


'WE'RE THE DAUGHTERS OF 9/11'

Two decades after the terror attacks on the World Trade Center, *Katreen Hardt* talks to the women who've grown up in its shadow

Manhattan
watched
helplessly as the
Twin Towers fell

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TWENTY YEARS AGO, on September 11 2001, 2,977 people were killed in the deadliest terrorist attacks in US history. While two planes hijacked by the militant Islamic group al-Qaeda ploughed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, a third plane plunged into the Pentagon in Washington, DC; a fourth plane, thought to be heading for the US Capitol, ended up crashing into the Pennsylvania countryside.

It was a day that shocked not just a nation, but an entire world as millions ▶

FEATURE GRAZIA

watched events unfold on live TV. Today, its consequences are still being felt, as demonstrated by the chaos in Afghanistan that has followed the decision to withdraw American troops by the 20th anniversary of 9/11 – the original trigger for the US invasion of the country.

But, for some, the 20-year milestone is more personal. An estimated 3,051 children lost a parent in the attacks and, in the months to follow, 109 babies were born to fathers who had perished. Known as Generation 9/11, they have few memories of their lost parents or never got a chance to meet them, which means that, now adults themselves, marking the 20th anniversary feels even more significant.

Jessica Wisniewski, 26, was just six when her father, Alan Wisniewski, 47, an associate director of the Sandler O'Neill investment banking firm, died in the South Tower of the World Trade Center (WTC). On that morning she recalls her grandparents taking her and her sister, Erica, now 35, and brother Matthew, 24, out of school. It wasn't until a week later that their mum explained their father wasn't coming home. Still, she didn't understand at first that she'd never see him again.

Now a law student at Fordham University in New York, Jessica says the pain of losing a parent is something you learn to live with. 'For the first 10 years we'd go to the memorial and, in 2003, aged eight, I remember reading aloud my dad's name during the ceremony and standing in what was essentially a dirt pit, as the memorial was still under construction, and it made things very real for me,' she says.

'I couldn't open up about how I felt, but then, aged 16, I started talking to other kids through Tuesday's Children, a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping the families of 9/11 victims, and their Project Common Bond. Thanks to counselling, I learned to focus on the happy memories, like what a big football fan my dad was or, since he worked long hours, how excited I was trying to stay up late to see him before going to bed, and to appreciate his life rather than dwell on the loss.'

Hannah Houston, 20, was 20 months old when she lost her father, Uhuru Houston, 32, who worked with the Port Authority Police Department. Now a student at St John's University in New York, she says the earliest memory she has is crawling towards her dad. 'I found out later, through stories, how affectionate and funny he was,' she says. 'Each year [on the anniversary]



Jessica Wisniewski with her dad Alan. Below: Jessica today

Hannah Houston, now a student in New York

my mum, aunts, cousins and my brother, Hasani, 24, get together and 90% of the time we're laughing about something he did, while for the remaining 10% we're grieving.

'I always knew my dad's death was tragic, but it wasn't until I learned about 9/11 in school that I understood the magnitude of what had happened – it wasn't just me who'd been affected,' she explains. 'Although growing up it was normal for me not to have a dad, it's hit me now that I don't have one to share my milestone moments with and I need to process that. So two years ago, I started therapy.'

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EVERY DAY I LOOK AT HIS PHOTOS AND TALK TO HIM. I BELIEVE HE'S LISTENING

Now, she has found ways to make him a part of her life today. 'I have a black T-shirt with a yellow, smiling sun that my father wore, which my mum had made into a pillow. I keep it on my bed as it's something tangible that gives me his energy. Last January, I had his birth date tattooed to my wrist so that I can feel his presence.' She adds, 'It's important that we never forget 9/11 as the ramifications are palpable. I mean, 20 years on, I still don't have a dad.'

Sadly, some among Generation 9/11 have no memories of their parent to treasure, so have found other ways to connect. Claudia Szurkowski, 19, was not yet born when her father, Norbert Szurkowski, 31, lost his life in the North Tower of the WTC while working for a wallpaper company. Today, Claudia is a student at Florida SouthWestern State College.

'When I was six, I remember going to the memorial, walking in a long line towards the two pools that mark the sites of the Twin Towers, and throwing a rose into the one associated with my father's name,' she remembers. 'I was never told about the event but, as I got older, I pieced things together. It made me angry because my dad just happened to be working in one of the offices that morning. But my mum says everything happens for a reason.'

Of course, she struggles with her loss. 'I've been branded a 9/11 kid, which is hard because it doesn't define who I am. I don't want to be pitied. I'm grateful to my mum and sister, Alexandra, 23, for answering all the questions I've had about my father. It's helped me get a better understanding of who he was. When I heard he was outgoing it made me want to be outgoing, too.'

'My dad picked my name, so to know that he knew my name before he died gives me relief. We also have the same facial features and stocky build, which I like because when I look in the mirror I see him reflected back at me. Every day, I look at his photos and talk to him as I believe he's listening.'

This year, like so many of those who lost someone in the attacks, Claudia will be marking the anniversary with the rest of her family. 'September 11 is a day wrought with emotion and I spend it with my mum and sister. We'll go to the memorial or listen to the names of those killed being read out on TV and make the day all about my father. Despite the fact that it's been two decades, people should know it still affects us deeply. It's essential that I do all I can to keep his spirit alive.'