Recovering from a 9/11 Loss

An interview with Amy Warchola, a 7th grade social studies teacher in Queens, New York by Justin Sulsky.

On September 11, 2001, I was 16 and a junior in high school. That day I was taking my road test and I was with my brother. We first heard about a plane hitting the World Trade Center on the car radio. We went back to my school where my mom worked and started making calls to check on my dad’s status. My dad, Lt. Michael Warchola, worked for Engine 24 Ladder 5 in Greenwich Village, which was in very close proximity to the World Trade Center, so we knew he would have been involved in some way. I did not go back to school for the rest of the week as we kept calling hotlines for information. My parents were divorced at the time but we all kept calling to find out.

At one point I called and they mixed up my dad’s name with somebody who had been found so I briefly had good news, only to then discover the mistake. That was very difficult. On Friday, September 14, my uncle let us know that my dad was found with other firefighters from his company in the North Tower. I really do not know the specifics of what exactly he was doing when the towers went down. I don’t dwell on that aspect of it.

Within a week, there was a funeral arranged by my Uncle Denis in Middle Village, Queens. I remember driving there from upstate — we lived two hours north of the city at that point — and seeing hundreds of firefighters lining up to pay their respects. The image of all of those rescue workers waiting there, saluting is something I will never forget.

In my school, I was the only person who lost a family member on 9/11. I never met any other child who lost a parent while I was in high school. It was kind of a lonely situation. It was difficult because my school was very small and everyone knew each other’s families. I attended a Christian school and everyone definitely was supportive. Everybody knew I was the girl who lost her dad on 9/11 and they were lovely and nice. My principal came down for the funeral.

I really have not been involved in many organizations dedicated to victims’ families. We did a get a lot of offers so I do not remember if I said no to different things or if I did not hear about them, especially since we lived so far north from the city. We did go for about 10 months of counseling through the NYU bereavement center, and that was great. They agreed to meet us halfway between our home and Manhattan, which made things easier. They were very supportive and helpful. Aside for the counseling, I had a group of friends and went to church often so I had a lot of support. My mom and family were great at home as well.

Some of my current students know that my dad died on 9/11. Last year, 9/11 occurred on a school day so some teachers and students were talking about it. I don’t really bring up my part in it. I want my kids to learn about it without bias. If it arises, I will talk about it. But I do not really discuss it with my students unless it comes naturally with the lesson. Many of my children have a lot of difficult things going on so I don’t only want to talk about my issues. But I do want them to know about the attacks and I talk about it in the context of social studies, especially since my current students were very small when it happened.

Since the attacks, I never really connected with anybody else personally affected by it. Nobody really discussed it. I did have a class on terrorism at Hofstra and I let everyone know where I was coming from. The only other person I met who had a connection was somebody I worked with who lost her brother in the attacks. In the future, if the opportunity arose and if it was uplifting and helpful, I would join a group or organization.
When it first happened, it was something we haven’t experienced here so people treated me special because of my status. But at school, we had 9/11 survivors speak who were actually at the World Trade Center. They had stories that were similar but also very different. After the attacks, as it gets further and further away, the shock value has definitely decreased but that is okay because I’d rather my students know about it and learn about it. I don’t want sympathy and pity, especially from my students.

Of course I was angry at the terrorists, but when I was 16 and just going for my driver’s test, I did not know much about the causes of that day. I was angry that people could have hatred in their hearts and feel that this was the answer to the disagreement they had with the country. I felt sadness more than anything else. Sadness that I lost my father and that so many people were taken away. I don’t think anger really solves anything. I’ve tried very hard to move past the anger and appreciate the time I had with my dad and the kind of father he was.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of the attacks, I definitely hope it is discussed and remembered in the context of honoring those people who were lost. I hope that it will be. Every year on September 11th, I go the firehouse and a church service, and I am sure I will do the same this year. It is important to talk about your memories and you’ll feel the sadness as you remember, and then you can continue with your lives and remember the people who shaped you. On September 11, I like to spend the day with family, and talk about the good memories of my father, instead of dwelling on the hurt feelings.

I was fortunate that after my father passed away I was given a lot of opportunities due to an array of grants and scholarships. The city and State of New York definitely helped my family, and I would like to name the scholarships that I received for my college studies: The Silver Shield National Fallen Firefighters Scholarship, The International Association of Firefighters Scholarship, and the World Trade Center Memorial Scholarship. I am very, very grateful that I was awarded those scholarships. That was something that nobody had to do and it would have been hard for my family to send me to college without them.

Before 9/11, I did have it my mind to become a teacher and 9/11 kind of just confirmed that’s what I wanted to do. When you lose a parent or family member, you have an understanding of what’s that like for kids. I am able to empathize when my students go through something similar. It is helpful as a teacher to know what kids go through and that has helped me in my teaching as I relate to kids who have difficult home and family issues.

The events of September 11, 2001 will always be in my memory and in my heart. Like so many families across the nation and world, mine will forever be connected with that day. My heart continues to go out to those who lost a loved one that day and to those who assisted so selflessly in the rescue efforts and clean up of Ground Zero. However, as each year passes, I hold with me not anger, but rather powerful memories of my father’s heroism and what he gave up to try to help others.

**Better Days Foundation – Camp Better Days**

The Better Days Foundation (http://www.campbetterdays.com), based in Denville, New Jersey, was set up in 2003 out of a great need for long term support for children who lost loved one’s in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The foundation is operated by people who lost family members, friends, and loved ones on that day. Its motto is – *It’s about the kids!!!*

Amongst the programs offered by the Better Days Foundation is Camp Better Days, a weeklong residential summer camp at Camp Echo Lake in Warrensburg, New York. where children have fun healing and being together. The staff of Camp Better Days is made up entirely of volunteers. Campers, aged 9 to 17, become junior staff as they grow older and so they never have to leave the “family”.

Besides Camp Better Days, the foundation hosts events for the staff and kids all year such as an annual reunion, holiday breakfasts, and trips to baseball games, the Bronx Zoo, and the Liberty Science Center. There is no charge for participants in the events or the camp.

The Better Days Foundation’s founding director, Amy Callahan is a licensed clinical social worker whose fiancée, who was 29 years old and worked for Cantor Fitzgerald, died in the 9/11 attacks. Her fundamental belief is that “Out of tragedy emerges life, faith, friendships and most importantly hope.”

Donations to its programs can be made online and are always welcomed.