

# REFLECTIONS ABOUT SHADOW VICTIMS OF 911

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*This narrative chronicles the events which led to the development of the nation's first organized student effort to provide financial resources and support for the shadow victims of the attacks on America: the 2,500 people who face both the trauma of memory and the challenge of newly acquired disabilities.*

There is a moment in each of our lives when time stands still. When the world around you and the individuals standing beside you cease to exist. No sound can be heard despite the continuous ringing of a phone or shouting from a great mass of people. Time stood still for me at 8:10 a.m. on September 11th, 2001. I wasn't standing on the streets of New York City nor beside the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Instead, I was inside an orthopedist's waiting room, pondering how to deliver a three-hour lecture while standing on a fractured ankle. Hobbling to the front desk, I turned to glance at the image captivating university students and the receptionist. Feeling perturbed at that moment, as no one afforded my temporarily disabled status special attention, my eyes fell upon the television screen. I am unsure how long I stared at the surreal vision before turning away, only to have the image of gaping holes in the World Trade Center Towers become a snapshot forever imprinted in my mind, forever in American history.

As the world watched the horrifying footage of America under attack, how, why and who served as repeated utterances. How could this happen in the United States? Why would anyone do this to innocent people? Who could possibly survive this tragedy? I, too, asked how, why, and who, yet my questions differed slightly. Within hours, I no longer wondered how this could happen in the United States; instead, I inquired, "How can I help my current undergraduate students to learn

from this senseless tragedy?" and "Why am I compelled to focus on the survivors?" These two queries led me to focus my attention towards one simple question: "Who will be the shadow victims of this tragedy?"

Standing before a class composed of bewildered, anxious students on September 12<sup>th</sup>, I posed the question aloud, "Who will be the shadow victims of this tragedy?" Responses included blue-collar workers, unborn children whose fathers were killed, siblings of the deceased, hostages on the planes, and the families of firefighters. All were possible victims who might be forgotten. Sadly, the shadow victims would be the population whom I had dedicated my work towards for the past ten years. But was it too early in the semester of this particular class, having met only once before, to expect my students to understand? Maybe it wasn't too early. I looked at my students and asked, "Would it be okay if I sat to teach this evening's course? When I place pressure on my ankle, the cast rubs. This is only a temporary disability. I know in six weeks, my ankle will have fully recovered. How does my temporary disability differ from the definition of developmental disability that we discussed last week?" Students glanced at the pages of their syllabus, searching for the definition of a developmental disability. Finally, a student read to the class the qualifying factors distinguishing a developmental disability from a temporary disability. The young woman sitting beside her then queried, "Would people in the World Trade

Center incident who become disabled be labeled developmentally disabled, even if they are over the age of 22?" My response, "No they will be labeled the shadow victims of 9/11."

Shadow victims of the September 11th tragic events are the estimated 2,500 individuals who face both the trauma of memory and the challenge of newly acquired disabilities, including paralysis, burns, and hearing loss. These lesser known victims and the lack of media attention directed towards them became the focus of our class that evening and a segment of each Wednesday night class for the remaining 12 weeks of the course. The World Trade Center tragedy afforded me the rare opportunity to utilize a national event to combine the philosophy of the Introduction to Developmental Disabilities course with a call for unification towards public service and civic involvement among college students.

Each semester, a component of the Introduction to Developmental Disabilities course centers on the formulation and execution of a community service project. Students receive no credit for their participation in designing or implementing the project; the pledge of community work serves as a mere introduction to the level of volunteerism and professional service necessary when one commits to the social work profession. The students in this fall 2001 class elected to focus their service project towards helping victims who became disabled from the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This narrative will chronicle the events that led to the development of the nation's first organized effort to raise societal awareness of the impact of disability on survivors and to provide financial resources and support for these shadow victims of the attacks.

The weeks following September 12<sup>th</sup> addressed educational and organizational frameworks for the students enrolled in the course, the majority of whom were non social work majors. Students possessed mini-

mal knowledge pertaining to the disability community and lacked familiarity with the nonprofit sector, two necessary components to raising societal awareness and monetary funds. The course was designed to enhance the students' understanding and knowledge of the unique issues impacting the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families. The course content is derived from the philosophy of humanization, an ideology based on the principles of individual worth and uniqueness and the concomitant rights of individuals with disabilities. The course places disability in a political, social, cultural, and economic context to increase awareness and understanding of the needs of and societal barriers impacting individuals with disabilities throughout their life cycle.

During the weeks following our national tragedy, students learned that people with disabilities comprise an estimated 48.9 million individuals or 19.4% of the nation's population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990; McNeil, 1993). Students recognized that every individual is susceptible to becoming temporarily or permanently disabled due to environmental and biomedical factors. Estimates suggest that one out of every three people will acquire a disability at some time during his or her life (NASW, 1994), a statistic that brings disability to the forefront as an emergent majority group. Disability may intrude suddenly and traumatically, as in the case of spinal cord injury following an accident, or appear slowly and subtly, as with the disabling effects of multiple sclerosis.

To understand the needs facing individuals who became disabled from the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, the course focused on the adjustment to a disability. Although the impact of a disability on an individual's life can create physical, psychological, social, vocational, and economic effects (Livneh, 1991), the type and severity of a disability are never the sole determinants of a person's ability to adjust (Robinson, West & Woodworth,

1995). The response to disability is dependent on several variables including environmental and social, in addition to the psychological characteristics of the respondent (Marinelli & Dell Orto, 1991). As a person struggles with a new and increased awareness of the impact of a physical or mental impairment and its accompanying stigma, he or she faces a readjustment or loss of past skills, knowledge, outlook, goals, dreams, and relationships. The loss/change process is a useful way of viewing the emotional states precipitated by the transition. Feelings and emotions vary in intensity, duration, and sequence, specifically when the onset is unexpected and occurs due to a violent and criminal act, such as a terrorist attack.

In order for students to truly understand the many unmet needs of individuals with disabilities, we examined the problems faced by New York City residents who were disabled prior to the World Trade Center attacks. Due to safety concerns, individuals who resided in downtown Manhattan were forbidden to return to their residences following the destruction of the towers. While many New York residents stayed with friends or family, several individuals with physical disabilities were unable to stay at relatives' apartments due to the inaccessibility of many New York buildings. Additionally, these individuals were also turned away from shelters and forced to stay at hotels they may have been unable to afford because the shelters or beds were also inaccessible. Personal assistants were denied access to various buildings or transportation routes, rendering many individuals with disabilities without personal care services such as toileting assistance, meal preparation, and medication disbursement. Food stamp cards ceased to work, leaving some individuals with disabilities without food. Federal agencies established hotlines that failed to list TTY/TTD numbers, preventing deaf individuals from obtaining services and information. Many companies lacked evacuation plans to assist

people with disabilities to safely exit buildings, forcing them to be left behind or separated from their mobility equipment. The problems were myriad since disaster relief efforts often fail to attend to the needs of the disability community. Course content examined such aforementioned societal barriers, which prevent individuals with disabilities from acquiring the same information and resources as the nondisabled.

With heightened awareness of the needs of the disability community, students pursued the formulation of a service project with enthusiasm and an infinite sense of wisdom and sensitivity. Students explored the following questions: What service project should be implemented to maximize resources and meet the greatest need for these survivors and their families? Should the project be limited to current students only or should former students be invited to participate? Should we form a student organization? What type of fundraiser did we want to develop? Whom should we target to solicit donations? What would be our mission? What agency would disburse the funds acquired? After several weeks of classroom and e-mail discussions, over two hundred of my current and former students assembled to form United for WTC Victims with Disabilities.

United for WTC Victims with Disabilities is a university sponsored student organization. As the faculty advisor, I attended numerous mandated meetings to learn how to transform our far-reaching vision into a successful student organization. We decided to pursue official status as "university sponsored," thus permitting the organization to fundraise on campus and to utilize trademark university logos and letterhead. Following the organization's incorporation, the majority of student members gathered daily over the course of a three-week period. During this time, students received an introduction to the nonprofit world. Topics addressed included adopting a philosophy and mission statement,

formalizing committee structures, developing of a strategic fundraising plan, and an examination of possible repositories for funds raised. We attended to each of the aforementioned tasks efficiently and expediently. The organization was able to move forward with minimal controversy, despite our large size. Our immediate progress was due to the establishment of a systematic approach for decision making, the adoption of rules for governance, and a clearly defined mission statement and short-term vision.

Our next step as an organization was to explore the continuum of unique fundraising activities proposed. We opted to create a "donation committee." The committee succeeded in acquiring gifts from various community vendors for 10,000 paper cutouts of hands, 25 banners, unlimited reams of paper, easels, organization signs, tape, and money boxes, thereby enabling us to implement the fundraiser "United We Sit and Stand." Donors receive a construction paper cutout of either a hand or wheelchair symbol in red, white, or blue for donations from \$1 to \$5. Donors are able to write a message to be sent to victims with disabilities. The hands, which spell messages of encouragement in sign language, and wheelchair cutouts are affixed to large banners and will be presented to victims currently in or recently discharged from rehabilitation centers in the New York City area.

In addition to individual donations, we sought corporate sponsors from companies currently employing people with disabilities, hoping that this would lead the way for businesses in New York to acknowledge how valuable employees with disabilities are. The "corporate committee" researched companies employing people with disabilities and sent letters congratulating them on valuing diversity in the workplace in honor of National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Companies wishing to donate \$100 received a small gold star; for \$500 they received a

larger gold star that was affixed to the banners. "Star companies" are an important part of the message to the victims with disabilities, many temporarily displaced from employment.

We are hopeful that the fundraiser will raise disability awareness and demonstrate social work's commitment to people with disabilities. At each fundraising event, flyers are disseminated describing the impact of disability on individuals and their families and listing countless ways that citizens can work to reduce the barriers to full societal integration and acceptance of people with disabilities. The flyers also portray the story of Abe Zelmanowitz, a nondisabled man, and Ed Beyea, a quadriplegic, friends who died side by side on the 27th Floor of Tower 1 of the World Trade Center. Mr. Zelmanowitz refused to leave Mr. Beyea, when it became apparent that the elevators were not operational. Mr. Beyea was unable to be transported without the use of his electric wheelchair. The fundraiser commemorates their friendship.

After careful consideration and much research, the members selected the Heightened Independence and Progress Center for Independent Living (HIPCIL) as the repository for funds raised. The "funds committee" established guidelines for monetary disbursements by the agency to people with newly acquired disabilities. HIPCIL is a nonprofit agency that has been assisting individuals with disabilities displaced from their homes due to the tragedy. This organization is the main conduit for resources and counseling for individuals who were disabled by the attacks. At present, we are continuing to raise monies to address the unmet financial needs of these individuals.

The media hype centered on the World Trade Center tragedy may have lessened and the images may begin to subside, but students' commitment to public service is renewed with an energy and level of determinism that en-

ables me to envision a truly integrated society for people with and without disabilities. The events of September 11, 2001, continue to have far-reaching effects on Americans and on the American way of life. For today's college students, this is their first experience not only of a tragedy of this magnitude but of one with such serious implications for their future. Members of United for WTC Victims with Disabilities have recently formulated a long-term vision for the future of the organization. It has been decided that the student organization will undergo a yearly name change to attend to the most recent national or international incident affording individuals the status of "disabled." Some disabilities, like a fractured ankle, will be temporary and have healed long ago; others will be life long or life ending.

My hope is that students recognize that their dedication and commitment to individuals with newly acquired disabilities through fundraising efforts and increasing awareness among the non-disabled achieve an important goal: the reduction of societal barriers. Obtaining funds helps to address the unmet needs for adaptive equipment or accessible transportation, the lack of which prevents a newly disabled individual from being independent. Heightened awareness of disability among persons who are non-disabled leads to a reduction in the negative stereotypes and perceptions of people with disabilities. Together, through awareness and financial assistance, there is the possibility that the breakdown of barriers can lead to a truly accessible and integrated society. Maybe then there will no longer be a need for the question: "Who will be the shadow victims of this tragedy?"

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