

Finding Ourselves in the Story: *The Diverse Voices of 9/11*

Megan Jones

IN March 2022, I presented at my first in-person conference in two years, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the days leading up to the presentation, I combed through the program, putting together a comprehensive schedule of sessions I was hoping to attend. I was immediately drawn to one entitled “Diversifying the U.S. History Narrative through a Thematic Approach,” which promised to explore the dominant historical narratives taught in U.S. History classrooms, their impact on student identities and experiences, and how to challenge them responsively. The session dialog was impactful—we grappled with questions like, *Who is included in our history? Who is left out? Who tells the story? What if we flipped the narrative and told the stories from the perspective of those who have been overlooked?* I reflected on the history we are entrusted to teach at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. I thought about our students, a generation with no memory of 9/11, learning about an event that forever changed the world they would soon inherit. Did they see themselves—their lived experiences—in the narrative? The 9/11 Memorial & Museum’s Education Department has made this a focus, researching, and highlighting voices that speak to the wide range of experiences during and after the attacks. With this diversity of stories, we hope that students see themselves in this history and appreciate how people from various backgrounds have turned tragedy into positive change for their communities.

Regina Wilson

When Regina Wilson stood in line to take the entrance exam to join the New York City Fire Department, she recalls feeling nervous and

intimidated—not because of the intense training it would take to become a firefighter, but because of the many candidates in line, she was the only woman. “I didn’t see any other girls out there on the line. But I said, ‘Let me just try. I’m here. I paid my money to take the test. So now I’m going to go and do it.’”¹ At her graduation in 1999, Regina was one of just seven Black candidates and the only woman in a class of more than 300. “The weight of that was already on my shoulders,” she said.²

After graduating, Regina was assigned to Engine 219/Ladder 105 in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where she met her mentor and friend, John Chipura. Little did they know that a brief conversation just over a year later would forever change their lives. On the morning of September 11, 2001, John made a seemingly ordinary request: would Regina trade duties with him? Regina had been assigned to ride Ladder 105 truck that day and John wanted some additional truck experience. Regina agreed and both started their days, not knowing the impact of that decision until she “heard this loud noise from the kitchen [television], and ... a bunch of the guys were like, ‘Whoa, look at that. Did you see that?’”³ What they had just witnessed on television was a replay of Flight 11 striking the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Shortly after, the alarms went off and John and their other colleagues suited up to make their way to the World Trade Center.

After the impact of the second plane into the South Tower, Wilson found herself racing to the World Trade Center on another firetruck. Upon entering the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, the truck was hit by a massive gust of wind that shook them violently—a force caused by the collapse of the South Tower. Entering lower Manhattan, Wilson recalls a scene of total devastation. “We



Regina Wilson



Photos courtesy of Regina Wilson

started to look for 105 ... but we couldn't find the truck. I just remember feeling really afraid and really scared that I wouldn't find my fellow firefighters and my worst fears came true because we never did find any of those firefighters there."⁴ Seven members of Engine 219/Ladder 105 were killed that day, including John Chipura.

In the years since the attacks, Wilson often reflects on that day.

9/11 was definitely a day that is written in history that was filled with so much tragedy and hurt. But as I look back on it, I take away from it the love that we have for each other. And that's what sustains us and brings us close together ... when you give to others, others will give to you.⁵

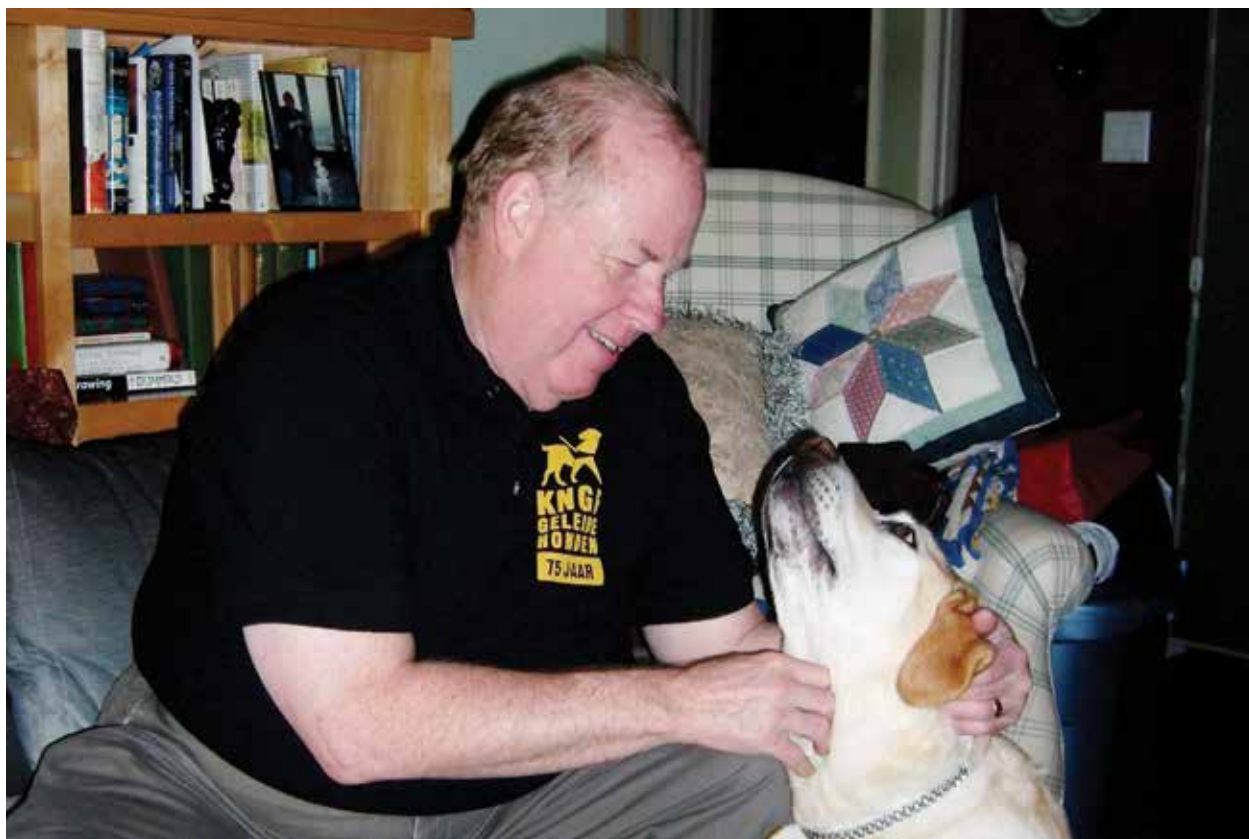
To this day, Wilson continues to give to others, working tirelessly to shine a light on the contributions of women at Ground Zero and to advocate for a more diverse fire department, serving as president of both the United Women Firefighters Organization as well as the Vulcan Society, a fraternal organization for Black first responders. "I'm so happy that I decided to make sure that I didn't let anything get in my way just because I didn't look like everybody else in the room."⁶

Michael Hingson

When Michael Hingson was born with retinopathy of prematurity, doctors suggested his parents send him to a home for the blind, where he could receive better care. Michael's parents, however, decided to raise him in the same way they raised his older brother. This decision enabled Michael to learn how to find his own way in the world, which eventually led to a job at the World Trade Center.⁷

On September 11, 2001, Michael and his guide dog, Roselle, started their day in New Jersey, waking up earlier than usual to prepare for a breakfast and presentation scheduled later that morning. Michael was working as regional sales manager and head of operations for Quantum/ATL, a data-protection agency, on the 78th floor of the North Tower. At 7:40AM Michael set up the conference room for the meeting as Roselle took her position near the door to greet people. Hingson recalls, "Most people don't think a blind person can do a laptop presentation using powerpoint. Don't believe it for a minute. I can do most everything ... including walking, getting around ... leading a staff and running a company, even."

After setting up the space, Hingson returned to his office and Roselle commenced napping at his feet underneath the desk. Moments later, Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World



Mike & Roselle

Trade Center. As the building swayed and a loud boom rattled the office, Roselle remained very calm, and began doing her job—leading Hingson to safety. The pair proceeded to walk down 78 flights of stairs together amidst the chaos and confusion and successfully evacuated the building. Hingson credits Roselle for saving his life, and the lives of many others in the stairwell that day. “She’s the real hero.”⁸

News of Roselle’s heroism on 9/11 spread quickly, eventually making it to the White House. In 2005, the pair were invited to the Oval Office to meet then-President George W. Bush, where Roselle was honored for her service. In 2011, Michael published their story in *Thunder Dog: The Story of a Blind Man, a Guide Dog, and the Triumph of Trust at Ground Zero*. That same year, on June 26, 2011, Roselle passed away with Michael and his wife, Karen, by her side. Her legacy lives on through Roselle’s Dream Foundation, a nonprofit charity dedicated to assisting blind children and adults in obtaining technology to help them navigate

the world and to educating people about blindness.

Sonia and Jose Agron

Both Sonia and Jose Agron, lifelong residents of the Bronx, followed their shared calling to serve. Sonia trained as an emergency medical technician while her husband’s career as a New York City police officer spanned 30 years. By 2001, after an accident on the job, Sonia had retired as a first responder, but the urge to be of service to others remained.⁹ The couple’s dedication and resilience were put to the test on 9/11 and in the years following the attacks. Sonia recalls, “We are who we are today, partly because of our jobs, but also because of 9/11.”¹⁰

September 11, 2001, was Joe’s fifty-first birthday and Sonia had a surprise planned that took her to Midtown Manhattan that morning. About an hour and a half after arriving in Midtown, Sonia—unaware of what was unfolding just a few miles away—was forced to evacuate the city. When she arrived home hours later, her 16-year-old

Lesson Plan (Grades 5-8)

1. Tell students they will be listening to the story of Lolita Jackson, a survivor of both the 1993 and 2001 terror attacks on the World Trade Center.
2. Play the video clip www.911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/webinar-stories/webinars/lolita-jackson (The video is available with captions, Spanish subtitles, ASL Interpretation, and an Audio Description.)
3. As they listen to Lolita's story, ask students to respond to the following questions:
 - What details did you learn about Lolita from listening to her story?
 - What were some of the steps Lolita and her colleagues took as they began to evacuate the World Trade Center?
 - How did 9/11 change Lolita's outlook on her own life and career? How does her response demonstrate resilience?
4. Hold a class discussion based on student responses.
5. Conclude the activity by reflecting on Lolita's comment that her experiences made her and her colleagues "better citizens of the world." Have students reflect on what actions they can take to be better citizens in their own communities?

Lesson Plan (Grades 9–12)

1. Tell students they will be listening to the story of Sonia Agron, a Red Cross volunteer who worked at Ground Zero after 9/11.
2. Play the video clip www.911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/webinar-stories/webinars/sonia-agron (The video is available with captions, Spanish subtitles, ASL Interpretation, and an Audio Description.)
3. As they listen to Sonia's story, ask students to respond to the following questions:
 - How was Sonia's family life affected by 9/11?
 - Sonia became a recovery worker after the attacks. How does she describe conditions at the World Trade Center site and the mental health issues workers experienced?
 - How did Sonia's advocacy and volunteer work help her heal in the aftermath of 9/11?
4. Conclude the activity by reflecting on Sonia's comment, "9/11 didn't end at midnight or a year later ... 9/11 still goes on." What does she mean? How does Sonia's story bring awareness to the ongoing repercussions of 9/11?

9/11 Memorial & Museum Anniversary in the Schools Program

Join students and teachers from around the world to commemorate the twenty-first anniversary of 9/11 by registering for the 9/11 Memorial & Museum's free Anniversary in the Schools program. Hear Regina Wilson share her story during this 35-minute film. She will be joined by Keating Crown, one of 18 individuals to safely evacuate the South Tower from above the impact zone; David Lim, a retired Port Authority Police officer who survived the collapse of the North Tower; and Bridgette Gormley, raising awareness for those facing 9/11-related illnesses after losing her father to cancer linked to his time at Ground Zero. The program will be available on-demand beginning Friday, September 9, 2022. 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.

daughter was sitting on the floor in front of the TV, hugging her knees. As she closed the door, she heard her daughter say, "Please, God, let her be real."¹¹ The phone rang a short time later—it was Joe, calling from the World Trade Center. "It's really bad here. It's horrible here. It's so dark." Sonia remembers being confused—she looked out the window and saw nothing but sunshine. Joe promised he would call back at 10PM after he finished setting up a perimeter near 7 WTC, a nearby building. It was just a short time later that she, along with her daughter, watched that building collapse. Ten o'clock came and Joe didn't call.

When Joe walked through the door on September 12, he could only say, "Help me."¹² After that, he didn't speak for three days. "When he walked through the door ... he was not the same man I said goodbye to the day before," Sonia said.¹³ When Joe was finally able to speak again, he told Sonia and their daughter that his colleagues died in the collapse of the Twin Towers. That marked the beginning of a long healing process for the Agrons, ultimately leading them to serve in ways they had never imagined. Despite promising Joe she would not go to the World Trade Center site after the attacks, Sonia felt compelled to volunteer at Ground Zero as a recovery worker on overnight shifts with the American Red Cross. Joe soon followed. For Sonia, coming to Ground Zero started to restore her faith in humanity following the horrors of 9/11.

In addition to grieving the loss of colleagues and friends, the Agrons would soon face another challenge, coping with health effects brought on by exposure to hazards and toxins at Ground Zero. Shortly after their time spent volunteering, both Sonia and her husband started to show symptoms that resembled allergic reactions. Sonia experienced flu-like body aches, stomach issues, and rashes. It wasn't until 2009 that she learned that toxins in the air around the site in the aftermath of 9/11 had made people ill. Both Sonia and Joe



Sonia and Jose Agron

Photo courtesy of Sonia Agron.

were diagnosed with cancer, along with other pulmonary and digestive conditions.

These medical issues, however, didn't diminish their drive to serve—they became docents at the 9/11 Memorial Museum, using their voices to educate visitors, especially those too young to remember that tragic day. Sonia credits the Museum with helping Joe find his voice again after his trauma. When asked why she continues her volunteer and advocacy work, she remarked "... they stole the voices of 2,977 people, but they didn't steal mine. You're never going to hear all of our stories ... but you heard mine, make mine, let mine be something that changes you."¹⁴

The story of 9/11 is a human story. Victims hailed from over 90 nations, young and old, with diverse backgrounds, and those who loved them were forever changed on that September morning. Highlighting the diversity of these experiences connects us all to this story and forms a bridge linking the past with the present. Hear Regina, Michael, and Sonia's stories, along with those of other first responders, family members, survivors, and young people, by participating in the 9/11 Memorial & Museum's free Anniversary in the Schools program.

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. ■

Notes

1. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2022, directed by Ryan Savini (Spot Creative, Inc., 2022), 17:04–17:22, www.911memorial.org/webinar.
2. Jennifer Lagasse, “Women’s History Month: Firefighter Regina Wilson,” *Memo Blog* (March 2, 2022), <https://911memorial.org/connect/blog/womens-history-firefighter-regina-wilson>.
3. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2022, 19:17–19:35
4. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2022, 24:42–25:05
5. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2022, 24:55–25:47
6. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2022, 17:38–17:57
7. Nicole Torres, “Michael and Roselle: A Story of Teamwork and Trust on 9/11,” *Memo Blog*, <https://911memorial.org/connect/blog/michael-and-roselle-story-teamwork-and-trust-911>
8. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2020, directed by Ryan Savini (Spot Creative, Inc., 2020), 4:17–4:22, <https://911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/webinar-stories/webinars/michael-hingson>.
9. Eduardo Quezada, “Hope Helps Sonia Agron and Her Family Cope in the Aftermath of 9/11,” *Memo Blog*, <https://www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/hope-helps-sonia-agron-and-her-family-cope-aftermath-911>.
10. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2020, 1:10–1:13
11. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2020, 1:49–1:53
12. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2020, 3:31–3:34
13. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2020, 3:17–3:21
14. *Anniversary in the Schools* 2020, 6:00–6:39



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Teaching Writing in the Social Studies

Joan Brodsky Schur | NCSS Bulletin 118, 143 pages, 2020

Good writing skills are a pathway to academic success and a lifelong asset for students. The social studies disciplines offer excellent opportunities for the development of these skills because social studies subjects require students to present information clearly and accurately, to summarize different perspectives, and to construct persuasive arguments.

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