration of trade center girders. Grief in all its manifestations, including anger.

Until recently reminded, I had forgotten that my colleague Kevin Flynn and I wrote a story about a scuffle at the trade center site early that

November between New York City firefighters, who had lost 343 colleagues, and police officers, who had lost 23. “A familial brawl at a never-ending wake,” we called it.

A never-ending wake.

LOOKING BACK, the dozens of stories I wrote about a wounded city seem to blend into one long 9/11 requiem, with certain chords silent until struck again by something seen or heard.

Suddenly I am back at the 300th funeral for a firefighter — this one on Long Island, like all too many. The funerals were so numerous, often with little or nothing to bury, that the somber ritual of a firefighter farewell became uncomfortably routine: the beating of a black-clothed drum; the lone bagpiper playing “Amazing Grace”; the wall of white-gloved firefighters in salute.

Or I remember the 16 refrigerated trailers humming in sad chorus behind the medical examiner’s office, where staff members worked to identify the nearly 22,000 body parts stored inside. I watched a forensic pathologist try to glean DNA material from a bone, and heard the chief medical examiner, Dr. Charles S. Hirsch, explain that when presented with yet another body part, he always asked the same question:

“Who are you?”

(Twenty-five years later, that astounding work continues. Of the 2,753 people killed in the World Trade Center collapse, the remains of 1,099 have yet to be identified.)

Or I see the stacks of crushed police and fire vehicles amid the 1.2 million tons of trade center debris that was trucked up to a village-like operation established on the Fresh Kills landfill. For nearly a year, investigators in hazmat suits sifted through the rubble for credit cards, jewelry, bone fragments, anything that might have provided identification.

Then one day, this nightmarish Brigadoon was gone.

Or I think of one victim in particular, 30-year-old Ann Nelson of North Dakota, who had gone off to find her future in the big city. Her personal laptop, sent home, sat unopened for years, until her mother began playing games on it as a way to keep her daughter present.

One day she clicked open a file labeled “Top 100.” What appeared was her daughter’s earnest — but unfinished — catalog of how to live.

1. Be healthy/healthful. 5. Make a quilt. 10. Killman-jaro. 14. Read every day. 18. Volunteer for a charity. 23. Helicopter-ski with my dad. 24. Spend more time with my family. 34. Kayak. 35. Drink water.

And the last: *Learn about wine.*

Ann Nelson was planning to attend a wine class that night.

I RECENTLY RETURNED to the area of Lower Manhattan once known as ground zero. So much has changed that, emerging from the E train, I struggled to find my bearings. Only the sight of the old Millennium Hotel — now the M Social Hotel — helped me determine north from south.

Walking through the 9/11 Memorial plaza, past the tree groves and the reflecting pools and the museum, I could not help but see shadows.

One day back then, I packed a small bag and slipped into the restricted area surrounding the grimiest crime scene in American history. My assignment was to relieve an intrepid colleague, Chris Chivers, who had been camping out with the National Guard in nearby Battery Park.

I shared a tent that night with the gifted Times photographer Eddie Keating, a compact man with a knowing grin and an ever-present Leica. Greeting us in the morning was a Coast Guard cutter in New York Harbor, a 270-foot sym-

bol of the jittering uncertainty coursing through the city.

We put on yellow construction helmets and walked into a 16-acre calamity that less than two weeks before had been the center of international finance. With clipboard and camera in hand, we spent the next few days chronicling a smoldering wasteland, exposed all the while to the toxic air that would contribute to the deaths of so many, including my friend Eddie.

We saw emergency workers too weary to grieve, earnest volunteers handing out donated clothes no one wanted, preachers and gawkers and dazed residents stumbling out of bars that stayed open out of civic necessity. They all played their roles on a still-life stage, where fruit rotted under the gray blanket of dust in the Amish Market, and the newspapers in the deserted Millennium gift shop reported the news of Sept. 10, once urgent, now inconsequential.

One night Eddie and I watched as rescue workers crawled through the Calder nightmare of twisted girders and broken concrete that glowed under the harsh stadium lights. Hope powered their every move: that an echoing clang of machinery might be a call for help; that the flash of light on broken glass might be an SOS signal.

A call went out and all activity stopped, freezing people in reverent stillness as another body was discovered and carried away by firefighter pallbearers. When the silence ended and the task resumed, I saw the unexpected amid the unimaginable:

A single city sanitation worker pushing a broom along the edge of the ground zero hellscape.

Twenty-five years on, this one image has never left me. He was, he is, the rest of us. Pushing his broom, doing his best to move forward, but knowing that some of this dust will always be here.

|| IN PHOTOS

Before and After

ON THAT DAY I WAS a freelance photographer for The Times, covering the primary, when the towers fell. I returned to those same spots for modern-day re-creations. For a city that is defined by change and evolution, marking a moment like this grounds our understanding of what came before. JUSTIN LANE



BROOKLYN HEIGHTS PROMENADE, LOOKING WEST



DEWITT AND CHURCH STREETS, LOOKING SOUTHWEST



JOHN STREET, LOOKING WEST



BROADWAY AND VESEY STREET, LOOKING WEST



II DOCUMENTATION

On the Hunt For Pictures Once Found, But Now Lost

By MICHAEL WILSON

When he was 15 years old, Jonathan Walczak came upon a newspaper article that described a disposable camera found in the pocket of a dead man in the rubble of the World Trade Center.

An F.B.I. agent quoted in that 2003 article said his team had developed the film from the camera, revealing pictures taken from inside one of the towers as the Sept. 11 attacks were unfolding.

Jonathan had been to the twin towers, once, with his grandparents and his younger brother when he was little. He read to the end of the article, then he read it again and clipped it out. The description of those photos cast a spell on him that he could not shake. An extremely specific fixation took root.

Years passed. Mr. Walczak graduated from college in North Carolina and became a newspaper reporter before moving to Manhattan in 2010 to attend graduate school. He lasted only one semester, but that fall in the city triggered memories. He watched the ninth anniversary of the terrorist attacks, and thought about that camera. He had kept the newspaper clipping all those years. Where was the camera now? Could he see those pictures? They sounded so vivid.

His time as a reporter taught him how to access government documents. Later that year, Mr. Walczak, now in his early 20s, filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act — his first of many — demanding that the F.B.I. release the pictures from that disposable camera.

“There is no other camera like this,” he wrote in his request. “There are no other photos like these.”

Mr. Walczak is quick to clarify something at this point in conversations about the missing film. He does not believe that the pictures will reveal some hidden explanation for the events of that day. He is not a conspiracy theorist.

He is something different — a Sept. 11 completist. The two can look very similar from a distance, people foraging for things that will supposedly show what really happened on that day. But Mr. Walczak has a track record of actually finding them.

On an episode of a 2021 podcast he created, “Missing on 9/11,” he rattled off a list of photos that he has verified were taken on various floors of the towers: “One picture from the 48th, three from the 35th, one from the 51st, five from the 74th, two from the 61st.”

And in his sprawling, labyrinthine quest for those photographs, he would come to know a community of sleuths intent on finding and preserving unseen footage from that singular day. They huddle in Reddit threads, inspecting images and triangulating the exact positions of the photographers.

“People just assume everything’s been published,” Mr. Walczak said. “Not only is that not true, there’s a lot of fascinating footage that hasn’t been published.”

It is like they are working together on a puzzle that, 25 years later, still seems not quite complete. And new pieces keep emerging.

Just this year, amateur Sept. 11 archivists have found a gripping video from a forgotten Camcorder, and another showing office equipment falling from the highest floors — likely thrown through the reinforced glass windows by people desperate for fresh air. These are marked within the community as major discoveries.

But for Mr. Walczak, the disposable camera remains the big one.

THE STORY THAT the teenage Jonathan Walczak clipped out was written by a Baltimore Sun reporter named Laura Sullivan. In 2003, she spent time with the F.B.I. Explosives Unit at its storage facility in Quantico, Va., a main repository for evidence from Sept. 11.

Deep in the article, her focus turned to the disposable camera. Mr. Walczak has reread those sentences countless times, analyzing them for clues about the photographer or the people around him that day.

“Unit members found a disposable camera in the pocket of a man who jumped from one of the towers,” Ms. Sullivan wrote. “When they developed the film months later, investigators found a chilling chronology of the man’s experience that morning.”

“The photos show the man, who appears to be a construction worker, standing at the window as the other tower burns behind him. The photos, which include pictures he took as well as a few taken by someone else, also capture other jumpers falling. The man looks stricken, his face one of shock and disbelief.”

There were solid clues to chase down. Construction worker . . . the photo taken as the other tower burns.

The specificity of this description intrigued him. Many articles, books, documentaries and films have been made about that morning in Manhattan. One would imagine that there’s nothing new. But relatively few images from inside the towers have been seen. And none are known to have surfaced from the floors above where the planes hit.

He sought to convey the significance of the photos in his podcast in 2021.

“To me, they’re the Zapruder film of 9/11,” he said. “They’re singular and unique, a point of view unlike any other, documenting a monumental moment in American history.”

But time after time, in his view, he was stonewalled by the F.B.I.

He pursued other avenues. During the “Missing on 9/11” podcast, he made a bonus episode, “The Disposable Camera.” And he invited a guest: the reporter who wrote the Sun story 18 years earlier.

“I email you out of the blue,” Mr. Walczak



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

reminded the reporter, Ms. Sullivan, by then with National Public Radio. “Did you kind of wonder what this is about?”

“I was like, ‘Oh, my God, what did I write?’” she replied. “What did I do now?” But she remembered that day in the Quantico evidence lab.

“I had a flash of Mohamed Atta’s suitcase,” she told Mr. Walczak. “And then it all came rushing back.”

In the evidence room that day in 2003, a brand-new suitcase rested on a table. It belonged to Mr. Atta, a hijacker who struck the north tower — luggage checked so as to avoid the drawing suspicion as a passenger with no bags. The suitcase missed the connecting Flight 11 in Boston from Portland, Maine, and thus survived.

She vaguely remembered the photos. Mostly, she remembers the feelings they evoked.

“It was a man in a beige outfit standing by a window,” she told him. “It was sort of the emotional pull of them, that they were taken in this moment of tragedy.”

The pictures seemed to reveal, she said, “this moment that was his last moment — that he didn’t really know it was his last moment.”

Five years after that podcast, Ms. Sullivan can still recall how she felt about the people in the photographs. “Something about them,” she said, “felt trapped.”

She understands the allure of analog found footage.

“In this day and age, we want to be reminded of what’s real,” she said. “An image from that morning of a person living that nightmare, that’s real. And from a disposable camera — it’s real in a way that images today are not.”

AS MR. WALCZAK DUG deeper into the footage from Sept. 11, someone suggested he reach out to a younger man who was regarded as something of an expert. His name was Andrew Boston. Mr. Walczak was skeptical — Mr. Boston was an electrician in his 20s in Nebraska. But he gave him a call.

His doubts vanished: “We spoke for three or four hours.”

Mr. Boston was only 5 years old on Sept. 11, but he remembers it for a specific fright. His father was away on business on the East Coast, and was supposed to fly home that day, but no one had heard from him. His worried mother basically ignored him, and he sat in front of a television showing the scene from Manhattan.

“I do recall the south tower collapse, watching at home,” Mr. Boston said. “After that my brother and I were sent into the basement, and we played Nintendo. I think

‘People just assume everything’s been published. Not only is that not true, there’s a lot of fascinating footage that hasn’t been published.’

JONATHAN WALCZAK, on footage and photographs from the attacks.

my most ever-present thought was, ‘Something very bad is happening.’”

As the afternoon dragged on, the boy ended up on the porch with his mother. Neighbors were outside, too. Then, as Mr. Boston remembers today, there was a tremendous roar overhead. Everyone looked up — it was a huge jet.

“I could see every panel,” Mr. Boston said. A grown-up explained what it was: Air Force One, the president’s plane.

During the chaos that day, Air Force One darted around the country, from Florida to Louisiana to Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska — a few miles from the Boston family’s house.

And a few hours later, Mr. Boston’s father called home — he was safe, his plane diverted to a small airfield.

“It was the first big event of my life,” Mr. Boston, now 30, said. “Every generation has that something that you become aware, ‘Oh, there’s a bigger world than what’s going on around me.’”

To come of age after the attacks is to grow up seeing images from that day. “Wherever you look, documentaries, books — there was always a new thing to learn,” he said.

It followed him into adulthood, where he discovered false claims about what happened that day. “People were, like, just making stuff up,” he said. “This is just bad history.”

Two or three years ago, he began devoting serious time to collecting and cataloging Sept. 11 footage, helping build a community on Reddit called r/911archive. He wanted, for example, to understand — in granular detail — what caused the buildings to collapse. He has sought to understand why some escape routes were available while others were not. He has examined the role of vertical shafts and voids in the collapse.

“It’s a disservice to not try to understand why,” he explained. “It’s history that gets lost.”

The community is still finding footage. Just last year, a newly discovered videocassette — a harrowing scene recorded by a contractor named Edward Sferazza — was digitized and posted online. It begins with people staring up at one burning building, then a second, and finally, suddenly, everyone is engulfed by ash. Mr. Sferazza, gasping for air, returns to his van to find two strangers inside, seeking refuge.

“That was huge,” Mr. Boston said of the video. “I’ve never seen something so visceral and so human.”

For his part, Mr. Sferazza, the contractor, said last week in an interview that he hasn’t watched and has no intention to. He released the video for the sole purpose of rebutting Sept. 11 deniers, he said.

“I just want it to be known that, when they compare it to the moon landing, I was there,” he said. “I smelled it, I tasted it, I lived it.”

MR. WALCZAK, THOUGH, was not making any progress whatsoever in his search for the disposable rubble camera. Time after time, his Freedom of Information Act requests to the F.B.I. were denied. His description of his material he sought was always too vague, the bureau said.

After having sent more than two dozen requests for documents over 15 years, adding new search terms or names of construction workers who perished, Mr. Walczak finally sued the bureau in federal court last year. He accused the agency of, in effect, not looking hard enough. That lawsuit is playing out in the Southern District of New York, but he felt as if he was nearing a dead end.

Jonathan Walczak, left, was 13 on Sept. 11, 2001. He is now part of a community of online sleuths documenting the attacks. Below, Mr. Walczak with a 2003 article about a disposable camera found in the rubble of the World Trade Center.

There was one more obvious person to contact: the F.B.I. agent who ran the evidence lab in Quantico and who showed the pictures to Ms. Sullivan in 2003.

His name was Donald Sachtleben, and in 2003, he was approaching the end of a remarkable career as a bomb technician — a career that, in the years to follow, would itself implode in spectacular fashion.

His dangerous outings, and the toll they took, are described in detailed court documents.

Mr. Sachtleben, then an agent in his early 30s, gathered evidence in New York after terrorists bombed the World Trade Center in 1993. Impressed with his work, the F.B.I. flew him to Oklahoma City the day Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck bomb at the Federal Building, killing 168. He spent weeks there, picking through corpses for evidence, and after dark, drinking the day’s horrors away in bars.

In 1996, during the Unabomber investigation, agents zeroed in on a suspect: Ted Kaczynski, a recluse who lived in a tiny cabin in the Montana woods. Mr. Sachtleben entered the cabin after Mr. Kaczynski’s arrest, and he found a live bomb under the bed. And it was Mr. Sachtleben — “too stupid to be afraid,” he would say later — who drove the bulldozer carrying the explosives down an icy hill to a spot where the bomb could be safely detonated.

After the attacks of 2001, Mr. Sachtleben worked on the ground in Shanksville, Pa., the scene of the crashed Flight 93. He listened to the black box recording of the passengers wrestling control of the plane from the terrorists. “The psychological and emotional toll that work took on Don was enormous,” his lawyers would later state.

He left the F.B.I. in 2008, then returned as a contractor with full access to top secret information. But four years later, investigators made a disturbing discovery when they searched his laptop: He was storing and sharing child sexual abuse imagery. A separate investigation revealed that Mr. Sachtleben had also leaked secret information about a failed bomb plot to the media.

He was arrested and charged in both cases, and pleaded guilty in both. His lawyers said the burnout from his stressful career and heavy drinking led him to use poor judgment. He spent nine years in prison.

During that time, Mr. Walczak tracked him down and wrote to him, asking about the photos from the disposable camera.

Can’t help you, Mr. Sachtleben replied. “There were hundreds of thousands of photos related to the 9/11 investigation,” he wrote from prison. “I imagine these images are tucked away in some storage bin.”

Mr. Sachtleben was released in 2022. Today, he lives far from his old life, in a house at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac near a stocked fishing pond in rural Indiana. Mr. Walczak wrote him here, too, and received the same reply. Can’t help.

When a reporter visited the former agent in August, Mr. Sachtleben listened quietly to questions about the disposable camera and the pictures it yielded.

“I cannot be part of this story,” he said in a brief conversation. He was not allowed to discuss F.B.I. matters without approval, he said.

Asked if he simply remembered the photos, he said, “Somewhat.”

EARLIER THIS YEAR, a head of the F.B.I.’s Record/Information Dissemination Section filed a detailed court response to Mr. Walczak’s lawsuit, outlining the lengths to which the bureau has gone to find this camera. The bureau tried dozens of terms — “disposable,” “rubble,” “camera,” “pocket,” “jumper,” “tower” — in internal search engines, to no avail.

The storage area the Sun reporter had visited is now a mail room, and the evidence that was held there has been transferred elsewhere. Several offices were physically searched in recent months for any sign of the camera or photographs, the F.B.I. said. No luck.

As his search for the camera plods on, Mr. Walczak has become an expert on other so-called rubble cameras found in the ruins of ground zero. Those investigations have proved more fruitful.

He took a deep dive into the contents of a professional-grade camera found at ground zero, and sought to identify its owner by reaching out to the people photographed in the chaotic minutes after the towers were struck. He studied shadows cast by buildings to determine exactly what time different pictures were taken.

He turned that investigation into a documentary called “32 Frames: A 9/11 Mystery.” It arrived on streaming platforms this month.

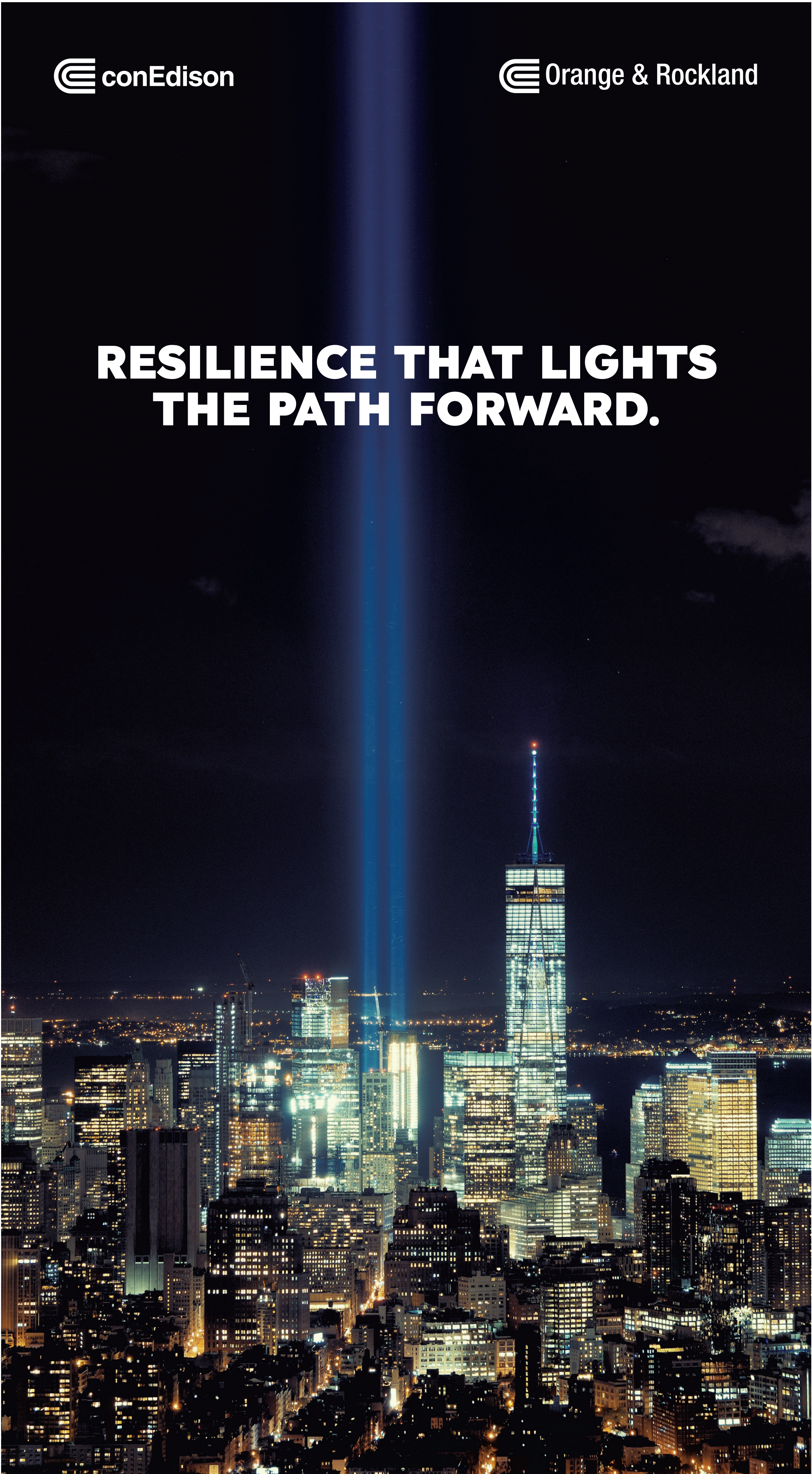
He gets one question a lot. So does his friend Mr. Boston. So do all the Sept. 11 completists.

Why? “I turned 13 three days before 9/11,” Mr. Walczak said. “It was a coming-of-age moment for me.” The event shook him. And to find community and purpose in revisiting that time after so long — to realize he wasn’t alone in wanting to learn more — is something like a nice surprise.

“These people really deeply care,” he said. “It’s a community of young people who were impacted as kids by 9/11, who the torch has been passed to.”

The attacks immediately sent him back to the day in 2000, visiting the towers with his grandparents as an 11-year-old. I was just there, he thought with wonder on Sept. 11, elevating that day to a core memory. In the same way, Mr. Boston in Nebraska recalls sitting helplessly on his porch, hoping his father was somewhere safe, when the president flew over his house.

Twenty-five years on, they keep coming back to those moments, to that day. Still looking for pieces of a puzzle that the world handed them when they were boys.



II PORTRAITS

Losing A Mother

Jacob Campbell was a baby on Sept. 11, and he has struggled to come to terms with that tragedy. For the grandmother who raised him, it's even harder.



Jacob Campbell was 10 months old on Sept. 11. His mother's office was at the point of impact in the south tower of the World Trade Center. Jake's grandparents, Jeanne and Joe, raised him. He grew up in his mother's bedroom.

By KATHERINE ROSMAN
Photographs by HIROKO MASUIKE

Jacob Campbell and his grandmother were in a dark movie theater in Sayville, N.Y., waiting for a screening of his film, “Those Left Behind,” about his quest to know his mother, who died in the Sept. 11 attacks. But before the film was screened, Jake and his grandmother, Jeanne Maurer, 85, would have to white-knuckle it through “9/11: An American Requiem,” a 2011 documentary with harrowing images of towers spewing black smoke and fire and witnesses talking about jumpers. As pictures of destruction flashed on the screen, Jake, 25, whispered to me. “Tell her she doesn’t need to do this,” he said. Jeanne was sitting on the other side of me with her eyes squeezed shut. Her fingers plugged her ears. Over the past quarter-century, Jeanne had done her best to steer clear of such footage. What she could not look at, though, Jake cannot avoid. That is in part because he grew up on the internet, where such images were inescapable. But it is also because, through the passage of time and a relentless series of challenges, he had come to realize that he had no choice but to look squarely at all that had shaped and haunted him since the very beginning of his life.

THE MORNING JILL DIED, at age 31, her parents, Jeanne and Joseph Maurer, had come to her Middle Village, Queens, apartment as usual. As their daughter put on her makeup and dashed for the train, Grandma Jeanne and Grandpa Joe waited for 10-month-old Jake to wake, then fed him and drove the few blocks back to their house. When they arrived, there was a message on the answering machine. “An airplane hit the World Trade Center, the other tower,” Jill’s voice said. “We’re all safe,” she said. “I don’t think they’re even evacuating us.” Jeanne turned on the television. Then she and her husband watched a plane hit the south tower, exploding through the 78th floor, where their daughter worked as an administrative assistant. In the following days and weeks, Jeanne vacillated between hysteria and magical thinking, convinced that Jill was roaming Manhattan with amnesia. Joe, a retired Fire Department captain, knew better.

“My husband, from the very beginning did not think we would ever find her because he said she was at the point of impact,” said Jeanne. “She was vaporized,” he said. Jill’s husband, Steve Campbell, was a Police Department officer. He visited his young son at the Maurers’ house, and Jeanne and Joe thought Steve would take Jake home once he had his bearings. When it became apparent to the Maurers that Jake would remain with them, they moved their grandson’s bassinet upstairs from the living room. What had been Jill’s childhood bedroom would become Jake’s. In many ways, he had a typical and happy upbringing, raised in a middle-class neighborhood. There were Little League games. Visits to Santa’s Village. Catholic school. Church on Sunday — and Mets games, the family’s other religion. Still, Jake told me recently, “It was sort of unavoidable that something was off.” He felt an emptiness. “The person that brought me into the world — the reason I existed, the anchor to my own existence — just was not there,” he said. “It’s hard to describe the strangeness of the feeling.”

In a nightly bedtime ritual, Jeanne and Joe would hand Jake a framed photograph of his mother for him to kiss. Among his earliest childhood memories is the feel of glass against his lips. The medical examiner never identified any remains as Jill’s, so ground zero became the cemetery the family visited every Sept. 11 and on Jill’s birthday in June.

Like most curious children, Jake had many questions. But he often was afraid to ask them, not wanting to see his grandparents sad.

One day when he was 4, he summoned his courage and approached his grandparents about the woman in all the pictures: Did my mom talk?

Jake pored over Jill’s scrapbooks and family photo albums. He watched grainy VHS tapes, like the one with Jill swaying with baby Jake in her arms at his baptism, with the Lee Ann Womack song “I Hope You Dance” playing in the background. Jake loved the home movies because he could “see her move and see her being herself in a way that was not someone telling me about her,” he told me.

One of his favorites was a video his father gave him. His mother was pregnant, and “she was kind of annoyed that he kept sticking the camera in her face,” Jake said. “Those moments show the little things that make a person who they are.”

Sometimes information came when he was not prepared. When Jake was 7, he asked his grandfather who the bearded man on the cover of the newspaper was. “He’s the man who killed your mother,” Joe said.

Jake had not understood until then that she had not simply died. Someone had taken her from him.

JEANNE DID NOT NEED videos to understand what she had lost. She had 31 years of memories playing on repeat in her mind. And they were often too difficult to talk about. While her contemporaries were shifting into carefree grandparenting, spoiling little ones with ice cream and toys, she was starting over, raising a child. “Jake was a gift from Jill,” Jeanne told me. “He gave us something to live for.” She resolutely refused to cry in front of

her grandson, but Jake still sensed that his family lived under a veil of sadness.

“Never Forget” became something of a family mantra, with banners on walls showing the American flag flying in front of the Twin Towers and a framed flag sent by U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan with a plaque honoring Jill. Sept. 11 lived among them, and more and more space was made to accommodate that housemate.

By now, Jeanne struggled to believe in God. When she prayed, she prayed to Jill. “Three long years without your sweet smile,” she wrote on an internet memorial page for her daughter in 2004.

“Wish we could turn back the clock,” she wrote in another message, “and keep you from going to work that day.”

“It breaks my heart to not be able to hold you,” she wrote on one of Jill’s birthdays.

The cloud of Sept. 11 grew darker when Joe, who had helped with recovery efforts after the towers came down, developed esophageal cancer — an illness that has been linked to exposure to toxins at the Trade Center site.

When he died, just as Jake was starting high school, it hit the family hard.

“Joe was my whole world,” said Jeanne. “I felt lost,” Jake said.

As Jeanne sunk deeper into sorrow, Jake started to rebel against his sense that his identity was being swallowed by Sept. 11. Was this all he was meant to be? Part of a tragic household of martyrs?

Even before his grandfather died, he said, “I always felt that they were wallowing in the pain and the feeling that they always had to remember the event and remember her. I thought ‘I have to get away from this in order to be myself.’ I gave it its place, on the anniversary I went to ground zero, but outside of that, I didn’t want to do anything with it.”

There would be more losses to bear. When Jake was 16, his father, whom he had been estranged from for three months, died from a heart attack at 52.

“It was just unbelievable to me that this was continuing to happen,” Jake said.

Weeks later, on a cruise with his grandmother and aunt, he stepped out on a ledge over the dark water with a plan to jump.

He thought about what his aunt and his grandmother would face once they realized he was missing.

He stepped back. “I didn’t want to disappear like my mom.”

JAKE LEFT FOR the University of Michigan a year later. But starting fresh was not so simple.

Everyone at his high school had known Jake’s story. But in Ann Arbor, there was no way to casually answer questions about his family.

He struggled to make friends and then stopped trying. He was drinking and smoking weed alone, and he continued to think about suicide.

Jake had been determined to reject the life of grief that he believed had engulfed his family, but he did not know how. “I went so full force into putting it in a live box and trying to avoid it,” he said, “that I wound up coming back around the other side like a horseshoe.”

The pandemic hit his sophomore year, and he traveled to Georgia to stay with his half brother, Steven Campbell, the son of Jake’s father and his first wife.

Steven, nine years older than Jake, challenged him to stop feeling sorry for himself. “He loved my mother,” Jake said, “but he wasn’t destroyed by her death. I got a different perspective.”

Jake and his brother took walks and watched movies. Jake began to think, maybe this is what happiness is — the simple things.

He started picking classes that excited him — philosophy and history — and weaned himself from alcohol and weed.



Above, memories. Below, Jeanne and Joe, a retired F.D.N.Y. captain. He died of cancer — caused by his time at ground zero — when Jake was a teenager.



“This happened 10 months into my life,” he said. “So, if I stay miserable, that means it will have ruined my entire life. If I let that happen, we would have lost my mother, and I would have lost Grandpa and we will have lost me.”

He started weekly sessions with a therapist he found through an app. And he turned back to the Catholicism of his youth.

Jake was particularly taken by a Gospel story in which the disciple Peter denies knowing Jesus amid the furor leading up to the crucifixion. And yet, Peter was forgiven.

“There is at no point anyone or any situation that is beyond hope or beyond redemption,” Jake said.

Jake also found himself moved by an interview in which the talk show host Stephen Colbert discussed losing his father and two of his brothers in a plane crash when he was a child.

In the interview with Anderson Cooper, Mr. Colbert said he came to recognize and even appreciate the goodness that has

come as a result of the loss — that he had allowed himself to view tragedy through a lens of gratitude. “What punishments of God are not gifts?” Mr. Colbert said, quoting J.R.R. Tolkien.

Jake transcribed Mr. Colbert’s comments into a journal and has returned to them so often he has nearly memorized them.

IN 2018, I READ an article about Jake in The Wall Street Journal. It ran with a photograph that showed how he had placed a “Michigan Mom” T-shirt over the spot where Jill’s name is cut into the bronze of the Sept. 11 memorial.

My own mother, who died in 2005, was a Michigan mom. I reached out to Jake on Facebook, and my sister and I sent him a care package of Michigan swag. He and I kept in touch. The next summer, over lunch, he told me how he had been reading more history and nonfiction about Sept. 11. I encouraged him to write about his effort to learn about his mother by studying the event that ended her life.

When the Opinion desk of The New York Times published his essay “Growing With Grief in the Shadow of Sept. 11,” Jake felt a shift. Maybe he could try to process the impact of Sept. 11 in his life using his brain and his pen. And so after he graduated with a business degree in hand, Jake applied and was accepted into a graduate creative writing program at Dartmouth. A new start.

Then he looked at the school calendar. The first day of classes would be Sept. 11, 2023. Jake felt caught between his past and his future. He chose the future, skipping the ground zero ceremony for the first time.

On that first day of class, he met a high-energy graduate student named Abby, who would become his girlfriend.

“It’s a day that I have given new meaning to,” he said. “I think my mother would be happy.”

But less than two months into his new beginning, his Aunt Linda, who lived her adult life in the bedroom next to his, grew critically ill. He sat by her bedside for days before she died. “I felt like I was stepping up a little bit instead of buckling,” he said.

As he dug into filmmaking at Dartmouth, Jake began to think more about how to reconcile his desire to reject the culture of mourning he was raised in with his longing to connect with the very subject of that mourning.

Maybe the answer was seeking the woman his mother was when alive, before she became a myth.

She had gone skydiving, so he went skydiving. She went backpacking in Europe, so he did too. She traveled to Australia, and off he went.

While he was there, he spent a few weeks with the family of a woman who had traveled with his mother decades before and later became her pen pal. She shared letters with Jake that Jill had written. About talking to the actor Matt Dillon at a bar at 2 in the morning. About a tour guide who had hit on her. About dating Jake’s father.

“Jake was a gift from Jill,” Jeanne said of her grandson. “He gave us something to live for.” But she is careful to hide her grief from him. “I’m trying to protect him.”

“Growing up, I heard stories,” Jake told me. “But it was a hagiography, not necessarily a real person’s story — a saint’s story with some truth sprinkled in.”

“Reading the letters,” he said, “was a tremendous experience for me. They were really funny because she doesn’t hold anything back.”

It was Jill telling her own stories, he said, “and I recognized bits of myself.”

On a visit home to Queens, he started scrounging cabinets for more. He happened upon student videos Jill had made while in college, shot at a fire station where Joe had worked. Then his grandmother told him that Jill once worked as an editor for a video company.

Learning that they shared a love of filmmaking gave Jake what he called “the courage and the clarity” to finally contend with her death in a way that felt authentic.

The result is his film, a 22-minute documentary. In it, he asks a foundational question: “What is it like to miss someone you don’t know?”

Jill is the inspiration. But Jeanne is the star.

THE FILM, “THOSE Left Behind,” was selected for the Sayville International Film Festival, and Jake returned home for the festivities in August.

Jake finally contended with his mother’s death in a way that felt authentic: a documentary, “Those Left Behind,” for which he won a directing award at the Sayville Film Festival.



‘There are people out there who are in the midst of tragedy, and are helped. There is love in the world, in equal measure to the suffering.’

JACOB CAMPBELL

foremost among them. “But I’ll never be grateful for the punishment of losing her,” she said.

“I’m not asking you to,” Jake said softly, but Jeanne was not done speaking. “Why does it have to happen?” she said. “Even if good does come out of it, why does it have to happen?”

“I’ll never have an answer for that,” he said.

She turned to me. “I want him to be at peace, you know, and to be happy in his life,” she said. “I’m very happy for him that he has gone back to God.”

But she just could not square his equanimity with the losses.

“How many kids his age have gone through what he’s gone through?” she asked. Her lost faith in God, she added, is not just about Jake. “There is too much suffering.”

Jake looked at his grandmother. “You can say there is suffering,” he said, “or you can also say that it’s people like you who, faced with that suffering, decided to raise a baby and give all of yourself to something that was helpless.”

“It’s not that, Jake,” she replied. “When I see these children that are suffering, it breaks my heart.”

He threw his arms up in frustration. “That was me!” he said. “I was the child!”

He paused and then spoke softly. “There are children out there who are suffering, and they are helped,” he said. “There are people out there who are in the midst of tragedy, and are helped. There is love in the world in equal measure to the suffering.”

TWO DAYS LATER, we all met in Sayville, N.Y., along with some of Jake’s friends and relatives, as well as his girlfriend, Abby, and her parents.

“Those Left Behind” opens in his childhood bedroom — also Jill’s. In voice-over, Jake explains that as a child at night, he felt the presence of his mother — “nondescript and unmistakable” — in the corner.

Later on, he talks about imagining how his mother felt at the very end of her life.

“Part of me believes that if I can conjure that moment as vividly as possible — if I can place myself in it with her, if I can see her — then I can, through some strange transference, let her know that I’m there,” he says. “I become the ghost. I sit down with her, and I tell her that I’ll be OK. That I’m still here, still trying.”

After it ended, the crowd applauded him. When they realized that Jeanne was also in the theater, they applauded her, too.

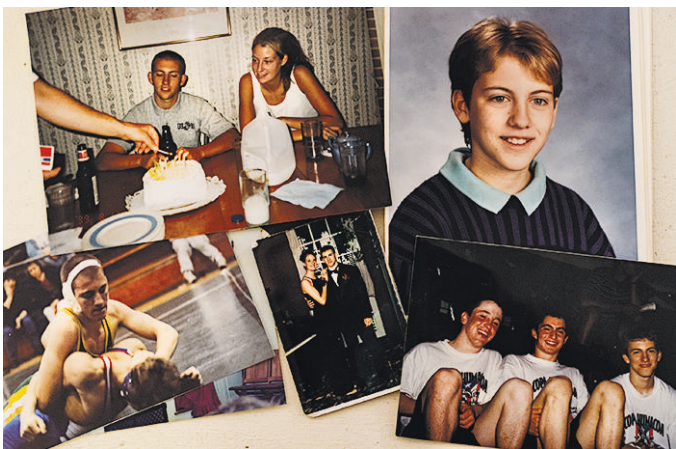
The next day, at the festival’s wrap-up luncheon, Jake was presented with one of the “best director” awards. Jake, Jeanne and Abby called me from the car ride back to Queens. I asked Jeanne how it felt to see her grandson win an award for something that had brought him closer than ever to his mom.

She answered simply: “We raised an amazing young man.”

II PORTRAITS

Losing A Son

Travis Fuller was from my hometown. I went back, 25 years after Sept. 11, and talked with his family about how they made sense of his death in Iraq.



In high school, Travis became a long-distance runner and joined the wrestling team. He began officer training with the Marine Corps over summers in high school. The Sept. 11 attacks, right after he graduated, affected him deeply.

By SABRINA TAVERNISE
Photographs by SOPHIE PARK

GRANVILLE, Mass. — On a cold January night in 2005, two Marines knocked on the door of David and Joanne Fuller and told them that their son, First Lt. Travis Fuller, had died in a helicopter crash in Iraq. A numbness took over Joanne's body. She sat at the kitchen table next to David, who was crying. She didn't cry, and doesn't remember speaking.

Nothing in her life has even come close to that feeling, she told me.

"It's like if you came home and your house had burned down," she said. "It's a shock, and there's nothing you can do."

That woodenness remained as they drove to Boston and then to Maine to tell their daughters — Travis's older sisters, Rebecca Fuller and Jennifer Francis. It was still there a few days later as Joanne, David and Rebecca stood on a tarmac in Connecticut, and watched as his flag-covered casket was taken off a passenger jet. They were not allowed to see his body because it had been so badly damaged, so Joanne slipped her hand inside and touched him.

At the funeral, the full force of her loss hit her. Travis was gone. So was his future wife, and their future children. She was no longer numb. She was angry.

"I just didn't know why he had to sacrifice his life," she said. "What was it for? What were we, as a people, gaining?"

I remember the day Travis died. I was a reporter covering Iraq in those years, and the crash made it the deadliest day of the war for the American military.

I also knew Travis. He was from my hometown, Granville, Mass., a tiny farming community of apple orchards and blueberry lots. His sister Jenny was my grade-school friend, and his father, a carpenter, had done work on my childhood home. I remember Travis playing Legos and riding his bike up and down the driveway.

The nation is marking the 25th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks and commemorating its victims. But the day was also important for the series of decisions that came next: the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and then Iraq, choices that would come to define an American era. Travis Fuller was one of more than 7,000 Americans who died in those wars, adding substantially to the 2,977 who died on Sept. 11 itself.

Last month, I went back to Granville to talk to the Fullers. I wanted to ask if they had found some way to make sense of his death, now that he has been gone almost as long as he was alive. Their family's grief is essential to seeing the full picture of the 9/11 era, and to understanding the consequences of American actions.

A quarter-century after the war on terror began, we are still asking the questions: When is a war worth fighting? And what do you do if your son died in one that you believe was not?

TRAVIS FULLER GREW UP about a mile away from me, in a house David built in the woods at the end of a long driveway. The Fullers were an outdoor family. They hiked. David was a hunter. Travis used to sleep outside all summer, building forts and exploring.

Travis was born prematurely and was small for his age, but he overcame that by high school, where he became a long-distance runner and joined the wrestling team. He made friends easily and liked to take people under his wing. A classmate with a troubled home life lived with the Fullers on and off for two years.

Travis's endurance was legendary. He never owned a car and would run the six miles to his girlfriend's house. In one favorite family story, he met a fellow hiker on the Appalachian Trail who said he would do anything for a beer. Travis ran miles to a town, bought him one and ran back.

"He was always challenging himself, seeing how hard he could push himself," Jenny said.

He was also a free spirit. Travis tutored another student, Dan Carroll, in math at Massachusetts Maritime Academy, a state college with a regimented structure, where students often wore uniforms. Carroll said that at his first session, he found Travis in the library sitting in jeans and a T-shirt, his bare feet up on a table.

Travis was a sophomore at Mass Maritime when he told his family he would spend the next two summers at officer training with the Marine Corps.

He and his sister Rebecca got into a fight that night. She told him the promotional pamphlets he had brought home sugarcoated the reality of what the military did. Travis stormed down to the basement.

"I just didn't understand it," she said. "It just felt like it had come out of nowhere."

THE SEPT. 11 ATTACKS affected Travis deeply. He had just graduated from college and was on track to become an officer in the Marines. His family didn't hear from him for several days. He eventually called David to say that he and several friends had driven to New York City on the day of the attack to help emergency workers.

Joanne remembers people hanging flags from their homes and doing small acts of kindness for one another. When the George W. Bush administration led a coalition that invaded Afghanistan a month later, the country was overwhelmingly behind it.

Joanne was not. The Vietnam War had left a deep scar on her life. Her older brother's close friend was drafted and never returned. And her sister's gentle, shy husband came back traumatized.

"What he saw tore him apart," she said. "It affected the rest of his life."

Joanne did not think the Sept. 11 attacks justified an invasion. But she understood that many Americans did, including her son. "I really think it was a trigger for him," she said. "Before 9/11 it was more, 'What is my adventure going to be?' After 9/11, he was really focused on doing something to protect the country."



Clockwise from top left: Joanne; David; and Travis, right with John Dugan, who served in his unit. Travis "became literally everything to us," Dugan said, as the unit faced war in Iraq; Travis's sister Jenny, who moved into her childhood home when her parents left, unable to bear the memories.

Travis reported for duty in November 2001. He was offered the chance to become a pilot, David said, but turned it down in favor of the infantry. The idea of leading a team appealed to him. He ended up commanding a Marine unit based in Hawaii.

Many of his men had come from working-class backgrounds. Several had messy lives, like unpaid child support. Travis told his family that he was spending a lot of time helping his Marines get their affairs in order. At first, the men didn't know what to make of Travis. He was just 5 feet 7 inches tall and young looking — far from the stereotype of a polished Marine officer.

"He looked like a goofy 17-year-old," said John Dugan, who served in Travis's unit. "And he liked to party."

Dugan, who grew up on Long Island and enlisted after the Sept. 11 attacks, said Travis was patient with all his men, including the hard cases.

Travis, at right center, giving a speech to his platoon before they invaded Falluja in November 2004. Below, the Fuller family gathering as they do every year to celebrate Travis's birthday.

He "took on all his men's pluses and minuses and didn't make them feel" bad about themselves, he said. When Dugan's family at home was going through a difficult time, Travis wrote to his mother to reassure her. Dugan found out months later.

Dugan was struck by how approachable Travis was — he did not have an officer's ego. In Honolulu, the two would meet up at the bar at night, even though, as an officer, Travis was not supposed to socialize with enlisted men.

Travis's leadership style would come to make sense as soon as they got to Iraq.

"Nobody had any idea what we were about to go through," Dugan said. Travis "became literally everything to us."

I GOT TO IRAQ IN APRIL 2003, a month after the Americans invaded. The government had collapsed, and there was a strange feeling of suspended reality. I remember watching someone throw a burning mattress from an upper floor of a hotel in central Baghdad.

By the time Travis and his men arrived in October 2004, suicide bombings were ripping apart Shiite neighborhoods almost daily. The unit had been assigned perhaps the hardest job of the war: to be one of the first Marine platoons into the city of Falluja, a major source of the violence.

It was night and pitch dark; the power to the city had been cut. Before the Marines emerged from their armored vehicles, an entire corridor of bombs went off. One Marine, who had been sitting on an open hatch, was hit, Dugan said, and when Dugan felt something wet, he realized it was blood. Men were screaming.

Dugan saw Travis trying to control the chaos. He said Travis looked focused and determined. Suddenly, Travis was in front of him, asking if he was OK. Dugan said the blast had hurt his eyes, and Travis told him to retreat to the medical vehicle. But watching Travis lead inspired him.

"I became the bravest version of myself I would ever be," he said.

Dugan then ran to help the wounded man, whose arm and leg had both been nearly severed. He said they spent the next 12 hours moving just a few blocks.

"He totally changed my life in that moment," Dugan said of Travis. Two weeks into the operation, Travis managed a phone call to Joanne. He told her he had not eaten or slept for the first three days. He said his unit had lost a man but now was doing OK, after the initial shock. He asked what people back home thought of what they were doing. She said everybody wanted the Marines to return home safely. But she added that people were also "concerned for the safety of innocent civilians."

There's no evidence that Travis ever questioned the mission of the war. His sister Jenny said he had believed that the cause was just. He wrote about finding explosive



JOHN DUGAN



'In every single news story that you see out there, there is some family just like us who is experiencing a tremendous loss. I don't think you can disconnect from that once you experience it.'

REBECCA FULLER (fourth from left above), one of Travis's older sisters

David and Joanne Fuller lost their son, First Lt. Travis Fuller, in January 2005. He was killed in a helicopter crash in Iraq. "It's like if you came home and your house had burned down," she said.

devices in ovens and refrigerators. But she said he had expressed discomfort with some aspects of it, like damaging so many people's houses during raids.

About a month into the operation, in mid-December 2004, Travis was badly burned when a grenade he had thrown ignited something in a garage. He ended up in a field hospital, watching DVDs with the nurses and pushing one of his men around in a wheelchair.

Bored and frustrated that he couldn't return to his unit, he opened a care package. The Marines sometimes got them from schools, Girl Scouts and churches, he told his family in an email. In it was a letter from a girl in California.

"She asked me if I had any other hobbies besides war," he wrote. "It was funny."

On Dec. 23, he wrote to his family that he had sneaked out to the city to his men but was sent back to the hospital within a day. On Christmas Eve, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made a surprise visit. He gave Travis a coin, a military tradition.

The day after Christmas, Travis sent photographs of it.

"More boring Rumsfeld pictures," he wrote.

THE OPERATION to control Falluja lasted just under two months and had one of the highest casualty rates of the war. One of the generals who oversaw it compared the intensity of its urban combat to one of the bloodiest battles in Vietnam.

When the operation ended, Travis and his men were flown back to the air base in the region. They took showers. They watched the Super Bowl. They drank hundreds of nonalcoholic beers. (The base did not have alcohol.)

"Everyone's calling their mom, saying, 'We made it!'" Dugan said.

On Jan. 26, they packed into two helicopters on their way to provide security for Iraq's first election. One crashed, killing Travis, who was 26, and all the other 30 service members on board. Travis was awarded a special medal of valor for his leadership in Falluja.

I WAS IN THE UNITED STATES when Travis died. I remember the shock of it in my town. But also a strange disconnect: In many places in the United States, the war felt far away.

For the Fullers, those early years were excruciating. Joanne retired from her job as a pension analyst. David kept working at the lumber yard but sank into a depression. They eventually moved out of their house; David could not bear the memories.

Joanne was determined not to drown in her grief. She threw herself into her shaped-note singing, a community-style form of a cappella. Many of the songs are hymns about loss and grief, and belting out the words together with others felt cathartic.

My friend Jenny moved into the family house that her parents had left. The memories helped her hold onto Travis. She and her husband still live there. Every Memorial Day, Granville recognizes Travis. It named the school gymnasium after him.

When I asked Jenny for her feelings about the Iraq war, she said she didn't think about it. Doing so would only emphasize her feeling of powerlessness and would make her bitter. Travis called the war a just cause, she said. Holding onto that smooths her complicated feelings.

She focuses instead on her brother's life: his ability to make her laugh at herself, his influence on the men in his unit, on his friends, on his family.

Travis's older sister, Rebecca, still regrets the argument she had with her brother.

"If I could go back and change one thing, it would be to say how incredibly proud I am of him, and how I have never doubted for a minute that he was the right person for what he was doing," she said.

Now, when she sees headlines about American military action, she no longer feels a simple rush of righteous indignation.

"In every single news story that you see out there, there is some family just like us who is experiencing a tremendous loss," she said. "I don't think you can disconnect from that once you experience it."

Joanne feels extremely proud of Travis's life, his kindness and his wisdom as a leader — and still thinks his death was a waste.

"I don't think the loss of him and his men did anything to benefit us here," she said. "There's not even the smallest thing that helped us."

I asked her how she lived with that.

Her anger and grief have never gone away, she said, but she has managed to become comfortable in them through persistent dedication to her husband and daughters.

"Being there — that's your obligation," she said. "You make it known you'd do anything for each other. Nothing is too much to ask."

She said this was one of Travis's legacies, too.

"We became more dutiful to each other after he died," she said.

EVERY YEAR, the Fuller family gets together on the week of Travis's birthday, Aug. 12. Over time, the gathering has grown, and now includes four grandchildren and everyone's partners. They play games, do puzzles and watch movies together. And they bake a cake.

They set an extra place at the table, and then, after dinner, they bring out the cake and sing to Travis.

This year, he would have been 48.

PHOTO ESSAY

Piercing Earth,
Waves and Sky:
‘My Mount Fuji’

By KEITH MEYERS

When I first arrived in New York in 1980, what struck me was the twin towers.

As an architectural design, they were an incredibly bold statement about an aging city. I ended up using them as my backdrop for a lot of photographs — not just news photographs, but photographs that I felt were evocative of the city.

Japanese artists used to use Mount Fuji as their backdrop a lot, and I guess the World Trade Center towers became my Mount Fuji.

My interest in the towers started because of my interest in the waterfront. It's a very active place. I prowled it in my boat for years, shooting pictures.

The twin towers, because they were so high, were a nautical reference. We would go tuna fishing miles offshore, and when we came back the first thing you would see of the city was the tops of the towers sticking up over the horizon. We used to see them, I think, almost 20 to 30 miles offshore.

One of my editors called me once and said, “You know, we’re really getting sick and tired of seeing the World Trade towers in those photos.”

I said: “Oh, yeah, really? OK.” From that day on, I tried to make sure that every photo I ever took, if there was any way I could sneak the World Trade Center towers in, that they were in at least one photo I sent him.

When I made the photograph of the towers that is on this section's cover, I was at Liberty State Park in New Jersey, focusing on the trees and the fog, when, all of a sudden, the fog opened up a little bit and I saw the top of the two towers. I snapped a photograph.

A few minutes later, they were gone. Like they are now. And sometimes, when I'm down by the waterfront in the fog, I just kind of expect them to be there.

Keith Meyers was a staff photographer at The New York Times from 1980 to 2006. Fascinated by the World Trade Center, he often made the towers part of his photographs. After the Sept. 11 attack, he photographed the towers for the final time, making aerial images from ground zero that became part of The Times's team of photographers' Pulitzer Prize-winning news photography coverage. He described his fascination with the towers in a 2006 interview with The Times.



Clockwise from far left: windsurfers at a 1990 regatta in New York Harbor, the Great Hall at Ellis Island in 1985 and a Coast Guard icebreaker cutting through the Hudson River in 1994.



John Robbins of the National Park Service helping to prepare the Statue of Liberty's torch for temporary removal for renovations in 1984.



Above, teens diving off the Brooklyn waterfront in 1991. Far left, checking lobster traps in the harbor in 1988. Left, the twin towers rising above New York, as seen from a helicopter above the East River in 1993.

II ISLAMOPHOBIA

Out of Wave Of Prejudice, Modest Gains In Influence

By LIAM STACK and MAYA KING

Once-friendly neighbors started to keep their distance. Undercover police officers began to monitor community events. And passers-by would give them dirty looks on the street, and sometimes harass them, when they left home in hijabs or other religious garb.

Many American Muslims have faced a quarter-century of suspicion and hostility since the Sept. 11 attacks, which reshaped life for all Americans.

In New York, a generation of Muslim New Yorkers responded to the Islamophobia by organizing their communities. Mosques hosted makeshift legal clinics. Small businesses became hubs in a citywide civil rights network. Muslims of different racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds formed alliances the city had not seen before.

Their political organizing helped, years later, to elect the city's first Muslim mayor, Zohran Mamdani. But anti-Muslim prejudice endures, echoing the Islamophobia that arose in the earliest days after Sept. 11.

Murad Awawdeh was 14 in September 2001. The post-9/11 backlash, and the grassroots response of his friends and neighbors, led him to trade his biochemistry studies — and his mother's American dream of having a doctor in the family — for a career in civil rights.

"I think that day belongs to everyone who lived it and what came after belongs to a smaller group of us," said Mr. Awawdeh, 39, who is now the president and chief executive of the New York Immigration Coalition and a confidant of Mr. Mamdani. "That part of the story this country still has not told itself honestly."

The Sept. 11 attacks left many Muslim American communities scarred by heavy-handed law enforcement tactics and the suspicion, if not outright hostility, of classmates, co-workers, elected officials and cable news commentators who blamed all Muslims for the terrorism they, too, had experienced



Murad Awawdeh, head of the New York Immigration Coalition, said he turned to civil rights work in response to the backlash.

that day. That experience spurred many to take political action.

"If you look at prior to 9/11, for the most part, Muslim Americans were not politically involved," said Afaf Nasher, the executive director of the New York chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. But, she added, "When you're pushed against the wall, you're either going to run in fear or you're going to push back, and political empowerment was certainly one way that we are pushing back."

The ascent of Mr. Mamdani has turned New York into perhaps the most prominent example of American Muslim success in the post-9/11 world. But the history of the city since the attacks has also highlighted the many challenges that Muslims in the United States continue to face.

Those include a history of police surveillance, backlash faced by high-profile Muslims in politics or the arts, and attacks on Islamic religious expression, including the construction of mosques and the wearing of religious clothing like hijabs. Those biases have also affected followers of other faiths, in particular observant Sikh men, whose turbans are often mistaken for a form of Islamic dress.

Such sentiments have compounded in many ways since the start of the war in Gaza, which most Muslim Americans have vigorously opposed. Opponents of that war have been accused of terrorist sympathies, and some, including the Columbia University protester Mahmoud Khalil, have been arrested and threatened with deportation for their advocacy. That has led some Muslims to say the war in Gaza has created an environment akin to the months and years after Sept. 11, when Muslim Americans feared that they could be marked as terrorist sympathizers for speaking out against the war on terror.

After Sept. 11, many Muslims in New York found themselves under covert police surveillance. Asad Dandia, 33, a public historian, was a plaintiff in a 2013 class-action lawsuit against the Police Department over its surveillance of the city's Muslim neighborhoods, a program that was assisted by the Central Intelligence Agency.

He had come under police surveillance after starting a charity as a teenager to feed poor families in his neighborhood. The po-

lice spying program was exposed in 2011 and caused a public uproar that led to its ending by 2018 after a series of legal settlements and other initiatives.

Today, Mr. Dandia is the official historian of the borough of Brooklyn and an informal adviser to Mr. Mamdani. One of his lawyers in the 2013 lawsuit, Ramzi Kassem, is the mayor's chief legal counsel.

"We went in the span of 10 years from suing the government to being the government," Mr. Dandia said. "And I think that is a classic and quintessential New York and American story."

Mr. Mamdani is one of several Muslims who have become prominent in American public life in recent years. Others include Representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, the Michigan Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed, the Academy Award-winning actor Mahershala Ali, the model Bella Hadid, and the comedians Ramy Youssef and Hasan Minhaj.

"Muslim America now has a greater cultural footprint, more institutional power and a lot more support from allies, comrades and friends all throughout the country," Mr. Dandia said. "Now when people think of Muslim America, they have names and faces they can point to."

But despite these successes, many challenges remain. Mr. Mamdani, who was 9 years old on Sept. 11, has said the Islamophobic backlash to the attack lingered and "became a fact of life."

According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted this year, 43 percent of American adults said Muslims are less patriotic than other Americans, and 42 percent said Muslim Americans are having a negative impact on the country. When asked to explain their views, respondents often cited the Sept. 11 attacks.

By some measures, the survey showed that public attitudes toward Islam were more negative now than they were immediately after the attacks. In March 2002, 25 percent of American adults said Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence, but that number rose to 51 percent in the survey conducted this year.

Those views have become highly polarized, with Republicans expressing far more negative views of Islam than Democrats, a change from after the attacks when supporters of both parties held similar views. Today, anti-Muslim sentiments have surged anew in some parts of the country with almost every election cycle.

Donald J. Trump campaigned for president in 2016 with a pledge to ban migration from Muslim countries and has restricted immigration from those nations and others that he views negatively during both his first and second administrations. In his second term, Mr. Trump has cracked down on students and universities over protests against the war in Gaza, portraying student demonstrators as terrorists and equating their arguments with anti-semitic hate speech.

That has included the arrest of young Muslim activists, including Mr. Khalil at Columbia and Rumeysa Ozturk, who helped write an opinion piece critical of Israel for the student newspaper at Tufts University. Kamila Ghanae-Bassiri, a professor of religion and politics at Washington University in St. Louis, said the embrace of Islamophobia by the Trump administration posed a serious threat to Muslim Americans. But for Americans who are skeptical or critical of Mr. Trump, it may have also helped to undermine anti-Muslim arguments.

"People forget now the degree to which Islamophobia was not something that was just on the right but was present on both sides," Mr. Ghanae-Bassiri said.

As an example of the reaction to Mr. Trump's policies, he pointed to protests at airports against the president's immigration restrictions in 2017 as a moment that "kind of shocked" some Muslim activists and organizations. They had become accustomed to pushing for their rights with few allies and little positive coverage in the news media, but the airport protests were filled with non-Muslims.

"Before that moment, if they criticized the state, their loyalty was always questioned by people on both the right and the left," Mr. Ghanae-Bassiri said.

But in New York, Mr. Mamdani's election has shown the resilience of anti-Muslim suspicion in both parties.

During last year's mayoral campaign, Mr. Mamdani was accused of supporting terrorism by critics in both parties, including the campaign of former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, his main rival in the race, and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who apologized after she falsely claimed in an interview that he had made "references to global jihad."

The hate is nothing new to the mayor's allies. Shahana Hanif, who in 2021 was the first Muslim woman elected to the City Council, was in elementary school when the attacks took place. She came of age as American policy and cultural attitudes shifted against the nation's Muslims.

At age 10, she wrote a letter to President George W. Bush asking him to put a stop to the hate that seemed to engulf so much of the country. For Ms. Hanif, a Bangladeshi native of Kensington, Brooklyn, it was an early form of organizing that helped inform her political career decades later.

"Seeing the injustice my community experienced" propelled her into progressive political organizing, Ms. Hanif said. "I can't take away the Muslim part of it and just say, 'Oh, no, this is only happening to us because we're Bangladeshi immigrants,' or 'This is only happening to us because I'm a daughter of immigrants.' It's a woman of color," she said. "That association of being Muslim is certainly part of it."

New York's Muslim political and civil rights leaders said they also saw opportunities to keep building on their post-9/11 organizing work.

Ms. Nasher, the executive director of CAIR, said that her group and others like it saw their efforts as an outgrowth of the discrimination they faced and a way to guard against its happening to others.

"That's not just because we're Muslim — it's because we're American," she said. "And you would think that as our fellow Americans, people would want every American to be politically engaged."



LONG ISLAND CITY, QUEENS



MOTT HAVEN, THE BRONX



DYKER HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN



WEST BROADWAY, MANHATTAN



KINGS HIGHWAY, BROOKLYN

II LANDSCAPE

Tribute in Brick: Quiet Murals Decorate Delis And Firehouses

By JOHN LELAND

They started to appear around New York City shortly after Sept. 11, with somber entreaties to "remember" or "never forget." In a city of swaggering street art, the murals, commemorating rescue workers who died at the World Trade Center, were something different: reflective, staid, calling for silence rather than adding to the urban noise.

Public grief had not yet migrated onto digital platforms, and the murals provided physical spaces for New Yorkers to connect in their pain or loss.

Some were simple, idealized portraits. Others threw in patriotic elements, like American flags or eagles, addressing the incomprehensible through the most easily grasped symbols. In all, 343 members of the Fire Department, 23 police officers and 84 employees of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey lost their lives that day.

Never forget? In 2001, with the downtown skyline still looking like an open wound, how could anyone imagine the city would fail to remember?

Joseph Indart painted his first 9/11 mural, with a flag theme, a week after the attack, and he has continued to paint more and restore those that are decaying. Now 61, he has painted around 100, he said, including one of an altered Mount Rushmore (bottom) — though many are completely gone. When people look at the murals, he said, "I want them to feel that we were very vulnerable, but yet we were strong." Even more than that, as the nation has become more divided, he said, "I want people to remember that we can be unified as a country, because in those days everybody had the American flag. Everybody united."

Two decades after the attack, the photographer Allan Molloy began to revisit as many of the murals as he could find, to see what happened to those promises to remember.

A few murals had been restored. But most showed various degrees of wear, neglect or the common form of urban invisibility, becoming generic spaces for graffiti writers to tag.

"It was as if we want to remember, but we also want to forget," Mr. Molloy said. "In a way, I'm disappointed. But that feeling you had the first few weeks after 9/11, when a plane flies over your head and your heart starts beating and you get really frightened — you can't live like that for 25 years."

Maybe, he said, the impulse to move along was an essential coping mechanism. Even now, he said, "Does anyone remember how horrible the spring of 2020 was because of Covid? It's like it never happened."

But if the memorial murals have lost some of their impact, the lethality of the attack has endured. In the 25 years since, more firefighters and police officers have died of 9/11-related illnesses than were killed in the buildings' collapse. Mr. Indart said his most recent mural, featuring a two-story-tall Statue of Liberty, commemorated this continued loss of life. "It's the biggest one," he said.

II GENERATIONS

They Feel The Weight, But Don't Carry It

By MAIA COLEMAN and TROY CLOSSON

More than 100 million people in the United States today were not alive on the morning the twin towers fell. Millions more were just learning to walk or starting preschool that day.

For them, Sept. 11 exists only in other people's telling. And if the adults in their lives can vividly recall the way life halted at 8:46 a.m., interviews with nearly three dozen teenagers and adults under 26 revealed a far less singular experience of growing up in the years that followed.

There were 20-year-olds whose worldview was shaped by scenes of death and rubble in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. Teenagers who struggled to see Sept. 11 as monumental having grown up amid mass shootings and a pandemic that killed more than 1.2 million Americans.

And college students — from Lower Manhattan to 2,500 miles from ground zero — who described a profound heartache at the scale and breadth of loss that day, even without their own connection to it.

Anika Heegaard, 25, has lived her life in the shadow of the attacks. To her, the day feels like something foggy, but looming; always there, but just out of reach.

Trying to connect to Sept. 11 has become something of an obsession for Ms. Heegaard, who now lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and considers being a New Yorker a defining characteristic.

Every September, she immerses herself in whatever primary sources she can find: a shaky video of the first plane careering into the steel building. A list of companies headquartered at 1 World Trade. Testimony from emergency workers. Building floor plans. Photographs. Obituaries.

"I can wrap my head around it," Ms. Heegaard said. "But it doesn't entirely make sense."

TODAY, HISTORY TEACHERS in their first year at a middle school might have learned about Sept. 11 as history themselves.

The youngest candidates for Congress never knew airports without the T.S.A.

And if students were taught about Sept. 11 at all, it was often a brief mention in the classroom: in stories from their siblings and Twitch streamers, podcasts, the Broadway musical "Come From Away," Instagram memes, and photographs of relatives posing before mountains of rubble.

Julie Frey, 26, whose father was a New York police officer on Sept. 11, often wondered what that day had been like for him.

'It's important to always carry the memory. But there are also greater lessons to take away from it: We were the cause of so much destruction and instability.'

LIBERTY WILSON, 19

But her father, who retired from the force in 2011 and later served in the Navy, refused to talk about it. She remembers his taking a trip every September to avoid the anniversary and the memories that accompany it.

"He doesn't want to even be reminded of it in any type of capacity," Ms. Frey said. She has struggled to understand her parents' feelings about the attacks.

"It's sort of like when someone you love has someone they love die," she said. "Their grief, you just feel it, and you want to support them and you want to be there for them. But at the same time, you didn't lose somebody."

JD Moussally, a 14-year-old from Flushing, Queens, said hearing about Sept. 11 felt like taking in decades-old sports highlights.

His father talks about classic Knicks, Mets and Rangers games like they happened yesterday — recalling the players, the scores, the emotions of everyone he watched alongside. "I can look up the stats," Mr. Moussally said. "But that is not the same as remembering the game."

"Grown-ups remember a skyline I've never seen in real life," he said. "Sometimes, I think they still see what is missing, even when the rest of us just see what is there."

For others, the holes in their generation's memory became clearer as they age. Elizabeth Cavanagh, 20, a student who was raised on Long Island's South Shore, recalled reciting the Hail Mary with her Catholic school classmates throughout every Sept. 11 anniversary.

But when she went to college at the University of Pittsburgh, about an hour and a half from where Flight 93 had crashed, the anniversary passed unceremoniously. She wondered: What about the strangers who comforted each other on the streets? What about the firefighters and police officers who risked their lives?

"It's a story of New York that you see in so many different ways — and that we're losing over time," Ms. Cavanagh said.

She and others lamented that the only ac-

Maia Coleman and Troy Closson talked to nearly three dozen people 26 and younger about what the anniversary means to them. Neither of the reporters has any memory of Sept. 11, though both were alive.

count they have heard of their country coming together was during one of its worst tragedies — and before they were even born. Today, many said, the country is too divided and its politics too fractured.

"We lost something that day that can't be measured," said Joseph Smith, 22, who lives in Northern Virginia and whose older sister joined the Marines after Sept. 11. He believes that the attacks made Americans more distrustful and divided. "We as a country didn't heal — and we still haven't healed — from all the things that have happened since 2000."

YOUNG PEOPLE across the country have watched their parents and teachers turn stony and quiet year after year on Sept. 11. Still, for them, the day feels more like a chapter of history, the way they imagine Pearl Harbor or the Vietnam War must have felt for the generations before them.

Life, they said, has been defined by more recent chapters, like the Trump presidency or the Oct. 7 attacks, and the tragedies ping-ponging incessantly on their phones.

"I honestly feel like a lot of people my age may have just kind of gotten numb to seeing horrible things in the news," said MK Peters, 23, who lives in Milwaukee.

She described how active shooter drills became a normalized part of school days, and how a global pandemic interrupted her teenage years.

Jessica Hall, 25, who lives in St. Paul, and whose college years were sundereed by the coronavirus pandemic, doesn't remember Sept. 11. But she knows where she was when 20 first graders and six adults were killed in Sandy Hook, Conn. — and when 14 high school students and three staff members were gunned down in Parkland, Fla.

"That was all a defining thing for me more than 9/11," she said.

For some, however, Sept. 11 evokes something deeply personal, and painful. Mai Quddus, 23, lives near Princeton, N.J., and said her father stopped using his given name, Mohammed, amid a rise in Islamophobia after the attacks. "I haven't been able to feel that way because of the way others made us feel," she said.

For Loulou Marmalade Toledano, 17, grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, just over a mile from ground zero. But as the child of immigrant parents — her mother from the Philippines and her father from England — the fear and alienation that permeated immigrant communities after the attacks have shaped her own memories.

"My mom sort of understood that if it had been a different group that had hit the towers that day, then you know, that sort of oppression and alienation that came toward Arab Americans and also Muslim Americans could have easily been any other group," Ms. Toledano said.

Khalid El-Halabi, 24, who was raised in a Muslim household in the Queens neighborhood of Jackson Heights, was a high school track athlete and often ran to the reflecting pools at the World Trade Center site.

"I would just always be hit by this concept of how many people have lost their lives," he said. "If that day had not happened, maybe I could have been fully American."

He was named after his great-grandfather, but classmates mocked him for sharing a name with Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who is accused of plotting the attacks. He got extra airport screening from age 2.

And he said he spent his life in the city feeling "almost like a second-class citizen," seeing the normalization of suspicion and hate against Muslims.

"Even 25 years later, is there really a future where my identity can be fully seen as a New Yorker? Or will it always be questioned?" he asked.

He remains drawn to ground zero, a symbol of the potential to rebuild.

BERKLEY PELLETIER WAS READY to sign up for the Army.

He was only a child, but listening to the phone calls of night passengers on a trip to the memorial museum in New York moved him that deeply. And as he grew up in Ohio, he said the legacy of Sept. 11 was filtered through a lens of nationalism: "This horrible thing was done to us."

Then in middle school, he dug deeper into history himself.

"I realized we were doing really horrible things to other people in the name of justice," said Mr. Pelletier, who is now 23 and working at an international trade consultancy in Washington, D.C.

Like Mr. Pelletier, many young adults said the 25th anniversary reminded them most of the country's shortcomings.

Life after Sept. 11, to them, has brought a drumbeat of costly and damaging policies in which they, only newly of voting age, have had no voice. While facing a warming planet and rising housing costs, they look back and see trillions spent on war and counterterrorism efforts.

Liberty Wilson, 19, shared much of her worldview with her mother, who was working in Lower Manhattan when the towers collapsed. But as a teen, Ms. Wilson learned online about covert C.I.A. operations in the Middle East before Sept. 11 and re-evaluated the country's history of intervention.

"Growing up, it felt understood that American imperialism was almost like a right," she said.

She said her mother believed that fighting back against terrorism remained urgent. To Ms. Wilson, it's more complicated. "There are also greater lessons to take away from it: We were the cause of so much destruction and instability."

For Aiden Burrus, 18, who grew up in Connecticut, that tension is top of mind. Mr. Burrus just started college at George Washington University in Washington, three miles from where Flight 77 hit the Pentagon. As the 25th anniversary approached, he said he felt called to mourn. For what exactly, though, he isn't sure.

"I remember the people who've passed away," Mr. Burrus said. "I remember the consequences afterward and everyone else that died because of 9/11. We cannot forget this. I know that I cannot forget this."

He paused for several seconds. "But I don't entirely know what that even means because I wasn't there. I don't remember it to begin with."



'Almost every adult I knew growing up was so affected by what happened, but I don't have any recollection of it. It doesn't feel like something that happened to me.'

JULIE FREY, 26



'There was no first time I heard about it. As a child it was simply a fact of the world I was in: 9/11 happened, and people like me are supposed to be sorry for it forever.'

KHALID EL-HALABI, 24



'I feel impostor syndrome. It's not quite apathy; it's definitely a respect for what happened, but just sort of an understanding that we can't really be a part of that collective grief.'

LOULOU MARMALADE TOLEDANO, 17



'I wish I could see it the way most Americans do.'

MAI QUDDUS, 23, was born in Bangladesh.



'I'm just trying to fundamentally understand something that I feel pretty disconnected from. It's hard to feel sad about something that you don't remember.'

ANNIKA HEEGAARD, 25

IN PHOTOS

Indelible. Unshakable. But Fading.

A QUARTER-CENTURY later, the images remain so immediate and so raw, in the way that a movie you've seen many times before can still startle you. Dust-covered and tear-drenched, the photographs from Sept. 11 retain the power to take you back, and aback. Each of these eight images tells its own chapter, but together, they form the 9/11 epic. The second plane about to pierce the south tower, confirming that the United States was under attack. The jagged and pulverized ruins of buildings that once symbolized world finance. The man exhausted from running for his life. The stillness of disbelief, conveyed by a tea set suddenly coated in gray. No matter where you were or are, there is an intimacy to these historic images that transcends the passage of time. A timelessness. A universality. We are all caught between watching and averting our eyes. We are all searching in vain for who and what was lost. We are all just trying to hold it together.

DAN BARRY



ROBERT A. CUMINS

United Flight 175, aimed at the south tower of the World Trade Center on the morning of Sept. 11. American Flight 11 had made impact minutes before.



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

"I crawled out from under the emergency vehicle where I had sheltered," the photographer Ruth Fremson recalled in 2021. She made her way to a deli.



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rescue and emergency medical workers searching ground zero on Sept. 12; 11 survivors were found that day. The site came to be known as the Pile.



MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Thousands of dazed people evacuated Lower Manhattan on foot after the towers fell via the Brooklyn, above, and Manhattan Bridges.



EDWARD KEATING/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A tea set, frozen in time and coated with dust, inside the Williamson family's apartment on Cedar Street, across from the south tower.



ANGEL FRANCO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clockwise from above: watching as the first tower collapsed; a funeral in Yonkers for Yamel Merino, one of the hundreds of emergency medical workers who were lost; a memorial tribute that grew in Union Square Park in the days following the attacks. Thousands of missing persons fliers blanketed the city.



GEORGE GUTIERREZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



CHIANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

HEALTH HAZARDS

Pondering Day of Ash And if Risks May Linger

By JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

Jacob Fortinsky and his twin sister, Sarah, were a month away from turning 4 when the first jetliner slammed into the World Trade Center 25 years ago. They had been watching Franklin the Turtle cartoons in their apartment one block west, on the 21st floor of Gateway Plaza. As fire trucks and ambulances gathered below, the twins began to count them.

When the south tower collapsed that morning, Sept. 11, 2001, the windows of their apartment blew in. Dust and debris filled their home, bringing darkness. Sarah thought a monster had come for them.

Their mother and nanny carried them and their 2-year-old sister into a stairwell frantic with fleeing neighbors, then down to a basement boiler room. Someone distributed strips of wet fabric, with instructions to breathe through it as a filter.

These are Mr. Fortinsky's very first memories: the fire engines in the street, the dust cloud, the panic in the stairwell, showing his sisters how to use the wet cloth. When they eventually emerged from the building, they were barefoot. The ground felt soft, covered in powdery ash. They boarded a boat to New Jersey. At a cousin's home, the children took bath after bath until the water was no longer murky with the gray dust that had clung to them.

"I don't remember anything before," Mr. Fortinsky, now 28, said. It has been impossible to forget. In the months after the attack, he was anxious that other tall buildings would collapse. And there was a fear of fire. He would shrink from even the Shabbat candles his family lit on Friday nights.

In the years that followed, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and he developed asthma, ailments that they believe are linked to the World Trade Center dust, which was full of toxins. Once, after playing soccer in the cold, he had such difficulty catching his breath that his friends worried he was dying.

"It's hard to know with 100 percent certainty if it's from 9/11, but it obviously took a toll on my body," Mr. Fortinsky said.

Growing up, he resigned himself to someday dying of lung cancer.

"I'd wonder what the equivalent number of cigarettes is — you know, in terms of what I inhaled that day," he said.

Those fears subsided long ago, and he hasn't had an asthma attack in years. But many researchers share his questions about how that day so early in his life could affect his long-term health.

Research into the toxic exposures from the attack initially focused on firefighters, police officers and other emergency responders who toiled at ground zero, searching for survivors and human remains, and sifting through rubble. An alarming number have fallen ill with respiratory ailments and cancer.

Researchers expanded their focus to the health effects on nearby residents and workers — including the survivors from

'I'd wonder what the equivalent number of cigarettes is — you know, in terms of what I inhaled that day.'

JACOB FORTINSKY, who lived near ground zero

buildings that were destroyed or damaged. But children who were nearby have received less attention and have proved harder to study. Researchers estimate that about 25,000 children lived or attended school near the World Trade Center.

Mr. Fortinsky and his sisters are among the youngest of the generation of children who witnessed Sept. 11 or were exposed to the dust cloud. Others are entering middle age.

The toxic exposures did not end that day: The pile where the towers once stood smoldered for months. The dust and smoke deposited toxins into homes and schools. The dust lingered on carpets where toddlers crawled and in the ducts of air-conditioning systems.

Now, 25 years later, the federally funded World Trade Center Health Program is endeavoring to track down exposed children and enroll them in a large research cohort. Congress ordered the project in 2022, and it is inching forward: The federal government recently began searching for research partners.

Scientists who have been studying the health effects of the dust exposure welcome the federal effort but say it is overdue.

"I would say it's a tad late," said Dr. Leonardo Trasande, a medical researcher at NYU Langone Health. "That might be a nice way to put it."

Studies of various sizes over the years have found that children who witnessed the attack or were exposed to the toxic dust have, by some measures, poorer health than their peers. They have been diagnosed with depression and asthma over the subsequent decades at higher rates.

Dr. Trasande's studies found that children exposed to the dust had far higher levels of certain toxins in their blood more than a decade later, including dioxins, which are linked to cancer, and PFAS, commonly



LENO PARRA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jacob Fortinsky and his twin, Sarah, were 3 and living near the World Trade Center in 2001.



ANGEL FRANCO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Dust shrouding Lower Manhattan the day of the attacks. Debris filled the Fortinskys' apartment.

known as "forever chemicals."

Other questions remain unanswered, including whether young people exposed to the dust get cancer at higher rates than others.

After Dana Nelson felt a lump in her breast in 2020, the cancer diagnosis at age 33 did not feel like random bad luck.

"I had been waiting for the other shoe to drop," she said.

On the morning of the attack, Ms. Nelson, then 14, and her father had taken the ferry from their home in Staten Island to Lower Manhattan together, their usual morning routine. She went to Stuyvesant High School and her father worked in an office building, each a few blocks from the World Trade Center.

The first plane struck while Ms. Nelson sat in English class. Another student, looking out the classroom's windows, said she could see birds near the towers. They weren't birds, but people jumping, Ms. Nelson realized.

The students left school and walked north. By then, one tower had fallen.

Stuyvesant reopened the next month. The pages of textbooks had an acrid smell, Ms. Nelson recalled. And dust was everywhere: in the upholstery of the auditorium seats, in the gray sludge that covered the streets.

Ms. Nelson was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic sinus problems. Reports of other Stuyvesant students becoming sick with cancer have been in the news over the years.

In 2018, Ms. Nelson's father learned he had kidney cancer. Then came her breast cancer diagnosis. Ms. Nelson, a teacher in Brooklyn, believes both stem from Sept. 11.

The largest studies involving children have emerged from a long-running research effort by the New York City Health Department, which has been tracking the health of thousands of people near the towers who enrolled in a registry in 2003 and 2004. Of the original 71,000 enrollees, more than 3,000 were children.

Not all of them still answer the surveys. But Health Department researchers periodically check cancer registries and hospitalization records to see how the group is faring.

The Health Department has found that about 25 percent of children exposed to World Trade Center dust have been diagnosed with asthma, compared with 16 percent in the general population of the same age.

The Health Department's research has found that people who experienced Sept. 11 as children were 50 percent more likely to have been diagnosed with depression than other New Yorkers of similar sociodemographic characteristics.

Witnessing such a traumatic event so young can shape people's outlook. They may go through life with a sense of dread or view the world as a bleak place, said Dr. Rebecca Rosen, the mental health director of the World Trade Center health program at the city's public hospital system.

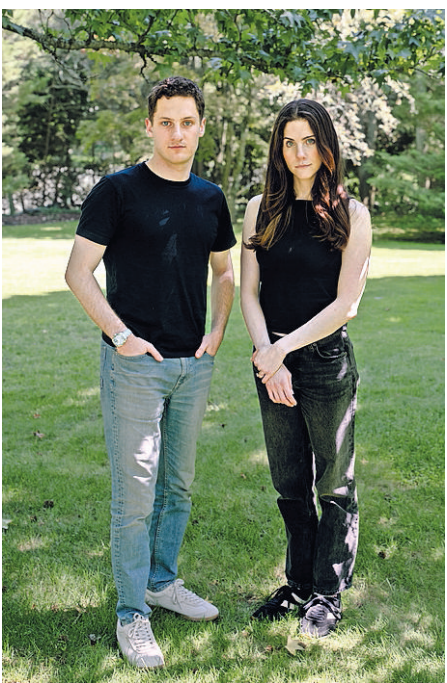
Mr. Fortinsky, who founded a sports prediction market, said he grew up with a view that "the world is chaotic and is not necessarily predetermined." He said his experience that day — watching his mother and babysitter protect him and his siblings and steer them to safety — probably nurtured in him a hopeful and optimistic streak. But that day also stoked fears.

When he began asking his parents whether the tall buildings on the street would fall over, they decided it was time for the family to move to Westchester County, north of New York City.

His sister Sarah was plagued by nightmares for years.

"I would see that same monster" — the dust cloud — "tackling me to the ground as a kid," recalled Sarah, a 28-year-old journalist. She dreaded bedtime and would insist her parents reassure her there would be no nightmares that night — a ritual that continued for years.

"I do think it shapes you into who you are to have that sort of experience so young," she said.



LENO PARRA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jacob, now 28, says his first memories were of 9/11, while Sarah had nightmares for years.

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

How to Finish Herculean Job Of Remaking Ground Zero

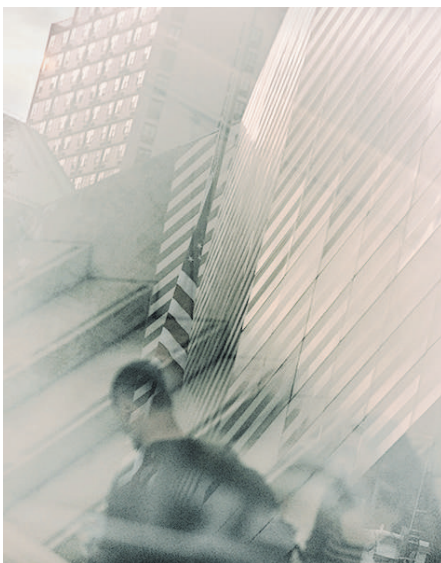
By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

One recent morning I hopped the No. 1 train to revisit the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine. Opened in 2022 to replace a century-old neighborhood sanctuary destroyed when the twin towers fell, it's the tiny, domed, fussily designed marble light box tucked in an elevated pocket park on the south end of the World Trade Center.

A few tourists chatted outside the doors under a canopy of honey locust trees, waiting for the church to open. The sound of waterfalls drifted up from the memorial. It was an odd experience in that part of town. It almost felt like being in a real neighborhood.

At 25 years the World Trade Center is an undeniable feat of urban redevelopment. It has added a quartet of high-gloss commercial behemoths by big-name architects to the city skyline, with another supertall office building on the way.

It has also produced a persistent hollow zone in Lower Manhattan in the sleek, cheerless guise of an office park, surround-



The Oculus at the World Trade Center opened in 2016. Its plaza hosts movie screenings.

ing the 9/11 Memorial and Museum — an area that remains alienated, as were the former twin towers on their wind-swept superblock, from the city around it. A relic of bygone city-planning ideas, it freezes the site in its moment of trauma.

A quarter-century is an inflection point. Some 100 million Americans have been born since the Sept. 11 attacks. There is an opportunity today to reconsider the development's bollarded and little-trafficked streets and maybe to resuscitate the idea of building more housing nearby to bring energy, serendipity and 24/7 life to the area. One can imagine a lively mixture of new residents and commuters filling redesigned streets raised to the level of the sidewalks and open plazas buzzing with commerce and cafe tables, buskers and benches. The activity would be yet another enduring rebuke to the terrorist attacks.

I've been writing about ground zero since that September day in 2001. When I checked in five years ago, the \$85 million, Byzantine-modernist St. Nicholas — a not-quite jewel box by Santiago Calatrava, made of bone-white Pentelic marble — hadn't yet arrived.

Its difficult construction was slowed by litigation and ballooning costs. An even more tortured odyssey had delayed the \$500 million Perelman Performing Arts Center, designed by REX, at the opposite end of the World Trade Center, which I reviewed when it opened in 2023. Its sumptuously veined and raised marble cube contains a Chinese box of shape-shifting theaters and a Marcus Samuelsson restaurant.

Perelman, like St. Nicholas, had promised to add new facets to the World Trade Center. Aside from the memorial and its museum, these are the only buildings at the site other than office towers and Calatrava's \$4 billion bird-shaped shopping mall and PATH station called the Oculus. A fifth commercial tower, a 1,226-foot-tall design by Norman Foster for American Express, has lately broken ground beside Perelman, with a projected opening in 2031.

So where does that leave the redevelopment?

Summer outdoor movie screenings now

take place at the Oculus Plaza. Food carts have appeared at the site's north end. A farmers market arrives on Tuesdays. And the offices are nearly full, which is obviously good news. Citywide the demand for office space lags, post-pandemic, but Grade A towers like those at the World Trade Center or at other high-end developments in town, like Hudson Yards, are in demand.

That said, Perelman and St. Nicholas have not done much to turn the World Trade Center into a cultural hub or make it feel like a neighborhood, even while the rest of Lower Manhattan has been morphing in all sorts of promising ways since well before Sept. 11. Its residential population has more than doubled in the last 25 years, with a spate of new apartment towers and the conversion of older office buildings creating a prosperous cohort of people, parks, retail and restaurants.

Perspectives have also changed on what the area needs after Sept. 11. A new documentary about the redevelopment of the 16-acre World Trade Center, "9/11: Reclaiming Ground Zero," recalls a public meeting organized after Sept. 11 at the Javits Convention Center. Five thousand New Yorkers turned up to voice their opinions, ripping into early ideas that planners had put forward.

Citizen attendees ranked priorities that organizers gave them. Remembrance was on the list. So was commercial redevelopment. Housing wasn't. Neither were measures to protect against rising seas and extreme weather.

Back then politicians and business leaders fixated on keeping Wall Street banks and other big companies critical to the city's economy from fleeing. Westfield, the mall developer, wanted to turn the site into an aboveground shopping center. Grieving families of victims were understandably demanding a fitting memorial. Everyone was worried about security.

So there was a rush to rebuild, sidelining voices of patience urging mixed-use development and circumspection about the civic wisdom of a new phalanx of glassy office towers. George E. Pataki, New York's governor at the time, was considering a White House run and demanded that a tower raised like a middle finger to the terrorists be erected as quickly as possible. Larry Silverstein, who had only just signed a lease on the property six weeks before Sept. 11, wanted to recoup his investment.

Then came the market crash in 2007, followed by Superstorm Sandy in 2012, which drowned much of low-lying Lower Manhattan, shut down subways and turned off the lights. The storm displaced thousands of residents and caused billions of dollars in damage.

Eight years later, the coronavirus pandemic ushered in a universe of remote work.

And today a widening income divide and the lack of lower- and middle-income housing across the city have further reshaped public preoccupations and fears about what most threatens New York's future, especially among a younger generation of city residents who weren't even alive when the twin towers were attacked.

To this generation, the battles over the World Trade Center's design belong to history. The project's disappointments no longer seem as urgent or divisive. Time has also created room for rethinking. Around new housing, for instance. Why has the promise to erect 5 World Trade, a 1,200-unit mixed-income apartment tower announced by Gov. Kathy Hochul three years ago, gone nowhere?

And what about reimagining public space? The original ambition at ground zero to restore streets that the twin towers had erased sounded smart and forward-thinking 20 years ago. But it hasn't panned out as hoped because the streets remain cordoned off and policed like demilitarized zones. Street-level retail in and around ground zero's office towers is meager. There are few places just to sit and enjoy a sandwich.

The police and the bollards aren't going anywhere. But in other big cities, from Tokyo to Vienna to Athens to Jerusalem to Mexico City, streets and sidewalks, including around sacred sites and memorials, are sometimes shared by cars, pedestrians and shops. These places can have bollards and security without foreclosing movement. They serve as tourist magnets and attractions for workers and residents with their mix of food, culture, memory and commerce — a recipe still unrealized at the World Trade Center, even with Perelman and St. Nicholas.

Creating these zones is a job for landscape architects and urban designers in New York, who elsewhere have transformed many city streets into plazas. I felt just a hint of what is possible standing outside the church recently. A few New Yorkers arrived, waiting to pray on their way to work. Some tourists had come to check out the frescoes in St. Nicholas by a monk from Mount Athos. We chatted in the summer breeze.

It was a rare, welcome experience at ground zero. It was the feeling of normalcy.

The St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine opened in 2022 after a difficult construction process slowed by litigation and cost increases.



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JUAN ARREDONDO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

MEMORIAL

Night by Night, Steady Hands Cleanse Anew

By JOHN LELAND

Jim Maroon begins his nightly work shift by putting on a rubber wading suit and stepping into some of the most symbolically weighted water in America.

Five nights a week, from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m., Mr. Maroon, 54, cleans the reflecting pools at the 9/11 Memorial. He is one of the legion of workers who make New York New York.

Since he started in 2012, soon after the pools and surrounding park opened to the public, he has maintained a site that is both a world-class tourist attraction and the location of a mass tragedy.

It is a heavy responsibility, Mr. Maroon said.

"These people lost family here," he said on a summer shift, gearing up for the 25th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. "You always want to put on a good display for them and not have them say, 'My husband died here and this should be a beautiful place, but this guy is not doing his job.'"

The two memorial pools, each about an acre in size, cover the footprint of the twin towers, dropping 30 feet down from street level, with a square void in the center that drops roughly 20 feet more. The water that rushes down the pools' black granite sides constitutes the largest man-made waterfall in North America.

Mr. Maroon worked out the math. Each pool takes 44 trips pushing a vacuum in one direction and 44 trips back.

He works with a colleague who brushes behind him, and another who works the vacuum's pump. But his is not a job for someone who minds being alone.

"I think that's a perk of the job," he said. "You don't have to see the boss. You do your

'I don't know if I'm loyal, persistent, stubborn. That's why, 14 years later, I'm still here.'

JIM MAROON

own thing. You just do it well, and they leave you alone. I wouldn't say I'm antisocial, but I'm happy alone, too."

The site has special meaning for Mr. Maroon. His father worked at the World Trade Center, and growing up, he spent a lot of time there.

On Sept. 11, 2001, he had a job a few hundred yards from the towers, and he was heading there as the first plane hit. He remembers the sound of the impact, then later the sight of people jumping from high windows.

On his job, he tries not to dwell on that memory. But each year around the anniversary he cannot avoid it, especially when he sees the names of the dead inscribed on parapets around the pools. "If I thought about it every day, I'd be heartbroken," he said.

As workers at the reflecting pool in Washington, D.C., have learned this summer, algae can do a number on a pool. At the 9/11 Memorial, chemists treat the water with an algicide called bromine to keep it in check, and Mr. Maroon clears any growth from the stone underneath.

What else is in the pools? Coins, soda cans, children's toys, the occasional camera, Mr. Maroon said. But mostly he vacuums up leaves from the memorial park's roughly 400 trees.

About five years ago he found a turtle the size of a lunchbox. "Maybe a bird grabbed it from somewhere and tried to crack its shell and wound up dropping him in the pool," Mr. Maroon speculated. Workers at the memorial gave it a home in their offices. They named it Lucky. "It'll probably outlast us all," he said.

The coins all go to the memorial, he said.

During Mr. Maroon's shift, with the visitors gone and the water off, there is an eerie quiet in the pools, broken only by the vacuum's whir and the occasional disembodied voice from one of the security guards above, echoing around the dark chambers.

After 14 years of cleaning the pools — no one does it if he's out sick or on vacation, Mr. Maroon said — he said the challenge was not so much the physical work, but the repetition. You go up, you go back, day after day after day.

"It's not the first time you do the pool," he said. "It's when you do it 1,000 times."

"It's like Groundhog Day. I guess it's good and bad. Like for me, I have no problem with it."

"I don't know if I'm loyal, persistent, stubborn. That's why, 14 years later, I'm still here. And you know, I don't plan on leaving unless my body breaks down."

As the morning sun slanted into the pools, it was time for him to peel off his wading suit and go home to Staten Island. In two hours the crowd would start to arrive. None of the visitors would see Mr. Maroon or learn his name. But in some small, telling way, his work would be part of their experience.

Jim Maroon has cleaned the 9/11 Memorial pools since 2012, soon after they opened. No one covers his days off.