

# GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

## 9/11: PROFESSIONAL HELPERS RESPOND

By Alex Gitterman, Ph.D. and Andrew Malekoff, MSW

During the past six months, several artists joined together to produce a soft cover book entitled *9/11: Artists Respond*. It is a collection of art, sequenced to showcase the artists' responses to "the terror that befell the world" on September 11, 2001. One nine-frame piece entitled "Please Stand By..." features a girl of about eight years old watching cartoons on television. By the third and fourth frames, the image on the screen changes to a live feed of the Twin Towers ablaze. As the little girl stands transfixed, stuffed animal in hand and her face less than twelve inches from the screen, the commentator announces, "We interrupt this program to take you live..." the little girl turns away and calls, "Mommy..." The next three frames begin with her mother dropping a basket of laundry. Then, with her face contorted in anguish, she embraces her daughter to shield her from the unrelenting images. The final frame is a close up of the little girl asking, "Mommy, when are the cartoons gonna come back on?"

Capturing the spirit of *Artists Respond* in this special issue of *Reflections*, human service workers respond. We, the editors, a social work professor (Alex) and an agency administrator and practitioner (Andy), both living within twenty-five miles of the epicenter of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, invited a survivor and human services professionals to share personal or professional experiences. We wanted to add the professional helper voice to a growing archive of personal stories in the aftermath of the

September 11, 2001 attack on the United States. We asked for narratives from persons who experienced and responded to those affected by the attacks on New York City, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania.

In our call for papers, we suggested several narratives: on direct contact with survivors and those who have lost loved ones, colleagues, and friends; work with businesses that have been devastated by the attacks; interventions with schools, students, and faculty; responses by human services professionals to the disaster and to caring for their own caregivers; trauma and bereavement work with people from children to elders; participation in community efforts such as vigils, prayer services, and other commemorative activities; and interactions with firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, medical personnel, and others.

As we write, these suggestions seem to casually fall to the page, yet we are acutely aware that this literary project is different from all of the others we have tackled over the years. "Things have changed forever" has become a familiar refrain since 9/11. Some would say that the expression has reached cliché status. But the visual images (over and over) of the planes crashing into the first and second Tower and into the Pentagon, people leaping to their death, and policemen and firemen running into the crumbling buildings pierced a lasting imprint in our memories. These images continue to haunt us and will be part of our national psyche forever. While

still trying to comprehend the enormity of the loss, our citizens and political leaders responded with great courage and resolve. And so did our profession! Little in our professional education has prepared us for unfathomable tragedies. Yet, we have responded in very powerful ways, with commitment and competence. This special issue attempts to capture our professional zeal and skill.

In this special issue we have included narratives written by authors all across the United States. Some of the places they take us to are the 90th floor of Tower 2; a walk along the streets of the South Bronx; the Staten Island Red Cross office; a small town in Pennsylvania; public schools and colleges in Long Island, New York City, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin; a memorial service at the

World Trade Center; a boat ride on the Hudson River; a trip to the Family Assistance Center at Pier 94 where thousands of surviving family members first provided DNA evidence and ultimately collected urns with ashes from the World Trade Center; a blood drive at a mosque; a funeral service for a captain in the New York Fire Department; an East Harlem after-school program; an elementary school in Oklahoma City; and social work schools' classrooms.

We meet children of all ages who lost parents; people who lost spouses, partners, colleagues, and friends; young and old, civilians and rescue workers suffering trauma; employees who lost their livelihoods; men and women who cannot cry, and those who cannot stop crying. We read about the tyranny of imagination and zero degrees of separation;



Photo courtesy of ABC News

and a beguiling question, "Who debriefs the common person?"

Who debriefs the common person? It occurs to us that this question speaks beyond 9/11 to the enormity and impact of trauma and loss on the world stage. The attack on Pearl Harbor, the bombing in Oklahoma, and the assassination of JFK are the kind of world-shattering events and monumental turning points, frozen moments in time that stopped Americans in their tracks long enough for each experience to be transformed into a personal story, a narrative that we tell over and over when asked "Where were you when?" September 11, 2001, is one of those frozen moments, yet different. It taps a vulnerability that we have not known, or been aware of, as universally as we now do. And if we did, we never slowed down long enough to allow ourselves to know.

For many weeks after September 11th, walking the streets of New York was an eerie adventure. The energy of the city seemed lost, faces on the subway were vacant, and the buzz was gone. Amid the silence, people started to see one another and connect in ways we have not known on such a grand scale. We joined together in our loss and pain, reached out to strangers like never before, and banded together, determined not merely to survive but to thrive. There are signs of a return to "normal" as the honeymoon of goodwill fades. Yet, we cannot afford to abandon awareness of both the frozen moment that September 11 has become and the aftermath. In this special issue of *Reflections*, we present personal stories of professional helping that we hope will help us to remember what we lost and what we have become.

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