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Every story from September 11, 2001 always seems to start out the same way. It was a beautiful September morning. The sky was clear and crystal blue. The temperature was perfect. Almost everyone in New York City was planning on spending their days or lunch breaks outside. Tragically, these plans never took place. It was a day that no one will ever forget, especially those who witnessed all of the terrible losses firsthand.

Movies are known for their unbelievable, eye-popping special effects. Blockbusters are filled with them and one will think to themselves, "That would never happen in real life", but it did on September 11th. The terrorist group Al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, unleashed a series of attacks on America over the course of that horrific day. Early that morning, two planes crashed into both the North and the South Towers of the World Trade Center. The Pentagon, the base of the the United States' Department of Defense in Arlington County, Virginia, also suffered an unexpected, terrorist-led plane crash. A fourth hijacked plane, fortunately, had not reached its intended destination but rather crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. This was only due to the fact that the passengers became aware of their fate and decided on an uprising; these courageous souls were ready to defend their country.

My mother, Jill Olexa, experienced the 9/11 attacks firsthand. She was working in Manhattan at the time. She was a Research Associate for the Tiedemann Trust Company, an association of trust fund investors. Their midtown office windows faced directly downtown to the towers. My mother remembers hearing the news of the first collision. She then watched the second plane hit the south tower, only later to watch that same tower collapse into a vast pile of rubble. She will never forget the things she saw; the lives that were lost, the nauseating screams that escaped from the mouths of innocent people, and the American dreams that were crushed. But more importantly, my mother will never forget the pride that she felt in her fellow Americans. She is forever moved by the noble and brave acts that were carried out by normal civilians. On September 11th, Jill Olexa witnessed America unite as a family, and care for each other like one too.

Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, an innumerable group of people, both trained professionals and local inhabitants, offered all that they could to the suffering population. According to Jill Olexa, "The thousands of commuters that were stuck in Manhattan had no way home. The bus terminals and train stations were shut down; there was no way to get in or out of the city. The only way for us to be evacuated was by boat. A great variety of boats were sailed in from all possible locations." These crafts made multiple trips to preserve supplies and protect the American citizens from additional harm. *Scholastic Scope's* Allison Friedman in "Rescue at the Water's Edge" adds that, "In just nine hours, mariners like Perez evacuated nearly half a million people. It was the largest maritime evacuation in history. And even after everyone at the waterfront was taken to safety, the mariners kept going-bringing food and supplies to rescue workers, carrying first responders from surrounding areas, and hauling away rubble" (pg. 10). Volunteers rushed up the stairs of the World Trade Center to save the lives of desperate people who could not escape. Workers dug through debris for days to save people buried under pieces of the buildings. While carrying out such actions, these people did not stop to think of the harm that

would be caused to themselves, but rather the clarity and reassurance that would be brought to their brothers and sisters: their fellow Americans.

The people who performed the acts that mended our country during the 9/11 terrorist attacks cannot be classified as one single group. The saying “not all heroes wear capes” is an excellent way to sum up the support that was given from everybody who was willing to help. Jill Olexa notes that, “Emergency personnel, fire departments, and police departments surrounded the city and offered their time to help with rescue operations and the clean-up of the debris that was left from the collapse of the towers.” There was so much work to be done to save Manhattan, and a great deal of helping hands was needed to restore the country. Thankfully, the American people certainly did not disappoint. According to Kay Boatner and Libby Romero in “Heroes of 9/11”, “Despite the fear of another attack, more than 150 ferries, yachts, tour boats, and tugboats rushed to the area to rescue people.” These were driven by regular people; not everyone who took action in this case was employed or trained to do so. The American population showed the world that the ones that wear the police badges or the uniforms of the firefighter are not the only ones to step forward in these situations. Although the circumstances were much less than positive, the strength that was shown in our communities masterfully describes the morals of America.

These selfless acts are impactful because the volunteers who helped our country risked their own well-being to save others. First responders who filtered through the remains of the Twin Towers and were exposed to the toxic air that engulfed Manhattan are at risk of a considerable number of health concerns. Jill Olexa, who remembers the massive amount of residue left on the ground from the towers, recalls, “Many of the people who helped out that day are living with, or have sadly died from, illnesses that they received from their close proximity to contaminated air. It saddens me to read about all of the cancer cases and deaths that have come out of being a part of the clean-up crew. Such deaths and diseases could have been so easily avoided; so many people could have still been enjoying the gifts of life to this very day.” The reported cases of cancer or other related illnesses have only been escalating in the past few years. According to Karen Selby in “20 Years Later: The Lingering Health Effects of 9/11”, “To date, more people have now died from this toxic exposure than in the 9/11 attacks.” The aid brought to our country by these suffering people helped remodel Manhattan into its proper condition, and by doing so, they fatefully sacrificed their own health to reinstate America’s normalcy.

The actions of the individuals who volunteered their assistance and their lives to America on 9/11 benefited the entire nation of America. The individuals who were lost or affected by the terrorist attacks had relations with people from all over the country. Every state and every county felt remorse for the affected environments and the souls that were taken that day. Improvements were made in the country; security at airports and in the government were more seriously observed and monitored. According to Lori Aratani of *The Washington Post* claims that “billions of dollars have been spent on aviation security, an investment experts say has made air travel safer but not insulated from future attacks.” Improved security is equal to improved safety, and this legal action protected American citizens from any more losses. When questioned today, Jill Olexa confirms that she “felt comforted by the thoughtful actions of others. They cured a nation, a group of commuters, a collection of families that had lost loved ones, and the inhabitants of New York from what could have been a long strand of depressive times.” The hope that flooded the streets of the United States due to the generosity of others was powerful enough to heal any type of mental offense that was dumped on the public that day.

The people who witnessed the attacks of 9/11 will never forget where they were when they heard of the events, how they heard of the events, and how they reacted to the events. My mother will forever hold with her the fear and the raw emotions that she experienced during her 9/11 experience. I too have to thank the heroes who helped her and the rest of the impacted civilians on that fateful day, for without them, I would not have the chance to experience the joys of life. I live today to honor the people who lost their lives on September 11th. I wear my country's colors with pride, for I am representing a long history of brave persons. May the motivation to help our fellow Americans continue to thrive on our soil, and may our country continue to heal together as one. We will never forget the losses we endured on 9/11. God bless America.

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