

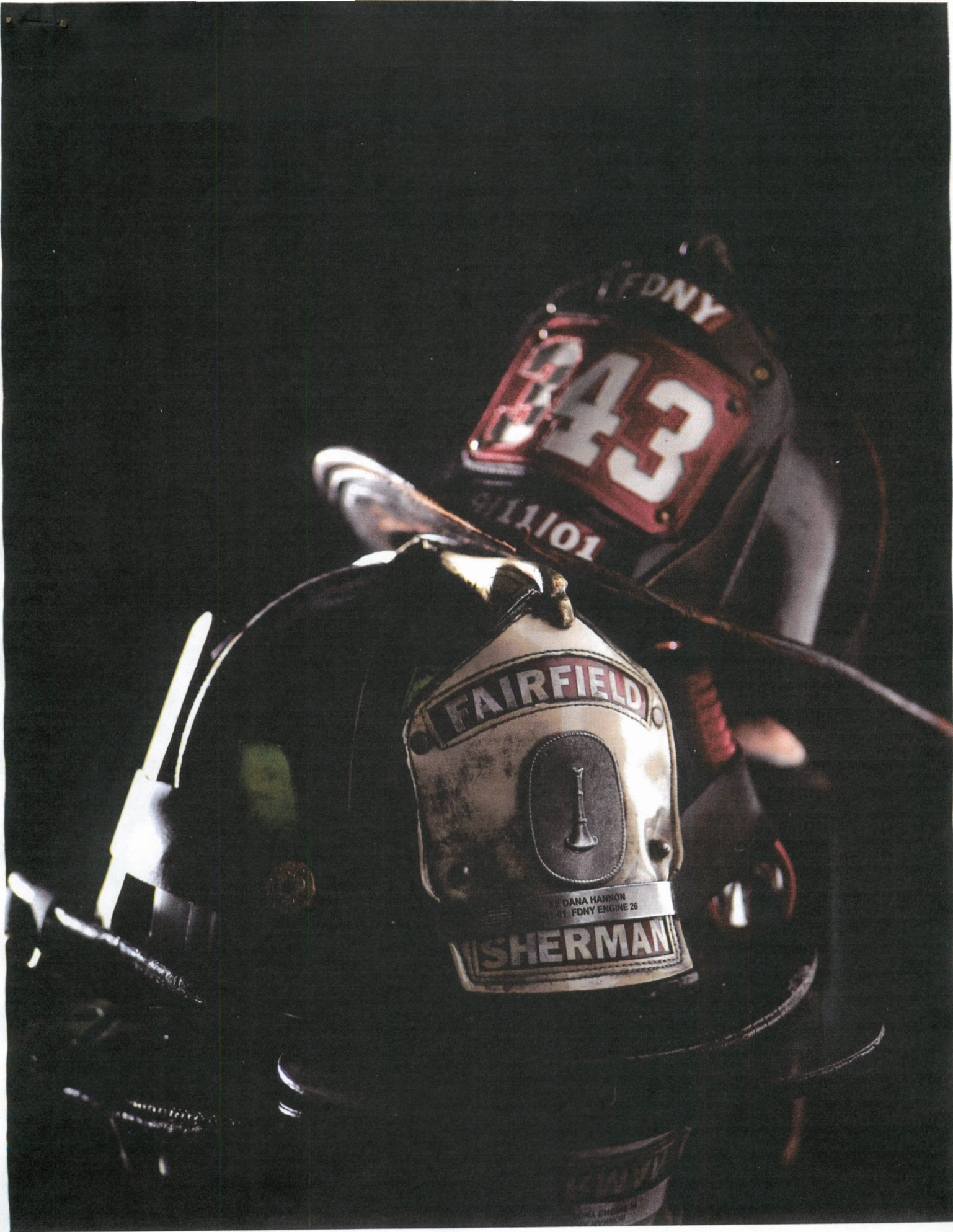
# *fairfield*

MAGAZINE

Autumn Evenings  
cup of tea,  
glass of wine,  
family activity,  
moment of reflection

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# Where Were You on September 11?

## Five Years Later, Fairfielders Look Back on the Day that Changed the World

written by Lynn Prowitt-Smith

photography by Peter Baker

**Maria Valente** and her husband Robert Perillo strapped their newborn into a BabyBjörn that sunny, Tuesday morning and walked their three-year-old daughter to her first day of preschool, just a block from their Brooklyn Heights brownstone. They took pictures, said their goodbyes, and Robert left for his job in Manhattan, while Valente made her way to the supermarket.

**Brian Vincelette** ascended the subway stairs at Fulton Street on his way to his office at 4 World Trade Center. He felt a huge rush of air. When he reached the street, everyone was frozen, staring at one of the tallest buildings in the world, which looked "like someone had taken a knife and cut the building apart in segments, and fire was coming out of it." Minutes later, a second blast of air knocked him down and fire flashed through the air overhead.

**Dennis Rothe** was sitting at his desk on the ninety-fifth floor of the south tower when he saw a fireball flash across the window and felt a sudden blast of heat on his face. Thinking that a bomb had gone off in his building, he headed for the door. "I was always taught that if there's fire, don't take the elevator, so I started down the stairs."

*it has been five years* since terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center. The attackers took close to 3,000 lives that day, and repercussions were felt across the country and around the globe. Connecticut lost more than 60 residents, most of whom commuted into the city to jobs at the Twin Towers. Three were from Fairfield.

In the time that's passed, we've mourned those that are gone. We've watched the news as al-Qaeda conspirators have been unearthed, questioned and even tried in our justice system. We are now accustomed to taking off our shoes at airport security checkpoints. We are appalled, but no longer surprised by the daily atrocities in Iraq. Some of us have traveled to Ground Zero to see the devastation up close. Memorials have been built, tributes written, web sites created. Books and DVDs on the subject abound. President Bush, Governor George Pataki and then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani put their names on a CD of patriotic music titled *God Bless America!* In April 2005, Universal Pictures released *United 93*, a reenactment of what transpired on the one plane that never reached its target.

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Kenneth A. Flatto,  
First Selectman

Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* opened in August. Because time pushes us forward whether we are ready or not, we have moved on. But we are New York City's bedroom, and we could see the Towers' smoke from our shoreline. No one has to tell us "never forget."

### fairfield's finest

First Selectman Kenneth A. Flatto (who worked on the eighty-ninth floor in one of the Twin Towers during the 1980s) said he remembers noticing a change in people around town in the period right after 9/11. They were nicer to each other, drivers were more courteous, and they were looking for ways to help. "The most notable thing was that the fire department decided to respond immediately and go down to the site. I was very heartened to hear that a number of firefighters and police officers felt that they needed to try to help," says Flatto.

According to reports, about 70 Fairfield firefighters contributed to the recovery efforts after the attacks. After trying on September 11 to get into the City with three trucks, but having to turn back, then-Lieutenant Doug Chavenello and about 15 other firefighters hopped on a Metro-North train the next day with all their gear and headed down to Ground Zero.

"Did you see Planet of the Apes?" asks Chavenello, who's been with the fire department for 27 years and is now a captain and training director, as well as president of the Fairfield Firefighters Association. "You know how they end up on that beach with the Statue of Liberty all bombed out and burned, sticking up from the sand? And how that kind of gave you a spooky feeling? That's how you felt when you first saw the place. It's exactly what I picture New York City would look like if a nuclear bomb had gone off."

At Ground Zero, Chavenello and the other firefighters worked nonstop, one night catching some sleep in a stairwell, another night out in the rain. They would work for a few days and then head back to Fairfield to shower, rest and either do their shifts at home or go back to the site.

The risks endured by the rescue workers were substantial. Ground Zero has been described as the most dangerous workplace imaginable; a *New York Times* writer called it "a smoking heap of nearly



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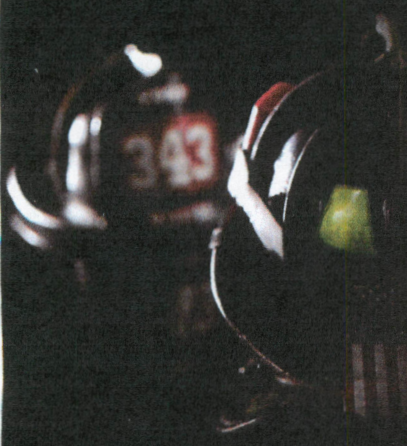


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*"When I thought about my kids' education, I always wished a place like this existed. And then we found Fraser-Woods, and I'm just amazed." – Parent*



# Concrete Memories



To show our compassion to loved ones left behind, to ensure that generations to come never forget, and to create spaces for reflection and honoring lives lost, we create memorials, monuments and parks. The tragedy of 9/11 has been memorialized like no other event in history, because it was like nothing that has ever happened before.

Unfortunately, the World Trade Center memorial complex at Ground Zero has been stalled repeatedly by controversy. The design is a product of a worldwide competition that drew more than 5,000 entries. But in May, the projected cost had


climbed to \$972 million, creating further conflict, and the president and chief executive of the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation resigned.

In June, however, the first large-scale 9/11 monument at Ground Zero was unveiled. Erected on the side of "10 House," the fire station across from the World Trade Center, it is a 56-foot-long bronze relief dedicated to the firefighters who worked in the recovery efforts after the attack. It is a panoramic sculpture depicting the flaming towers surrounded by firefighters in action, and it includes the names of the New York City Fire Department's 343 dead.

A year after 9/11, Connecticut dedicated its official memorial at Sherwood Island State Park in

two million tons of tangled steel and concrete that contained a brew of toxins, including asbestos, benzene, PCB's, and more than 400 chemicals." The immediate dangers were obvious, but some of the longer term ones are just now being understood. A year after 9/11, a study of more than 10,000 firefighters published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that about half of the 358 who developed "World Trade Center cough" remained on medical leave or light duty. According to an Associated Press report, three men died in 2005 of what their families and colleagues say were persistent respiratory illnesses caused by their extended work at Ground Zero.

Chavenello, who spent only a couple weeks working at Ground Zero, developed "a cough that just wouldn't stop." A doctor prescribed steroids to treat his lung irritation and that took care of the problem, he says. He wasn't the only one who was coughing, and the company decided to send all of those



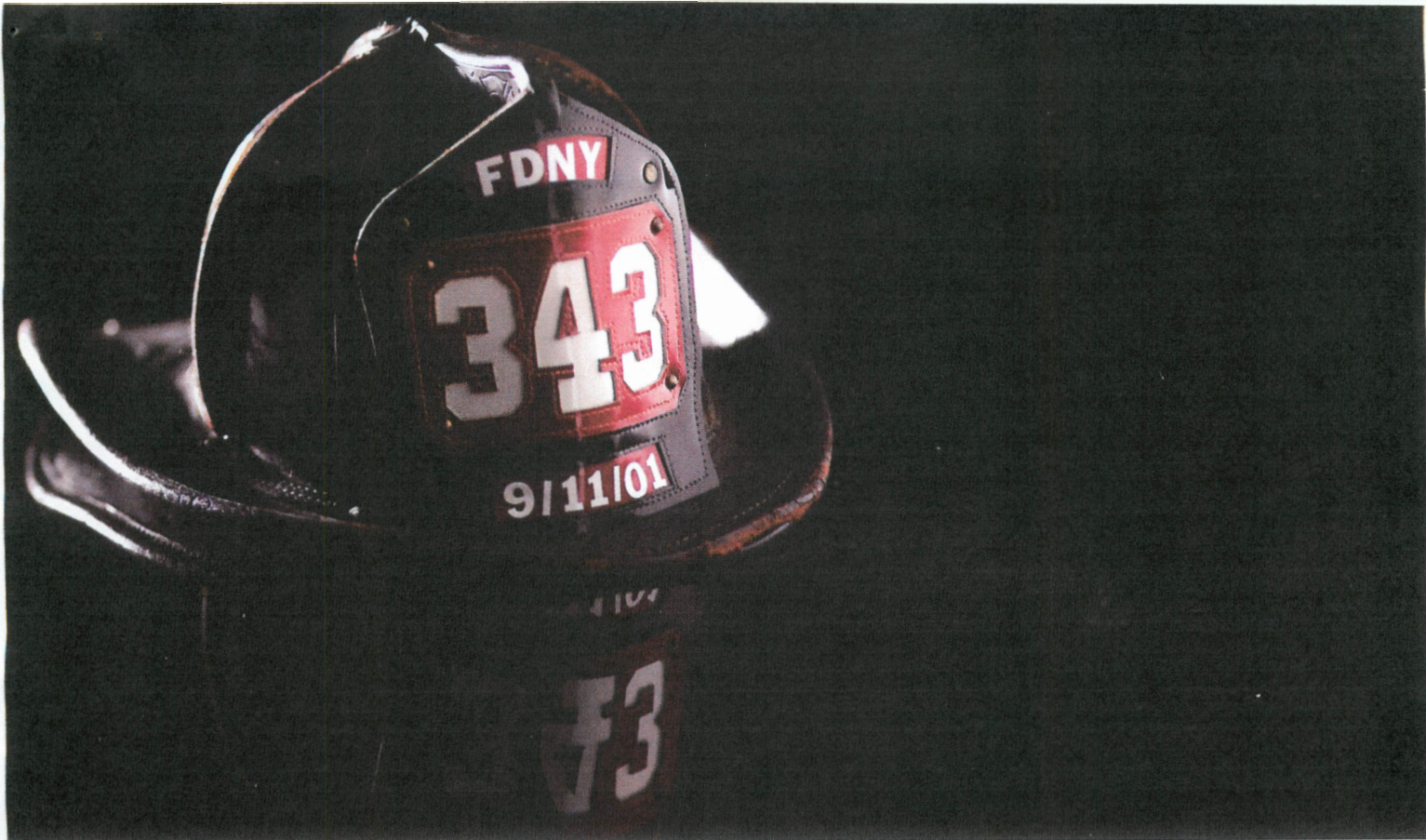
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“Someone told me a plane had hit the tower, and I remember at that moment knowing that this was act of terror. There was no way that on such a clear day a plane would hit accidentally.”

Maria Valente

“mommy, why is it snowing outside?”

When Valente came out of the supermarket the morning of September 11, she noticed white dust floating in the air. People were milling around the street on their cell phones, dialing and redialing. “Someone told me a plane had hit the tower, and I remember at that moment knowing that this was act of terror. There was no way that on such a clear day a plane would hit accidentally,” says Valente. “I ran to the school to get my daughter.” The three-year-old didn’t notice anything amiss except to ask, “Mommy, why is it snowing outside?”

Valente could not reach her husband, and though he didn’t work downtown, she had no idea where he was and didn’t hear from him for three hours. “I was just thinking, ‘get out of danger, move as far away as you can,’ so of course I got in my car.” Valente tried to drive east toward Long Island where her brother lived, but traffic was at a standstill. “To this day, what freaks me out more than anything is the claustrophobia of it all. You could not move. We were trapped.” And in the days that followed, Valente wanted nothing more than to get out of New York. “It was awful just waking up to that horrible smell every morning and not begin able to get anywhere. I remember the first night going to sleep with all four of us in that bed and thinking ‘I hope we wake up in the morning.’”

They never did get out of Brooklyn. In the days and weeks that followed, Valente remembers looking at her five-week-old son and asking herself, “Is this child going to make it through this year? What is he breathing?” He was very ill that winter, and the rest of her family also had respiratory infections. “Everyone in the area had one ailment or another that I’m sure had to do with all the impurities in the air because of the fallout and because of the warm weather we had,” she says. Her son had to be hospitalized for 10 days when he was five months old for a nonspecific virus in addition to bronchitis and a fever that wouldn’t come down. “His pediatrician’s office was flooded with these types of cases,” she



The images accompanying this article are of Fairfield firefighter Brad Sherman's helmet and a 1950s FDNY helmet fitted with a shield memorializing the 343 fallen firefighters from 9/11. Sherman was one of the many local firefighters who helped out in the aftermath of 9/11. On his helmet, he has mounted the memorial bracelet of Dana Hannon, a friend of Sherman's and a firefighter who died at Ground Zero. Dana was a Bridgeport firefighter prior to joining Engine 36 of the Fire Department of New York. Dana had only been with the FDNY for eight months before 9/11. The FDNY 343 helmet is used in a memorial service held every year for local firefighters killed in the line of duty. Now this particular helmet resides in Sherman's office and serves as a reminder of his friend's ultimate sacrifice.

says. Her son recovered, but Valente was left with the feeling that they were all robbed of that period of "beautiful, blissful innocence, when you're in this state of awe over this new, perfect person in your life. What took its place was just this horrible fear."

The family moved out of Brooklyn to Fairfield not long after 9/11. They decided to buy a house in the beach area to be near town and the train (Robert still commutes) and also to have other young families close by. Does she feel safer now? "There is that feeling of comfort, even though you're only like 50 miles away from the city. Once you've experienced that kind of fear, though, I don't think you really feel safe anywhere. But here, you don't feel claustrophobic, you don't feel that 'oh my god, I cannot get out of here [feeling].'"

### guardian angel

For Terilyn Esse, the awe and joy of having a newborn was in fact what saved her from what could have been all-consuming grief and fear. She was eight months pregnant when she lost her husband, James Patrick, in 9/11. In the midst of her shock and sadness, her biggest concern was for her unborn baby. "I started therapy the week after Jim died," she says, "and one of the first things I said to my therapist was 'my baby inside of me has heard so much laughter and happiness, I don't want there to be crying and sadness for this last part.' I was really concerned about whether or not he would notice the difference, even inside of me."

When Jack was born six weeks after 9/11, Esse was very strict about going to therapy and tried to focus on her grief there. "When he went to bed, I'd cry but when he was awake, I really tried to be happy and smile and laugh. And it's not like I had to really try hard—I had this little baby. I was able to



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Terilyn Esse

"When I saw that building collapse, my heart sank. My brother-in-law looked at me and he was white as a ghost."

Danielle Rothe

go on because of that. If you can find those things to be thankful for, it makes the devastation manageable, and you don't just sink and drown."

Esse believes that Jim has been looking out for her and Jack since he died. "Absolutely, no doubt about it," she says. She feels that he "had everything to do with" her meeting her second husband, Todd Esse. "My husband Todd is everything Jim would have wanted for Jack and me. It wasn't luck, let me put it that way."

Have there been any unusual signs from Jim? "Well, people think you're weird when you say things like this, but I was listening to a CD in my old house on Mill Plain Road and you know that song [she sings] 'I want to thank you for giving me the best days of my life'? I was blow drying my hair and I turned the dryer off and said to 20-month-old Jack, 'That's the song Daddy used to sing to me.' And then I pressed rewind and the whole song played over again. Right when the song was over—it's number five or six on the CD—the player stopped. It wasn't the power, there was nothing wrong. My CD player just shut off. And I was just, you know, 'Oh Jack, Daddy's here!'"

living with the "what if..."

After Dennis Rothe (pronounced Roady) left his ninety-fifth floor office, he walked down some 30 flights before stopping in a sky lobby and calling his wife Danielle, who was home in Fairfield with their two children. "I said 'Something happened, my knees are shaking, and I'm heading down to the basement.' She said 'I think a plane hit.'" A few minutes later, phone service went down. In the stairwell, Rothe felt the building shake, but the lights stayed on.

Because the call was rushed, Rothe had not mentioned to his wife that he had already descended to well below the ninety-fifth floor. She assumed he had called from his desk. Family had arrived at the Rothe's house to be with Danielle, who was watching everything on television. "When I saw that building collapse, my heart sank," she says. "My brother-in-law looked at me and he was white as a ghost. I handed my four-month-old to my sister and I got up and started walking circles around my house."

Rothe meanwhile had made it down to somewhere around the fiftieth floor when an older woman he was walking with began to feel weak. He and three others ended up carrying the woman all the way down to street level. "We kept asking her if she needed to stop and rest, but she just said 'no, let's keep going.' She was very religious and kept praying the whole way down."

Rothe caught the last train out of Grand Central, borrowed a cell phone from someone on the train, and was able to call Danielle at about 11:45 a.m. She says, "I was on the other line and I clicked over, and it was him." She was already crying, but the tears quickly shifted from grief-laden to joyful.

In the aftermath, it wasn't Dennis but Danielle who couldn't shake the events. Dennis, who was isolated in the stairwell all that time, didn't grasp the magnitude of what had happened until he got home and saw it all on television. Danielle, who found out she was pregnant a week later, was haunted by it. "I wasn't sleeping at all. I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that if I had lost him, he would never have known about the baby. I had a tough time during my pregnancy. I just kept thinking, what if...?"

He continued to commute into the city to Rockefeller Center until 2004, but now Dennis's company is in Norwalk. Danielle, who's expecting a fourth child as we go to press, says the move is the best thing that's ever happened to them.



## reunion at the clock tower

Brian Vincelette went in late that Tuesday so he could ride the train with his wife and her business partner. He came up from the subway and saw the smoke and the people trying to escape from the towers. "My initial reaction was 'I've got to get out of here.' It was all kind of in slow motion. I was looking at people running down the street. I heard someone say a missile hit the second building. I ran into the subway tunnel, and I remember getting on the train and hearing the conductor say 'this is the last train, get everybody on,' and pulling people onto the train."

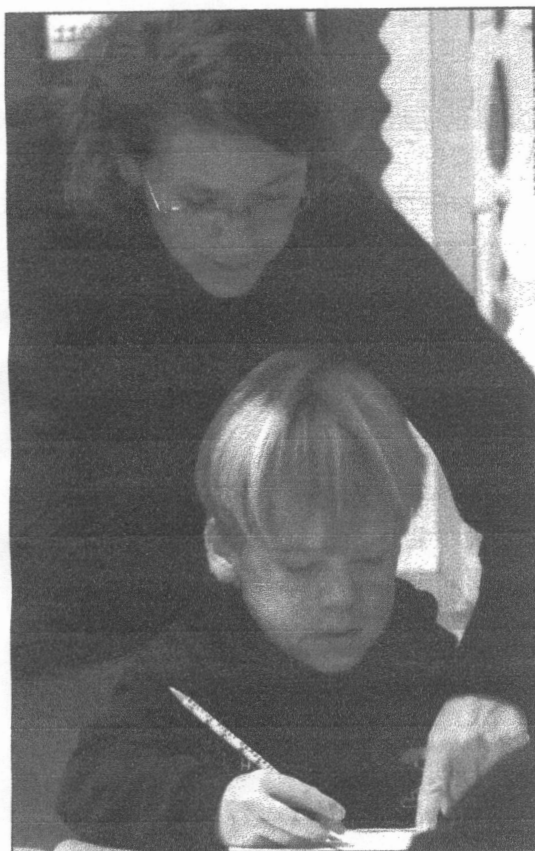
"When I got to Grand Central, it was surreal; everybody was in a state of shock. My wife and I had a standard meeting place under the clock tower, and it hadn't been that long since we'd commuted together every day. When we went home at night, our deal was that if you got on the train and it was about to leave and one or the other of us wasn't on it, you just got off the train and we'd meet at the clock tower. Then we would usually go to dinner and catch the next train. That day, I just knew she would be there. I couldn't reach her by cell phone, but I did reach my parents. While I was on the phone with them, I saw my wife coming toward me."

The first tower fell on the eight-story building where Vincelette worked. It pushed the entire building underground. Miraculously, his company lost only one person. Three weeks later, his firm relocated to mid-town, and a year later, they moved to Wall Street.

"This was around the time when they were raising the level of the terrorism threat," he says. "My wife went out and bought me a standard issue gas mask, which I kept in my briefcase. I also had iodine

"My wife went out and bought me a standard issue gas mask, which I kept in my briefcase. I also had iodine tablets, which a colleague was giving out at work—his wife had bought them. I was nervous taking the subway during those high alerts. I'm glad I'm not doing it any more."

Brian Vincelette



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tablets, which a colleague was giving out at work—his wife had bought them. I was nervous taking the subway during those high alerts. I'm glad I'm not doing it anymore." The couple now works together out of their home in Easton, where they moved from Fairfield two years ago. Coincidentally, like the Rothes, the Vincelettes discovered Amy was pregnant with their first child a week after 9/11, and today they have a four-year-old child and twin one-year-olds.

### the legacy

The people who shared their stories for this article were all asked if they thought 9/11 changed them. Their answers had a common theme: fear. Generations before us who experienced wars and occupations knew what it was to live with fear. But until 9/11, many of us were blissfully ignorant and secure. September 11 was a wake-up call on the grandest of scales, and we will never be the same.

"I used to be one of these people who liked to have a 5- and 10-year plan," says Valente. "But I just don't do that any more. And I don't think that's reckless of me or me being a bad parent—you know the saying, man makes plans and God laughs. It's such a sad reality to see how fragile life is and how everything can be taken away from you in just a second. It leaves you feeling so vulnerable that it shakes you to the core. It really did change us." ■