

“We are the 9/11 Class”: Lessons for the Next Generation

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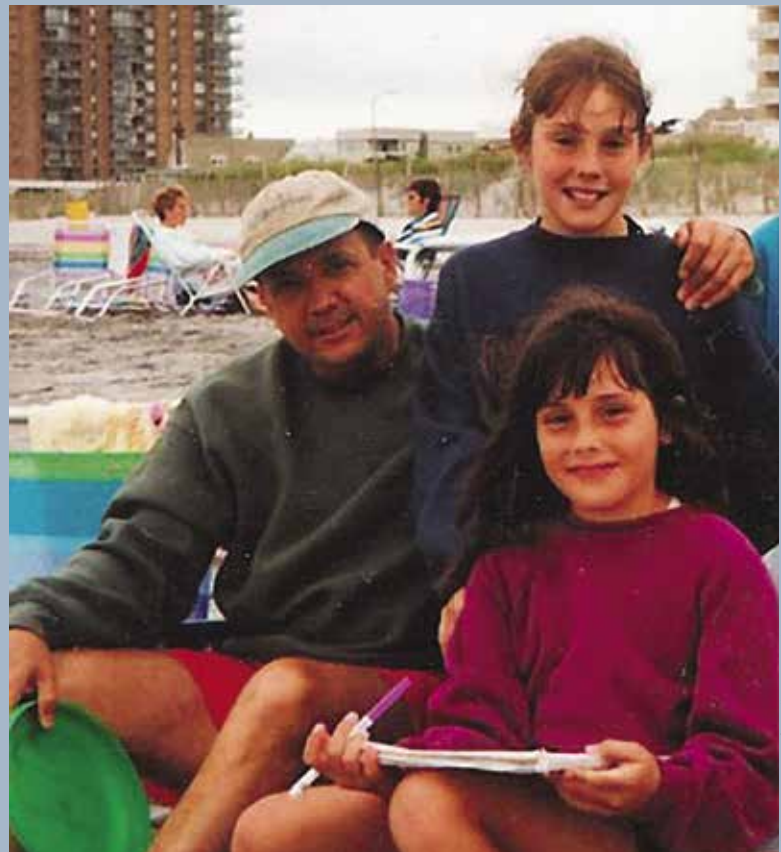
For those who remember 9/11, it is hard to believe that 20 years have passed since that Tuesday morning. The attacks forever changed the lives of victims’ families and friends, survivors, first responders, rescue and recovery workers, volunteers, millions of Americans, and those around the world. Today, their legacy continues to be felt in ways both big and small. Few events have had this enduring effect in recent history.

The humanity and selflessness exhibited in the aftermath of the attacks continue to inspire us in these difficult times and provide a unique learning opportunity for a generation with no memory of 9/11. Our students’ lives have fundamentally changed over the past year—they have lived through a turning point in history with repercussions still unknown, much like young people who experienced 9/11. While the events are different, the sacrifice, fear, uncertainty, and grief they have endured are similar. As we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, how can we underscore the ongoing relevance of the attacks while also helping us with the challenges we face today? By highlighting the stories of young people on 9/11, conveying their experiences and lessons learned, we can both educate today’s students about this crucial history and demonstrate that we can move forward in the face of tragedy—a message particularly resonant this year.

Brielle Saracini

On a summer weekend in 2001, Victor J. Saracini, a commercial airline pilot, rode his motorcycle to the beach in Atlantic

City, New Jersey, to pick up mussels that he would later steam in the kitchen of the vacation home he rented with his family. While the mussels cooked, his 10-year-old daughter, Brielle, listened to music and wrote down the lyrics to songs. Victor played along on his



(Photo courtesy of Brielle Saracini)

Brielle Saracini (lower right) with her father, Victor, and her sister, Kirsten, at the beach.



(Photo courtesy of Brielle Saracini)

A captain's helmet belonging to Victor J. Saracini rests in the front row of Brielle Saracini and Sean Maguire's wedding on September 9, 2017.

guitar. This was the last family vacation the Saracini family shared before their world changed forever.

Just a few weeks later, on September 11, 2001, Brielle was in her fifth-grade classroom in Yardley, Pennsylvania, when parents unexpectedly began arriving at the school. Brielle recalls not thinking much of it when her mother arrived—until she saw her face. That was when she knew something was terribly wrong. Her fears were confirmed when her mother explained that there had been an accident and her father was involved. Brielle's father was the Captain of United Airlines Flight 175, the plane that struck the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

Experiencing such a devastating loss at a young age had a profound effect on Brielle's life—eventually leading to a path of healing. It started with a baseball game. Craving normalcy, Brielle wrote to her favorite baseball player,

New York Yankee star Derek Jeter, who invited Brielle and her family to attend a game at Yankee Stadium on September 26, 2001, just weeks after the loss of her father. Reflecting on that experience, Brielle said "... it was just beautiful to have that sense of feeling normal again and feeling like a child should feel like [a] joy. That was something that was to me at that point not something that I had felt in a long time."¹ Brielle also credits spending a week at Camp Better Days (a camp created for kids who lost loved ones in the attacks) with helping her process her grief by forming a community bonded by their unique experience. It was at Camp Better Days that she met Sean McGuire, whose father, Patrick McGuire, was on the 84th floor of the South Tower when it was struck by Flight 175. "We met two years after 9/11, just kids who used to hang out together and match up against one another in pool and basketball, who eventually fell in

love," Brielle said.² They were married on September 9, 2017, her father's captain's hat placed on a chair in the front row. Sean was by Brielle's side during another challenge she faced—a diagnosis of stage 4B Hodgkin's lymphoma. Brielle credits them both having lived through adversity early in their lives with helping them persevere through her treatments.

I feel it's important to share my story because I think that everybody has a story to share. I want to just encourage others ... that if they have a story that they want to share ... not to just hold it in and keep it trapped within. I also think it's really important to share this story ... so that people know that there's a face and a family behind the victims of 9/11 ... because they were people, they weren't just somebody that's written now in a history textbook.³



(Photo courtesy of Carlton Shelley)

Carlton Shelley's fourth grade class photo at Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida. Carlton is second from left, in the front row.

Carlton Shelley

In conclusion, over the past school year, I have become a better person because I have more perseverance, I'm more patriotic, and I am more appreciative. I will always remember that I am one of the 9/11 class.⁴

—Carlton Shelley,
fifth-grade student

On June 4, 2002, those words were delivered at the Emma E. Booker Elementary School fifth-grade graduation in Sarasota, Florida, by Carlton Shelley. Just nine months earlier, on September 11, 2001, Carlton and his classmates were full of anticipation. The school was abuzz with excitement that then-President George W. Bush would soon visit their class. “That was a memorable day ... President George W. Bush was coming to my elementary to talk about our reading program, and I was

one of the best readers. I was excited, I felt like my work was part of the reason that the president was coming.”⁵ That excitement soon turned to disappointment, followed by confusion and fear as the students learned that the president had to leave due to an emergency. They later discovered that the emergency was the 9/11 attacks. As their teacher began to explain what was unfolding, Carlton remembers not understanding what was happening, and looking to adults for support. “As a fifth grader, it’s hard to conceptualize. The whole idea of people not being there ever again, and ... many people not being [there] ever again was really, really difficult to understand.”⁶ By graduation the following June, Carlton was able to reflect on what it meant to him to be a member of the 9/11 class—a greater sense of perseverance and service, which would lead him to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

At the end of fifth-grade, Carlton wrote, “I use to think that being patriotic meant that you like your country

and proudly wore the colors. Now I know that patriotic for me means that I LOVE my country and I believe, even if you are Caucasian, African, Chinese, or any race, we come together as Americans. We stand united to defend our country.”⁷ Carlton credits his experience as a young person on 9/11 as one of the reasons he pursued an education at West Point. It also provided him the opportunity to pursue his goal of becoming a Buffalo Soldier, a member of the historically all-black unit. Upon graduating, he became part of the legacy of just over 1,000 black graduates ever at West Point.

When reflecting on his experience on 9/11 and subsequent career in the military, Carlton notes that the ability to form a community bonded through a common purpose and the human capacity for resilience were the things that have helped him get through difficult times, something he was reminded of on a recent visit to the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. “As I have witnessed social injustice experienced by millions, and



(Photo courtesy of Carlton Shelley)

Carlton Shelley in uniform.

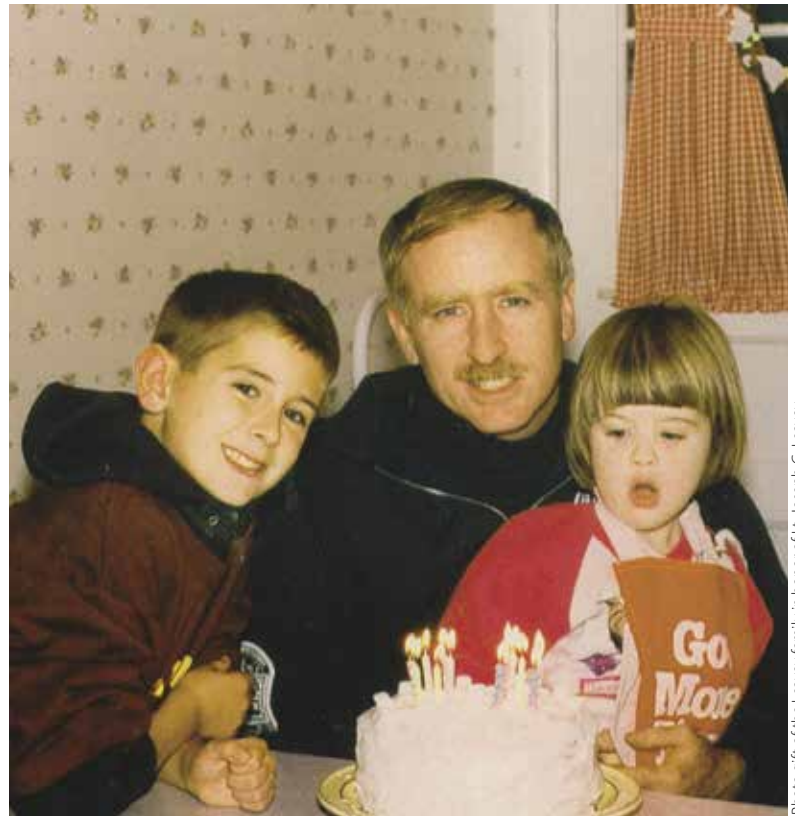


Photo gift of the Leavey family in honor of Lt. Joseph G. Leavey.

Joseph Gerard Leavey is pictured on his birthday with his son, Brian, and daughter, Caitlin.

how others have chosen silence in the face of the struggle for basic human rights, I am reminded of the resilience, hope, and unity we possess..."⁸ This is one of the many lessons learned in the aftermath of 9/11 that Carlton believes still applies today. "As we reflect on our lost loved ones, deeds of frontline workers, and others fighting for our freedoms and equality, let's keep top of mind how our actions or our inactions make people feel, because that's what they'll remember."⁹

Caitlin Leavey

When Caitlin Leavey thinks of her father, FDNY Lt. Joseph Leavey, she is reminded of sunshine. "My dad always called me his sunshine, and he always gave me this love and space and support to really express who I am."¹⁰ Many memories of her father took place within the community of Engine 4, Ladder 15 firehouse in lower Manhattan, which she considered her second home. Her father's love of family, work as a fire-

fighter, and community left a lasting impression on Caitlin. He could always be found volunteering for the PTA at his children's school and his church in Pelham, N.Y., and going out of his way to introduce himself to people. According to his wife, Carole, "There wasn't a person in Pelham Joe didn't know."¹¹ After her father died on September 11, 2001, doing what he loved—helping others, Caitlin would discover the true power of community.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, 10-year-old Caitlin was in school when she heard the news that the Twin Towers had been attacked. "My 10-year-old mind was just thinking, I know he's there, I know he has to be there."¹² Her instinct was right. Her father was one of the first to arrive at the World Trade Center site that morning, working out of the South Tower. Radio transmissions indicate that Lt. Leavey and other members of Ladder 15 climbed to the 78th floor using a stairwell, when they encountered civilians trapped behind

fire.¹³ Caitlin recalls finding comfort in listening to the radio transmissions with her brother later that day. "Having that gift of listening to his voice and hearing his calm and collectiveness is such a gift. It just reminds me so much of the man my dad was, and how he inspires me to this day... I know that that day he wanted to make sure everyone got to safety..."¹⁴ In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, many communities formed to support one another to process the unimaginable tragedy, and one community in particular started Caitlin on her journey to healing.

"I would not be who I am today without a very special community that was instrumental in my healing process and taught me the ability to rise above."¹⁵ That community was America's Camp, created shortly after 9/11 to support children who lost loved ones in the attacks, a place Caitlin remembers as one where she was no longer the "9/11 kid."¹⁶ Rather, the campers were allowed to just be kids—playing dress up, dancing in the dining hall, and trying

new things. After five years as a camper, she became a counselor, reciprocating the support and healing for other young people experiencing trauma. The camp experience led to her passion for helping others, drawing inspiration from her father and her own healing process. Now an early childhood educator in New York City, she believes her purpose is to help children impacted by trauma. “Many of my students experience their own hardships at home, and if there is one thing that I learned from my journey, it is to bring out the ‘sunshine’ in each and every one of them.”¹⁷ 🌍

Notes

1. *Anniversary in the Schools 2021*, directed by Ryan Savini (Spot Creative, Inc., 2021), 25:05–25:17, www.911memorial.org/webinar.
2. Michael Smerconish, “16 Years After 9/11, Children of the Day’s Victims are Wed,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (September 13, 2017), www.inquirer.com/philly/columnists/michael_smerconish/sept11-victims-children-married-camp-better-days-20170913.html.
3. *Anniversary in the Schools 2021*, 27:05–28:00.
4. Carlton Shelley, “Fifth Grade Graduation Speech” (Speech presented at Emma E. Booker Elementary School, Sarasota, Fla, June 2002).
5. *Anniversary in the Schools 2021*, 28:40–28:56.
6. *Anniversary in the Schools 2021*, 29:55–30:05.
7. Carlton Shelley, “Fifth Grade Graduation Speech.”
8. 9/11 Memorial Staff, “Stories of Hope: The Power of Unity and Resilience,” *Memo Blog* (November 18, 2020), www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/stories-hope-power-unity-and-resilience.
9. 9/11 Memorial Staff, “Stories of Hope: The Power of Unity and Resilience.”
10. *Anniversary in the Schools 2021*, 22:17–22:26.
11. “Portraits of Grief,” *New York Times*, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/us/sept-11-reckoning/portraits-of-grief.html>.
12. *Anniversary in the Schools 2021*, 19:52–19:58.
13. Kevin Flynn and Jim Dwyer, “Fire Department Tape Reveals No Awareness of Imminent Doom,” *New York Times* (September 13, 2017), www.nytimes.com/2002/11/09/nyregion/fire-department-tape-reveals-no-awareness-of-imminent-doom.html.
14. *Anniversary in the Schools 2021*, 20:44–21:18.
15. Caitlin Leavey, “15 Years Later: Daughter of Fallen FDNY Lt. Reflects on Healing,” *Memo Blog* (September 7, 2016), <https://911memorial.org/connect/blog/15-years-later-daughter-fallen-fdny-lt-reflects-healing>.
16. Caitlin Leavey, “15 Years Later: Daughter of Fallen FDNY Lt. Reflects on Healing,” *Memo Blog*

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan (Grades 5–8)

1. Tell students they will be listening to the story of Jon Leiken, a former assistant U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, and his daughter, Caleigh, who was born in New York City on 9/11 after his wife evacuated lower Manhattan.
2. Play the video clip www.911memorial.org/webinars/jon-and-caleigh-leiken. (The video is available with captions, Spanish subtitles, ASL Interpretation, and an Audio Description.)
3. As they listen to Jon and Caleigh’s stories, ask students to respond to the following questions:
 - What obstacles did Jon and his wife, Erika, overcome leading up to Caleigh’s birth?
 - When Jon describes sharing the story of Caleigh’s birth with friends and family, he says, “We all started to heal a little bit that day.” Why do you think Caleigh’s story helped them heal?
 - In 2019, Caleigh led an assembly at her school to honor the anniversary of 9/11. What could you do in your community to commemorate the attacks?
4. Hold a class discussion based on student responses.
5. Share Caleigh Leiken’s blog post, “Member of the Class of 2020 Born on 9/11 Reflects on the Power of Coming Together,” <https://911memorial.org/connect/blog/member-class-2020-born-911-reflects-power-coming-together>.
6. Conclude the activity by asking students if they see any similarities between the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks for

young people who experienced it and the challenges they have faced this past year.

Lesson Plan (Grades 9–12)

1. Tell students they will be listening to the story of Lila Nordstrom, a student on 9/11 at Stuyvesant High School, located next to the World Trade Center, who founded StuyHealth, an advocacy group for young adults impacted by 9/11 and its aftermath.
2. Play the video clip www.911memorial.org/webinars/lila-nordstrom. (The video is available with captions, Spanish subtitles, ASL Interpretation, and an Audio Description.)
3. As they listen to Lila’s story, ask students to respond to the following questions:
 - Describe Lila’s evacuation from lower Manhattan and the challenges she faced.
 - How did Lila’s experience as a student on 9/11 affect her as she entered adulthood?
 - Describe the initiatives that Lila launched after 9/11 and the impact they had on her and her peers. How do these initiatives underscore the ongoing repercussions of 9/11?
4. Conclude the activity by asking students to think of ways their generation can advocate for those impacted by 9/11 and the issues that the world faces today.

For more first-person stories from first responders, survivors, family members, and witnesses of the attacks, visit our Webinar Stories Archive at www.911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/webinar-stories.

(September 7, 2016), <https://911memorial.org/connect/blog/15-years-later-daughter-fallen-fdny-lt-reflects-healing>.

17. Caitlin Leavey, "15 Years Later: Daughter of Fallen FDNY Lt. Reflects on Healing"; "Mission Statement," 9/11 Memorial & Museum, www.911memorial.org/about.

The mission of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum extends beyond the concrete and glass walls of the Museum, providing a bridge between the past and the present.

May the lives remembered, the deeds recognized, and the spirit reawakened be eternal beacons, which reaffirm respect for life, strengthen our resolve to preserve freedom, and inspire an end to hatred, ignorance, and intolerance.¹⁸

—*excerpt from the mission of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum*

This excerpt from the mission of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum highlights the enduring resonance of the lessons learned after 9/11. The lives remembered—a father, a pilot, and firefighter—the deeds recognized—sacrifice, empathy, service—and the spirit reawakened through the paths chosen by three young people serve as beacons for the next generation. These stories are just a few of thousands that serve to humanize the incomprehensible, highlighting the power of community that help us to move forward in the wake of tragedy. That they are told by those who were young on 9/11, themselves forced to make sense of a world changed, only further serves to connect our students to the lessons and legacy of that Tuesday morning.



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9/11 Memorial & Museum Anniversary in the Schools Program

Join students and teachers from around the world to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 by registering for the 9/11 Memorial & Museum's free Anniversary in the Schools program. Hear Brielle Saracini, Carlton Shelley, and Caitlin Leavey share their stories during this 35-minute film. They will be joined by Will Jimeno, a retired Port Authority police officer who was rescued from the debris pile hours after surviving the collapse of the Twin Towers; Bill Spade, a retired FDNY firefighter who responded to the World Trade Center on 9/11; and his son, John Spade. The program will be available on-demand beginning **Friday, September 10, 2021**. 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/webinar.

Free Downloadable Posters

In honor of the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, bring the free exhibition, *September 11, 2001: The Day that Changed the World*, to your classroom. The exhibition features downloadable posters and associated teaching materials and reading lists to explore with your students. Register at www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/digital-exhibitions/september-11-2001-day-changed-world.

Explore more free resources including lesson plans, first-person stories, and more at <https://911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers>.

Advocacy Toolkit

Visit socialstudies.org/advocacy for the new NCSS Advocacy Toolkit and other resources for advocating the importance of social studies education.



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