

Called to Serve: The Enduring Legacy of 9/11

Megan Jones and Meghan Kolbusch

They were kissed goodbye as they always were, by parents who were off to serve their city. For many children of first responders, this was the typical routine. However, on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, everything after those signs of affection would be anything but normal.

While September 11 is often referred to as “the day the world changed,” the children of New York’s first responders would have to navigate that changed world without a parent or with one significantly changed by the attacks. Their childhoods would be marked by numerous ceremonies and anniversaries and regularly hearing the word “hero” to describe their parents. While the world saw their parents as heroes, these children pictured the parent who tucked them in at night, coached their sports teams, took them on vacation, and comforted them when they were frightened or sad. As the years passed, the children of 2001 became adults, gaining a greater understanding of the extraordinary bravery and commitment to service that their parents and so many others showed that day. Inspired by this, many children of 9/11 first responders decided that while that one day altered so much, they wanted to respond to the changed world as their parents had responded to the attacks—through service.

They Weren’t the First, They Won’t Be the Last

On a crisp September morning in 2001, Bridget Gormley watched as one by one, her fifth-grade classmates in Marine Park, Brooklyn, were picked up from school. By the end of the day, she was one of only a handful of students left, and she wondered why everyone was speaking in hushed

tones and exchanging worried glances. She would learn the answer when her mother picked her up—her father, William “Billy” Gormley, a New York City firefighter with Engine 310/Ladder 174, was responding to the World Trade Center.



Bridget and her father, William Gormley.

Her father’s story would slowly unfold over the days, months, and years following the attacks. Gormley arrived at the World Trade Center shortly after the collapse of the Twin Towers. Over the next few months, he assisted in the rescue and recovery efforts at Ground Zero, unknowingly breathing the toxic dust that lingered in the air. He rarely talked about 9/11 and his experience at Ground Zero with Bridget or her brothers, leaving them with many questions; but of one thing she is

certain—“despite the emotional and physical scars that the attacks and his time down at the site left on him and his fellow first responders, I know my dad would have done it all over again.”¹ Bridget felt lucky that her father made it home safely that day, however, the consequences of his efforts wouldn’t be revealed for years to come. In 2016, Gormley was diagnosed with bladder cancer. He died six months later, in June 2017, his cancer directly linked to exposure to toxic chemicals present at Ground Zero. “After my father died, there’s a feeling that [it’s] almost as if he died on 9/11, too. It just took 17 years to kill him.”²

On the day of her father’s funeral, Bridget learned that another Ladder 174 firefighter had died that day, leading her on a mission to learn more about the conditions at Ground Zero and what her father could never bring himself to tell his family. In searching for answers, she discovered that tens of thousands of individuals shared her father’s fate—men and women who had been in lower Manhattan breathing in toxins, who continue to suffer from or have died from related illnesses. “Once the magnitude and severity of the situation became apparent, I began to document it.”³ This was a defining moment in her life—a way to connect with her father and honor his legacy by advocating for change.

Bridget became a staunch advocate for the 9/11 community, lobbying in New York and Washington, D.C., for further coverage and compensation on behalf of those continuing to suffer from 9/11-related health effects. That was only the beginning. With the help of executive producer Steve Buscemi, a former member of the FDNY who also volunteered at Ground Zero after 9/11, Bridget directed a documentary film titled *Dust: The Lingering Legacy of 9/11*, which tells the story of those continuing to suffer from 9/11-related illnesses. Bridget hopes that her work will help others understand the lasting consequences of 9/11. “I want people to know people are still dying.... Our fathers aren’t here to speak for themselves now, so we pick up the torch and carry it on. They weren’t the first, they won’t be the last.”

The Call to Serve, a Generation Apart

Patrick “Pat” McGee Jr. remembers people telling him, “You know, your father’s a hero,” but as a two-year-old, he did not understand what they meant.

He attended ceremonies and knew his father had done something special, but it wouldn’t be until many years later that he would learn about his father’s heroic actions on September 11, 2001, and the impact it would have years later.



Officer McGee and children.

Pat’s father, Patrick “Paddy” McGee, knew he wanted to be an NYPD officer when his sister Regina joined the NYPD in 1980 and later moved to the elite Emergency Services Unit (ESU) in 1996. Paddy recalls, “She was the trailblazer, and I was following on her coattails”⁴ joining the NYPD in 1984 and later Emergency Service Squad 1, the squad he was assigned to on September 11. Upon witnessing the start of the attacks on television while getting ready for work, Paddy kissed his wife and kids goodbye, packed a few days’ worth of clothing, and rushed to headquarters. He was dispatched to the World Trade Center after the North Tower collapsed and immediately embarked on a rescue search operation that lasted into the evening. Late that night when he, along with fellow ESU police officer Scott Strauss and civilian paramedic Chuck Sereika, learned that two people were trapped in the debris—there was new hope that there were, in fact, survivors. The men began the dangerous process of rescuing trapped Port Authority Department Police (PAPD) Officer Will Jimeno and Sergeant John McLoughlin, by jumping into the debris pile and crawling down 30 feet into a fiery cavern. Paddy recalls making peace with his God and asking them to watch over his wife and kids, who were two and four at the time.⁵ It would take three hours to free Jimeno before they could reach McLoughlin, who was rescued in the early morning hours of September 12.

On a cold January morning in 2023, McLoughlin, Jimeno, and McGee reunited at the 9/11 Memorial Museum to present badge number 1117 to freshly minted PAPD Officer Pat McGee Jr. This had never been Pat's plan—he thought he would be working in the sports industry after college, not graduating from the PAPD Academy. However, as time moved forward, Pat had decided that he wanted to pursue a career in public service like his father and his aunt Regina. Sadly, days before his graduation, his aunt died from 9/11-related cancer linked to her volunteer work at Ground Zero. Pat credits the sacrifices his father, aunt, and so many others made on 9/11 with his decision to pursue a career in public service. "[Will Jimeno] wore shield number 1117 and now that I'm a member of the Port Authority Police Department, I have the honor of wearing that badge ... and wearing this badge every day is very special to me."⁶



Officer Ray Suarez participating in a rescue on 9/11.

"I Did it Because of Him."

On September 11, 2001, NYPD Officer Ramon "Ray" Suarez was working his post with Transit District 4 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan when he and his partner, Mark Ellis, learned

that two planes had struck the Twin Towers. The partners commandeered a taxi and sped toward the World Trade Center to respond. Suarez ran into North Tower several times, rescuing people from the smoke-filled building. He and his partner saved many lives including a seven-months-pregnant woman. On Suarez's third trip inside the North Tower, he did not return. He and Ellis were killed in the line of duty.

"I am grateful for having him in my life for the years that I had him," said Suarez's wife Carmen. She wanted their daughter, Jillian, to know that Ray had not died in vain. "There are families out there who will have their children for a very long time because my husband gave his life to save others."⁷

For the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Jillian Suarez shared her story for a youth program at WNYC, New York City's public radio station. She concluded the piece stating, "Telling you my story is enough—so I did it, I told you and I didn't cry, well, in front of you. For WNYC, I'm Rookie Reporter Jillian Suarez." The Radio Rookies project, in partnership with the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, provided an opportunity for Jillian to have conversations with her mother about her dad, Ray, their grief, and their hopes for the future. In 2018, Jillian graduated from the Police Academy, becoming an NYPD officer like her father. "I did it because of him. I wanted to follow in his footsteps."⁸ While on patrol, she wears shield number 12671, the same shield her father wore. "He always knew that his daughter was going to grow up to be someone so exceptional and beautiful," Carmen said.⁹

Lesson Plan (Grades 5-8)

1. Tell students that they will be listening to the story of Bill Spade, a retired FDNY firefighter who responded to the World Trade Center on 9/11, and his son, John, who was only a few months old on the day of the attacks.
2. Play the video clips (both videos are available with captions, Spanish subtitles, ASL interpretation, and an Audio description):
 - a. Bill Spade: www.911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/webinar-stories/webinars/bill-spade-0.
 - b. John Spade: www.911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/webinar-stories/webinars/john-spade.




Dust: The Lingering Legacy of 9/11 Premiere.

3. As they listen to Bill and John's stories, ask students to consider the following questions:
 - a. How did Bill hear about the attacks at the World Trade Center? Describe the steps he took in his response.
 - b. How did John first learn about his father's 9/11 story? What does he remember from that experience?
 - c. How does hearing from John, a young person with no memory of 9/11, help highlight the importance of commemorating the attacks?
4. Hold a class discussion based on student responses.
5. Share John's blog post, "Son of 9/11 Survivor Reflects on Ambassador Program," www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/son-911-survivor-reflects-ambassador-program
6. Conclude the activity by asking students to think about how Bill and John continue to remember 9/11 and think of ways they can honor the victims of the attacks.

Lesson Plan (Grades 9-12)

1. Tell students that they will be listening to the story of Bridget Gormley, a 9/11 health advocate whose father, an FDNY firefighter, responded to the attacks on the World Trade

- Center and later died from 9/11-related cancer.
2. Play the video clip www.911memorial.org/webinars/bridget-gormley. (The video is available with captions, Spanish subtitles, ASL interpretation, and an Audio Description.)
3. As they listen to Bridget's story, ask students to respond to the following questions:
 - a. How does Bridget describe what's left of the World Trade Center when she sees it for the first time?
 - b. According to Bridget, what were some characteristics that made her father a hero? How did that influence her work as an advocate?
 - c. Bridget says "9/11 didn't end on 9/11" for her. In what ways does 9/11 still affect survivors and younger generations today?
4. Conclude the activity by asking students to think about how their generation can advocate for those impacted by 9/11 and the issues that the world faces today, and why is it important that they do so.

For more first-person stories from first responders, survivors, family members, and witnesses of the attacks, visit the Digital Learning Experience Archives at www.911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/DLE-archives 

Notes

1. Caitlin Best, "Rescue & Recovery: In Their Own Voices with Bridget Gormley," Memo Blog (Aug. 29, 2022), www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/rescue-recovery-their-own-voices-bridget-gormley
2. Doree Lewak, "9/11 Hero's Daughter Wants to Raise Awareness for Linked Cancer Deaths," *New York Post* (Sept. 8, 2018), <https://nypost.com/2018/09/08/9-11-heros-daughter-wants-to-raise-awareness-for-linked-cancer-deaths>
3. Best, "Rescue & Recovery."
4. *Anniversary Digital Learning Experience 2023*, directed by Ryan Savini (Spot Creative, Inc., 2023), www.911memorial.org/dle.
5. *Anniversary Digital Learning Experience 2023*.
6. *Anniversary Digital Learning Experience 2023*.
7. 9/11 Memorial Staff, "'I See So Much of Him In You': Mother Shares Stories of Fallen NYPD Officer Husband

with Daughter," Memo Blog, <https://www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/i-see-so-much-him-you-mother-shares-stories-fallen-nypd-officer-husband-daughter>

8. 9/11 Memorial Staff, "'I See So Much of Him In You.'"
9. 9/11 Memorial Staff, "'I See So Much of Him In You.'"



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9/11 Memorial & Museum Anniversary Digital Learning Experience

9/11 MEMORIAL & MUSEUM
THE 9/11 ANNIVERSARY
**DIGITAL LEARNING
EXPERIENCE**

Join students and teachers from around the world to commemorate the 22nd anniversary of 9/11 by registering for the 9/11 Memorial & Museum's free Anniversary Digital Learning Experience. In the 30-minute film, individuals, including the McGees, share their extraordinary stories. Ada Rosario Dolch was principal of a high school located next to the World Trade Center. On 9/11, she safely evacuated her students at the same time her sister, Wendy Wakeford, was at work in the North Tower. Dr. Kerry Kelly is a retired FDNY Chief Medical Officer who survived the collapse of the Twin Towers and became an advocate for those suffering from 9/11-related illnesses. Her husband, Dan Jost, was a NYC teacher responsible for his students while not knowing what his wife was facing at Ground Zero.

The program will be available on-demand as of Monday, September 11, 2023. On that day, Education staff will answer student questions through an exclusive live chat. Teaching guides will be available in advance of the program. Register at: www.911memorial.org/DLE



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