

# **After the towers fell: First responders and their families share their stories**

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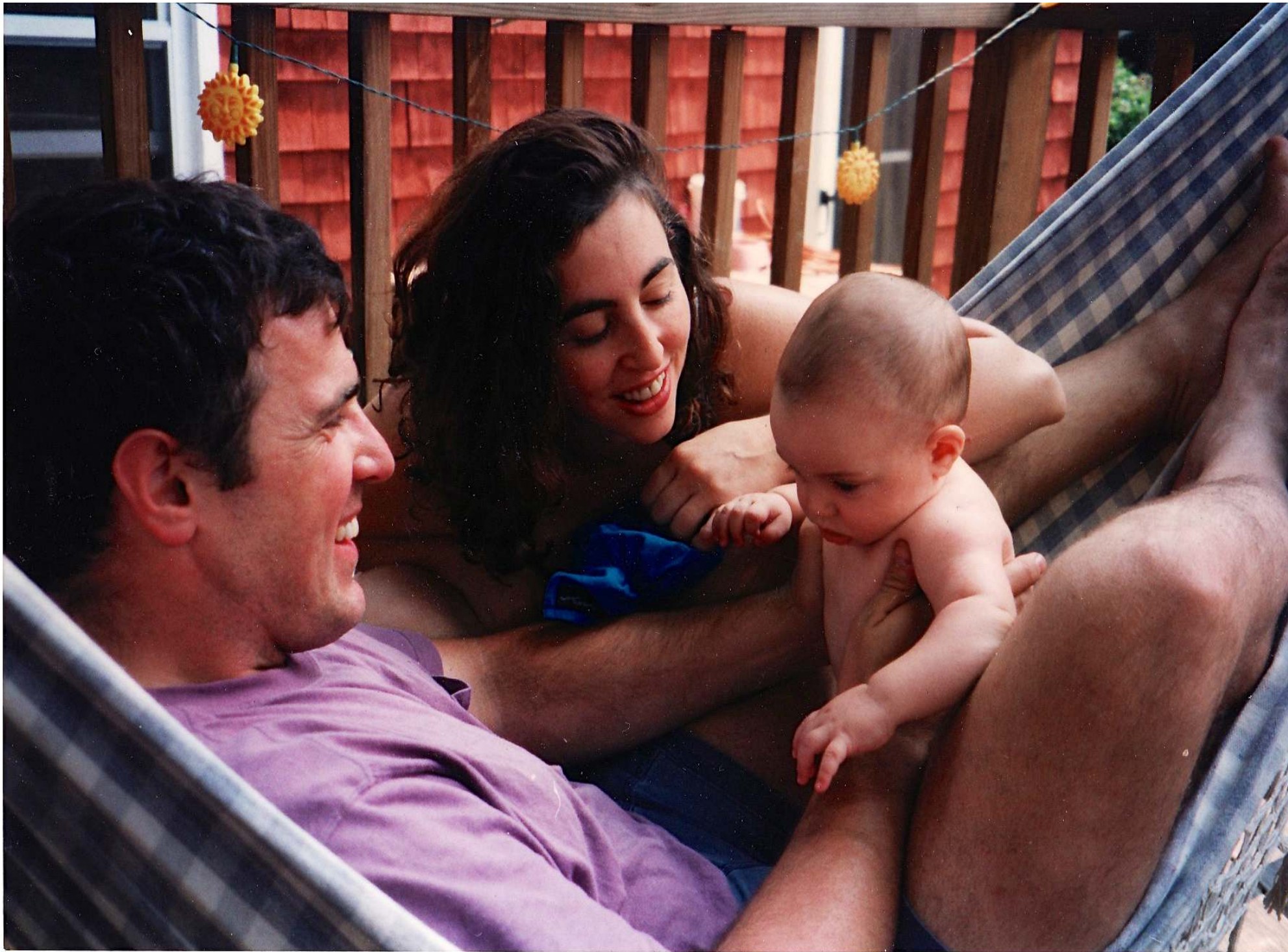
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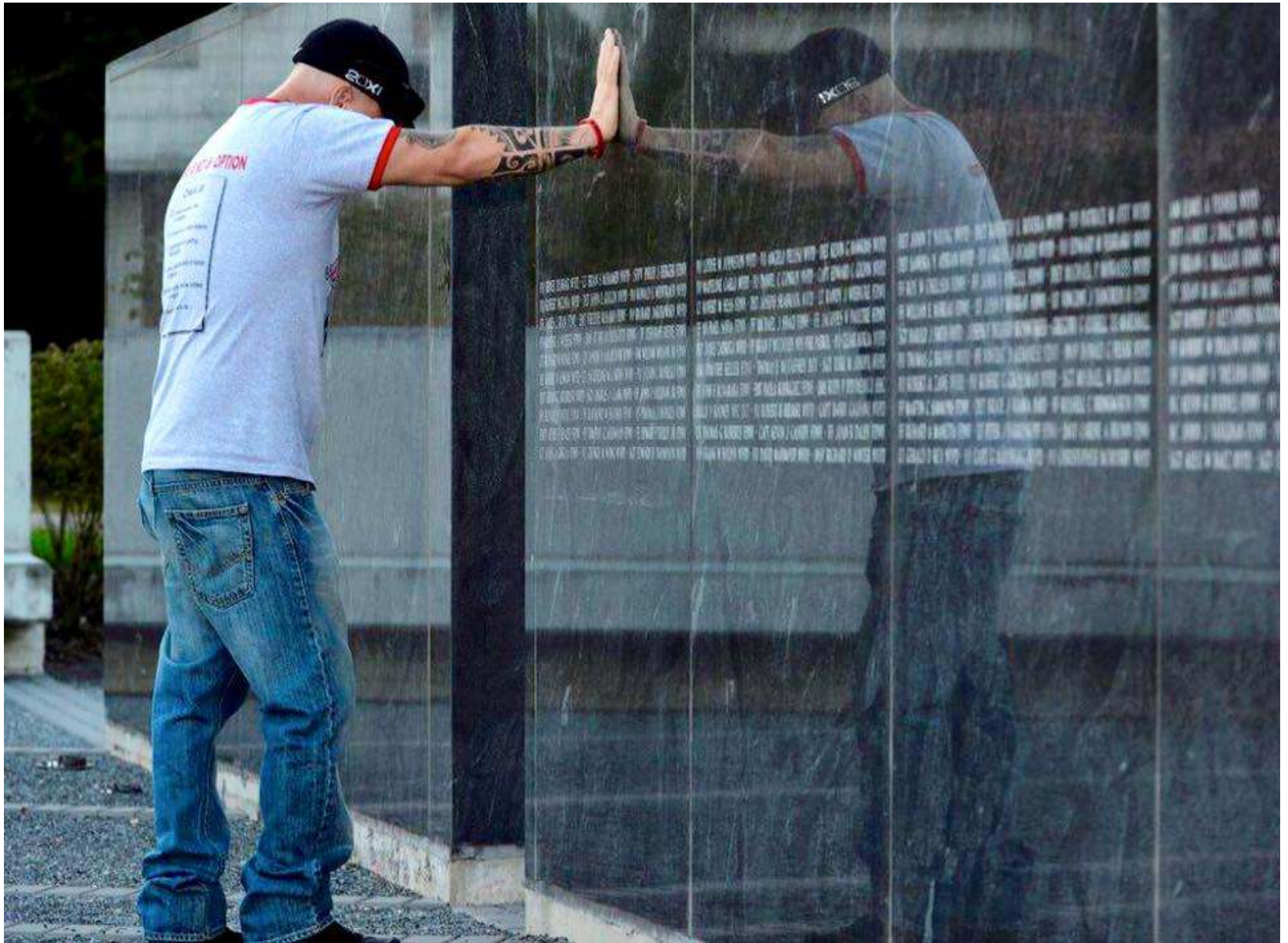
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## **September 11, 2001**

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the WTC in New York City - otherwise known as 9/11 - resulted in the largest concentrated emergency service response in United States history.

## Recollections of Ground Zero

*“People were frantic, they were running everywhere. A man came running up to me, screaming that a woman had come out of Tower 1 and her skin was dripping off...she had been burned by the fireball that came down the elevator shaft after the first plane went into the North Tower” (Male Firefighter)*

## Recollections of Ground Zero

*“The smell of the bodies, not the smell of someone who has been dead for a long time, but the smell of someone that has just died, and the blood. I can still remember that smell. And the fires, there were fires all around us, so that’s what I remember, the smell of death and smoke” (Female paramedic)*



## Recollections of Ground Zero

The toll from the search and rescue is evident.

*“It was horrible. The smells...and what we had to do. I remember the first day, we were finding whole bodies. Then as the days went on, the stench started to tell us where to look. Soon, we were only finding pieces. Every day you'd be down there digging and if we found a bone, well that was good day” (Male paramedic)*

## Flashbacks and memories

Sixteen years after 9/11, first responders remain haunted by quirks of fate that day.

*“I remember seeing John\* and we just hugged. He told me to be careful, and then ran off in the other direction. I never saw him again” (Male Paramedic)*

## Guilt

Feelings of guilt are persistent.

*“I just, you know...I feel guilty....(pause)....”*

*Interviewer: “Why do you feel guilty?”*

*“Because I didn’t find anyone alive...(crying)” (Male Paramedic)*

## Mental health Issues

In addition to these feelings of guilt, first responders continue to be plagued by nightmares, vivid recollections of Ground Zero, anxiety, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

*“It’s been quite a long time, but last night I woke up drenched with sweat and shaking. I had a dream of being buried in the rubble. It seemed so real, my heart was pounding out of my chest. The reason I woke up was because my dog was licking my face, he must have sensed I was having a problem” (Male EMT)*

## **Physical health issues**

When the WTC twin towers collapsed on 9/11 they converted much of the towers structure and contents into dense dust clouds of particles that settled on the streets and within buildings throughout Lower Manhattan.

About 90% of the settled WTC dust was a highly alkaline mixture of toxins that was readily re-suspendable.

## **Physical health issues**

High concentrations of this toxic WTC dust were inhaled and deposited in the airways, and subsequently swallowed, causing both physical and chemical irritation to the respiratory and gastro-esophageal epithelia of the thousands of responders and to tens of thousands of people living and working in downtown Manhattan.

Exposure to this dust caused both acute and chronic adverse health effects, especially in those lacking effective personal respiratory protective equipment.

## Physical health issues

WTC-related health effects have been reported in a number of research studies and highlight an increased incidence of health effects:

- Disorders of the respiratory and gastro-oesophageal tracts;
- Low birth weight and birth defects in children exposed in-utero;
- Growing concern about excess cancer incidence that may become further evident in future years.

## Cognitive Impairment

Some first responders are starting to show signs of cognitive impairment.

Cognitive impairment refers to poor memory and concentration - an inability to learn new information.

Many people with cognitive impairment have difficulty performing the routine activities of daily living.

A research study from the Stony Brook WTC Wellness Program identified that the average age of first responders with cognitive impairment was 53. The Stony Brook team found the impairment to be most evident among responders who suffered PTSD.



## **Marriage and family cohesiveness**

Marriages and family cohesiveness have been significantly strained and sometimes broken in the aftermath of 9/11.

While there is no official record, anecdotal reports suggest that the divorce rate is high among 9/11 responders.

Affairs and re-marriages to widows of fallen colleagues.

Spouses felt left out of the support loop and neglected by their spouses who were busy caring for the widows of their fallen colleagues.

## Marriage and family cohesiveness

Firefighter Rudy Sanfilippo knows first-hand the toll that “the pile” takes on the families of responders.

*“You work and work, and the best thing you can do is call a widow to say we found the tip of your husband's pinkie? We lost control at the site, and we lost control at home. In both places, we were doing the best we could, but it wasn't sufficient. Before this, we'd been good providers.”*

Around 18 months after 9/11, Sanfilippo sat down for a family dinner with all of his adult children.

*“And one of them says to me...my kid says, 'Dad, welcome home.’”*

## The 9/11 Widows

In the wake of the overwhelming number of losses of 9/11, a job that should usually have fallen to a designated senior member of the FDNY became the job of all the men in the New York firehouses.

They were tasked with checking up on the widows of their fallen colleagues and to help them with paperwork and ensuring that they attended all of the relevant meetings for the 9/11 families and received all of the support that they were entitled to.

## The 9/11 Widows

For many firehouses, an individual firefighter would be “assigned” as a liaison for a widow, many of whom were unprepared for the emotional burden that would come with this role.

In some cases, the firefighters and widows formed close bonds, threatening marriages that may already have been in a somewhat precarious position.

In other cases, the widows fell in love with their designated liaisons and these happily married men had to try and find a delicate way to extricate themselves from the situation without exacerbating the distress that the widows were already experiencing..

## The children of survivors

*“It’s hard you know, my Dad and I don’t have the greatest relationship. And I don’t know if that is just because of 9/11, or if it would have been that way anyway. But as a kid, it was definitely tough, everyone in our community thought Dad was a hero. But to me, he was a coward. He never spent anytime with us, he preferred to be with all of the 9/11 families. He forgot that WE were a 9/11 family, his own flesh and blood. But it seemed more important to him to spend time with the widows and other kids. Then when he did come home, he was a mean drunk. I pushed his buttons I admit. He hit me a few times – until I started hitting back. I would rather he take it out on me than Mom or Kate. But I have never forgiven him. We still don’t really talk too much. It’s sad to admit it, but at times I actually wished he had died that day”.*

## **Added burden – insurance and compensation**

Former EMT, Sal Turturici, wasn't in lower Manhattan on the day the planes hit, but he worked for four months after 9/11 operating machinery that transported body parts from Ground Zero to a makeshift morgue.

In 2016, Sal was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer.

Under the 2005 World Trade Center Disability Law, responders who became disabled as a result of 9/11-related operations are entitled to a 75% disability pension.

## Added burden – insurance and compensation

The deadline to submit that form was 11 September, 2015.

Sal got sick on 4 Oct of that year.

*“He missed it by three weeks,” said Sal’s wife, Wendy. “The only reason he wasn’t eligible for his disability pension was not because he wasn’t sick enough ... but because he didn’t fill out the paperwork in time. It’s the most ridiculous thing.”*

## The “other responders”

For most people, the story of 9/11 ends with the collapse of the towers. The recovery operation that lasted for more than eight months is generally nothing more than a footnote.

Have you ever wondered who cleared all that debris? Who looked for remains?

New York didn't have enough emergency rescue to continually man the twelve-hour search shifts.

So who were they?



## The “other responders”

They were regular people!

And it was a dangerous landscape for these people to be working in.

## And finally...the “forgotten” first responders

Few felt the pressure of the morning of 9/11 more than the 9-1-1 dispatchers into whose headsets poured the thousands of cries for help.

The calls came in without pause on the morning of 9/11, more than 3,000 of them in the first 10 minutes - constant pleas for help. Throughout the day, more than 55,000 calls would come in.

Did they stay on the line when someone was no longer responding? How long did they stay on the phone with someone when thousands of others were trying to call? The day was so traumatic, many would never return to work.

## And finally...the “forgotten” first responders

In the 102 minutes between the time the first plane struck the North Tower at 08:46am and when that tower fell at 10:28am, the demeanor of the 9-1-1 dispatchers can be heard to evolve on the 9/11 calls that have been released.

Initially answering with brisk professionalism - even gruff efficiency, they were efficient to the point of being abrupt:

*“I’ve got to answer more calls”* a fire dispatcher told a distressed man at 08:51am *“Can you speed it up?”*.

## And finally...the “forgotten” first responders

The responses start to become more empathetic as the prospects for rescue became more remote. Dispatchers started to spend more time on each call.

*“We are on the way, we are on the way. I am here with you” (9-1-1  
Dispatcher)*

## And finally...the “forgotten” first responders

Many years after 9/11, Fire Department dispatcher John still lives with the voices.

*"Sometimes at night you hear stuff," he said. "You hear voices ... you know, calling for help."*

## And finally...the “forgotten” first responders

Overworked, overwhelmed, they were thrust into situations for which no training could prepare them. Yet they kept picking up the phones, improvising answers even when they were exasperated, even when they were in the dark about evacuation orders that had been issued by fire and police commanders.

Helplessness increasingly defined their predicament, and it showed in some of their conversations.

*“I wish I knew what to tell you – I am so sorry” (9-1-1 Dispatcher)*

## **And finally...the “forgotten” first responders**

Recordings of 9-1-1 dispatchers trying to calm the thousands of distressed callers are hard to listen to.

On some, the dispatcher is on the line with someone in one of the Towers when they die.

Some die slowly from probable smoke inhalation - their response becoming slower, until there are no more words and just empty air at the end of the line. On other calls, you hear the fear in their voices, then rumbling start as the Tower collapses, and the call drops out.

## And finally...the “forgotten” first responders

The calls from civilians kept coming as did the radio transmissions from the emergency units at the scene.

Brief silences for the dispatchers were broken by frantic calls. But perhaps some of the most difficult were the ones that crackled in after the towers had fallen:

*"Mayday! Mayday! One of the towers has collapsed! Mayday! I'm trapped in the rubble."*

Many of these calls were from firefighters who had survived the initial collapse of the tower - but were never found in time.



## One final message...

The impact from 9/11 is devastating and it is ongoing. A new generation now think of 9/11 as something that happened in the past. But for the responders, it still feels like yesterday

So I think it's fitting to end this presentation with one final message from the responders.

*“Don't forget about us....” (Male firefighter)*

## e-book

Apple iBook

OR

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# QUESTIONS?