

TOWER STORIES: An Oral History of 9/11

By Damon DiMarco

FOREWORD

by Thomas Kean, Chairman of the 9/11 Commission

IT IS difficult to remember that day, but we must. Time has its way of dulling the sharp edge of memory. Once the edge has sufficiently blurred, the distorting colors of apocrypha swirl in, smearing the true images of what we once saw and creating a fable. A myth. By whatever name you call it, the picture is false, yet people will believe it. In later years, they will have no choice since a myth is better than nothing.

This book is unique for several reasons, not the least of which is that it allows our American people to speak for themselves regarding the terrorist attacks of September 11th. The events of that day are arguably some of the most traumatic to occur on American soil. There is ample evidence to support the need for a record such as this.

After the Great Depression had ravaged the United States through the early part of the 20th century, President Roosevelt realized that America needed more than an economic kick start; it needed cultural inspiration, as well. He assigned writers and journalists through the Federal Writer's Project to document the experiences of common people

living through uncommon circumstances. Roosevelt knew that a culture which cannot remember its past trials and transgressions will doom itself to repeat them.

The memory of slavery was also fast slipping from the American consciousness. In some ways this was a sign of progress; in other ways it was potentially dangerous. The FWP documented the recollections of thousands of former slaves in what would later become the Slave Narrative Collection. Nearly a hundred years later, these narratives are still performed around the country as theatrical events; assigned as required reading for university courses; read for self-edification by curious citizens. They are a part of our cultural body of evidence against what was, and an inspiration toward a brighter future for what might be. Some of our greatest works of literature were born of this need to bear witness. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited*. Studs Terkel's *The Good War*.

I'm proud and grateful to see this legacy continued.

What you are about to experience is not media spin, a five-second sound bite, or a coldly recycling film reel. It is a living time capsule of our nation's humanity. The interviews contained in this book are seminal to our American history. They were conducted immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center, before time had been granted a chance to blur the details. Reading these stories, you get the sense that there was just enough time between the Towers' collapse and the click of the recorder for people to catch their breaths and plant their feet on firm ground. Then they

began to speak—directly and candidly. They spoke from their hearts, and I can't believe they gave a single notion toward the idea that their words would be preserved forever. It was too confusing and painful a time to fumble with the weight of such ideas. Truth rings out in every word.

I hope this book remains in print for a very long time to come because everyone should read it. Our children should read it. With regard to 9/11, we—as a people—cannot allow a myth to take root. We must ground ourselves in the reality of our pain if we have any hope of moving forward. And move forward we must.

One of the contributors to this book calls 9/11 “a Kennedy moment . . . Everyone knows where they were when John Lennon was killed. Everyone knows where they were when the Space Shuttle blew. It's a Kennedy moment. A Pearl Harbor moment.”What a valid observation. Yes, it is common for human beings to remember sorrow, difficulty, pain, and loss. But only to inspire us toward higher goals and better times.

And so I invite you this instant to clear your mind and think back for a moment. Where were you that day?

. . . watching the video clips spool over and over again on the television . . . listening to your car radio while driving to work . . . waking up to a household exploding with confusion and chaos . . . calling friends, calling family . . . inside the Towers . . . outside

the Towers . . . on the streets of New York City, or halfway across the world, wondering where your loved ones were. Wondering. Just wondering.

You were scared. You were angry. You were vulnerable. We all were. But after that initial shock passed, what did you do? Perhaps the most important message recorded in *Tower Stories* is written between the lines:

You made turkey sandwiches for rescue workers rushing down to Ground Zero . . . you donated goods . . . you sent money to relief charities . . . you held a perfect stranger while she cried . . . you walked the streets of Manhattan, looking for someplace, anyplace to help . . . you gathered together in mourning. You prayed. You hung on. You went back to work. You picked up the pieces.

And maybe, like me, you made eye contact with people you didn't know on the streets where you live and nodded. Only this time, as our glances met, a new door was opened between us and we were able to share in a quiet secret that everyone suddenly knew—that we are all, in our own way, survivors.

Move forward we must. For we are Americans. This is our story. ■

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