



The Fetchet family with Brad (fourth from left), who was working at the World Trade Center when the towers fell in 2001.

AN INSPIRED APPROACH TO GRIEF

BY KIM KAVIN

When the World Trade Center collapsed fifteen years ago, Mary Fetchet lost a son, but rather than mourn in silence, she channeled her grief into good, creating the iconic **Voices of September 11th**, now a global organization helping communities around the world.

This month, Americans will turn the pages on their calendars and find themselves at the fifteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. For Mary Fetchet, the commemoration will be about more than the day her 24-year-old son, Brad, died in the Twin Towers. On the day the World Trade Center fell, Mary was a clinical social worker employed in Milford, Connecticut. She had attended a conference where the mother of an Oklahoma City victim spoke about her personal loss and the aftermath of the 1995 terrorist attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building there.

“She talked about the impact it had on the families and the people who survived, but she also talked about the rippling effect across the community—substance abuse, depression, all kinds of things,” Fetchet recalls. “When I started going into New York City, I thought, gosh, if a hundred and sixty-eight people died in Oklahoma City, and that was how it affected their community, what’s going to be the impact here?”

Fetchet, alongside Beverly Eckert, whose husband died in the Twin Towers, cofounded **Voices of September 11th**. The New Canaan-based nonprofit was incorporated in 2002, at a time when no organization of its kind existed. While local communities including Oklahoma City had mobilized in the wake of attacks, 9/11 created a need far beyond anything Americans had ever seen. “With 9/11 having three sites—New York, Shanksville and Washington—and because the relatives of the victims lived in ninety countries around the world, it was extremely complicated,” Fetchet says. “There were a lot of organizations that provided a narrow service, like the Red Cross, but nobody really had a holistic view of disseminating information and providing a wide range of services.”

Voices of September 11th has since evolved not only to help families continuing to deal with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, but also to help communities affected by mass-casualty events of all kinds. Today, whether it’s the need to cope with an elementary-school shooting in New-



TOP AND MIDDLE: Mary spent several years pushing for the creation of the 9/11 Commission. BOTTOM: Mary and Frank at a press conference with Senator Richard Blumenthal.

town, Connecticut, or a discotheque rampage in Orlando, or suicide bombers in Paris, **Voices of September 11th** offers suggestions and strategies. The group also provides planning tools for communities that want to prepare, should they become the next unlucky victims. “I just personally didn’t want it to happen to another mother,” Fetchet says. “I didn’t want it to happen with another son. That’s what you see after a lot of these events. People become very personally invested.”

It also was only the beginning. Mary was asked to speak at a rally, urging lawmakers to investigate the systemic government failures that had allowed the 9/11 attack to succeed. She soon found herself talking with members of the Joint Intelligence Committee, and ultimately spending several years pushing for the creation of the 9/11 Commission. “Then, once that was established, we had done so much research about the failures that led up to that day, we were able to make sure it was incorporated into their investigation,” Mary says. “And once their findings were released, they needed us to push for reforms to be legislated, and for the legislation to be funded. Both nationally and internationally, the counterterrorism infrastructure that is in place, is a result of what happened after 9/11.”

Voices of September 11th began with the realization that victims needed services, but they also wanted to document their loved ones’ lives. The group started a “Living Memorial,” a digital archive of photographs and personal keepsakes. Social workers fanned out to the homes of victims’ families, meeting them one-on-one. The organization had to create new digital archiving standards because, as the Library of Congress told Fetchet in 2005, no standards existed at the time. The project grew so enormous that the group opened a second base of operations, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Ultimately, **Voices** collected more than 70,000 photographs. “We wanted to encourage the families to focus on the lives of their loved ones, rather than their deaths,” Fetchet says. “It was really a therapeutic process.”

Today, the 70,000 digital photographs—with

the families' permission—are part of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York City. "After watching so many families go through this, we've learned it's such a therapeutic exercise, and it takes away a stigma of counseling and mental health involvement," says Mary's husband, Frank Fetchet, who joined the organization in 2005 as a volunteer and serves as vice president of business development and strategic partnerships. "It was a way for people to comfortably sit down with other family members—we are other family members—and be assisted in telling the stories of their loved ones in digital format. And the format was changeable, for families that wanted to swap out this photo or that one. The process was very empowering."

Around 2006, two years after the commission's report came out, the Fetchets began to realize the families of 9/11 victims had long-term needs. Agencies that had been created and funded in the wake of the attacks were waning, and there were no best practices for communities trying to handle the years' worth of depression, drug and alcohol dependency, as well as other problems that typically result from a mass-casualty event.

So the Voices of September 11th mission expanded. Thanks to a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, the organization's staff went to Oklahoma City, and to the sites of the 2001 shooting of U.S. Congresswoman Gabby Giffords in Tucson, Arizona, the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting and the 2008 shooting at Northern Illinois University. Just as they had done for the 9/11 families, the Voices team documented what was happening in those locations.

"We conducted hundreds of interviews, and we found some general themes relating to how a community manages volunteers, where they set up the family assistance center, how they collect and distribute donations, how they distribute funds to families and what some of the long-term mental-health considerations are," Mary says.

Soon, she was aligning with individuals and agencies, sharing what she had learned after mass-casualty events elsewhere. "We met other individuals doing the work here in the United States and abroad, and it was through those established relationships and best practices that we realized we needed to create a center of excellence where we could conduct research, partner with researchers who are doing great work, and make sure all of the data is translated so clinicians



TOP TO BOTTOM: The In Memoriam exhibit curated by Voices at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum; Mary with senator Joe Lieberman; the Fetchets with President Obama; Diane Sawyer, Beverly Eckert Mary, and Robin Roberts

can get the information they need," she says.

In 2014, the Voices of September 11th Resource Kit became available, and the Center of Excellence for Community Resilience was created. The Resource Kit, in particular, has already been helpful. (See "Overseas Impact on pg. 108.") "We were just about to release it at the time that Newtown happened and then when the Boston attack occurred," Mary says. "But it was still being vetted by the federal government. Even so, we were able to work with service providers, especially in Boston."

The Resource Kit is intended to be used by communities after an attack, and also before one occurs, so they can be better prepared. The kit has been downloaded by organizations throughout the U.S. and abroad. As a follow-up to the Resource Kit, Mary's nonprofit published "Voices of Experience: Helping Communities Heal After Tragedy," a two-day training process that helps prepare communities to respond to traumatic events. The trainings will be launched this fall. "God forbid something happens in these communities, whether it's a school shooting, an act of terrorism, whatever it might be, [these tools will enable them] to understand the type of infrastructure they might need," Mary says.

The robust resources developed by Voices help others, too. "The service providers may need assistance," says Mary, whose social-work background underpins the organization. "There's compassion fatigue among mental health clinicians and people working in law enforcement who are constantly faced with responding to traumatic events. Nobody could have been prepared for what they saw in Newtown. You have to make sure the caretakers take care of themselves. It's just a different way of looking at the world. How can you identify the needs of individuals and families, and how can you build upon those strengths to make everyone more resilient?"

Dates to Remember

This month, Voices of September 11th will host several events commemorating the anniversary of the attacks.

9/9/16: Pathways to Healing Symposium, NYC

9/10/16: The Annual Information Forum, NYC

9/12/16: Voices Public Discourse Initiative: Remembrance, Renewal and Resilience, at Grace Farms, New Canaan. For more information, voicesofsept11.org.

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OVERSEAS IMPACT

Levent Altan first heard of Mary Fetchet after the Charlie Hebdo and Paris terror attacks in 2015. All of France was reeling as he watched from neighboring Belgium. The terrorists were striking in prominent areas filled not only with French nationals, but also with international travelers. Much as Fetchet had realized in America following the 9/11 attacks, Altan recognized that trauma from the attacks in Paris was going to ripple all across France, throughout Europe and around the world. "We realized there was a gap," Altan says. "There was no European organization focused on getting it right for the victims."

Victim Support Europe, which had existed since 1990, set out to become the umbrella organization filling that gap. Altan is the executive director. "In trying to improve our expertise very quickly and support the national organizations that were overwhelmed—they had a list of 3,000 direct and indirect victims such as family members, of different nationalities—we set up a network. I reached out to Sue O'Sullivan, the Canadian ombudsman for victims, and that's how I met Mary."

By that time, Fetchet's group Voices of September 11th had been working for nearly fifteen years to figure out best practices for victims following a mass-trauma event. Fetchet was finalizing her group's tool kit, which Altan was able to pull from as Europe mobilized its response. "What Mary and her

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LEVENT ALTAN
VICTIM SUPPORT EUROPE

organization have done since 9/11 is amazing," Altan says. "We often talked about how the victim of one kind of crime responds differently than the victim of another type of crime."

Altan recalls that after the Paris attacks, specifically, he went online searching for ways to offer and find immediate international assistance. "Mary was already letting people know on the Voices website that help was out there," he says. "She knew that our attack would trigger trauma in victims of 9/11 and other attacks. It was a very quick response, and it demonstrates the deep understanding of victims that her group has."

Today, Altan says, he is working with Fetchet and other leaders to influence European legislation being developed in response to continuing terror attacks there. "We're improving our expertise, taking the knowledge of Mary and others and spreading it across Europe," he says. "The reality is that when these attacks happen, the primary focus is on law enforcement, how we catch and stop the terrorists. And while that's enormously important, the victims can get lost in that conversation. They get forgotten. There are victims that need lifetime assistance. Meeting those needs is part of the response to terrorism. The work we're doing, that Mary is doing, it's critical to fighting terrorism. If we don't get this part right, too, then the terrorists are winning." victimsupport.eu



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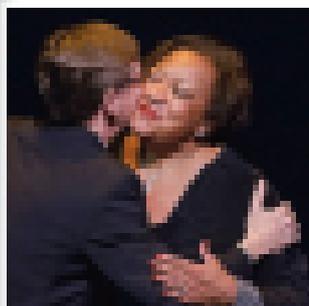


Photo by Mike Lee



OUR HOST

The evening will be hosted by author and Westport resident, James Haughton, director and regional vice president, James Haughton.



Save the Date
Thursday, November 17
6:30 – 9:30 p.m.