

Volunteering at VOICES

The staff at VOICES of September 11th is enormously grateful for the generosity of its dedicated volunteers, whose contributions have been invaluable to the organization's outreach, growth and influence. Their stories are truly inspirational. It is our hope their experiences will motivate you to join our team as a volunteer. Opportunities abound to share your talents, learn new skills, and impact others.

You might worry volunteering here evokes sadness, but in fact it's an optimistic place that provides comfort, purpose and hope. Volunteer Duane Orloske, who lost his wife Margaret on 9/11, is a great example. Two years ago, Duane decided to honor Margaret's memory by contributing to VOICES's 9/11 Living Memorial digital archive project. VOICES has created a web page for each of the nearly 3000 victims (available online at www.911livingmemorial.org), and is working with family members and friends to fill each one with photographs, keepsakes, and other mementos. Guest books are also available for stories and tributes. Duane worked with VOICES's team to create his wife's web page, and was so moved by the experience he decided to volunteer.

Now he and his equally dedicated fiancé Kate O'Brien help organize other families' precious artifacts as they are entered into the digital archive. They try with great sensitivity to express each victim's story and know they are not only providing solace for loved ones, they are documenting an important historical record. As Duane says, "Families want to convey the humanity of the whole event, not just the facts."

Duane and Kate feel strongly that when future generations look back on 9/11, they should see more than names on a plaque or a Web site; they should understand that each and every victim had a rich life worthy of great honor. Kate notes that as she's worked on the archive, she's become "really intimate with the people. They become real, not just victims of some terrorist thing." The global impact of terrorism is very personal.

Alessandra Benedetti, who lost her husband Paul on 9/11, agrees. She says we can "brush aside negativity" by concentrating on how loved ones lived their lives. Alessandra first learned of VOICES when her mother-in-law began participating in one of its support groups. An interior designer struggling with her own loss, Alessandra soon felt the desire to help in some way, but wasn't sure how to contribute. Today, she travels from Queens to Connecticut once a week, to help scan photographs and memorabilia (such as poems and letters) into the digital archive. She knew little about computers before and was happy to learn a new skill. But more importantly, she believes volunteering has helped her greatly in the healing process.

Working on the Living Memorial, and seeing the ways in which others honor their family members, makes her "feel good," which surprised her after living with intense grief. She's inspired by people's stories and feels she's a part of something important. She wants everyone, whether they were personally affected by 9/11 or not, to know those who died— their interests, their accomplishments, their unique sensibilities. Alessandra loves the idea of celebrating their everyday lives, and seeing just how much they were

treasured. "Another thing that makes it special," Alessandra says, "is being part of the VOICES family."

Frank Fetchet, whose son Brad died during the World Trade Center attacks, volunteers full time at VOICES. Frank was an executive at IBM when he lost Brad. Soon afterwards, he and his wife Mary began inviting families affected by the disaster to their home. VOICES was thus launched, and by 2005 Frank had left IBM, dedicating his life to its mission. His extensive experience in the business arena has been invaluable to VOICES' growth; his knowledge of strategy and development has helped propel the organization forward, and its impact is now widely felt.

Frank is very grateful for all he and Mary have been able to accomplish: "I have found volunteering at VOICES to be particularly fulfilling. My role at IBM satisfied so many things for 33 years, yet I was looking for something more. In simple terms, it feels deeply gratifying to be part of the VOICES family, helping the many extraordinary people who make up the 9/11 community. Deep down, I also do this in memory of our son Brad and, if the truth be known, do it for myself as part of my own healing journey. This is a perfect volunteer environment, as our small nonprofit impacts so many."

VOICES offers numerous resources for its members including teleconference support groups, case management services, and a weekly e-newsletter. These services have helped thousands of survivors not only cope with unimaginable loss, but also move forward with optimism to new and rewarding experiences.

Talking with Duane, Kate, Alessandra and Frank, one sees that family members and others impacted by 9/11 can heal in remarkable ways, by honoring loved ones and by working to prevent similar disasters.

VOICES needs assistance throughout the year, as well as during the September 10th and 11th Commemorative Events in lower Manhattan. While special skills are helpful (particularly communications, graphic design, computer science and public policy), they are not required. Any offer of time would be much appreciated.

VOICES also seeks high school and college interns. Its Summer Internship Program provides hands-on experience for students interested in 9/11 issues, public policy reform, and non-profit organizations. Opportunities are also available during the school year. VOICES has recruited exceptional interns from Fairfield University, Mount Holyoke College, New York University, Norwalk Community College, and New Canaan High School and welcomes applications from all interested students.

For more information on volunteer opportunities at VOICES of September 11th, please visit www.voicesofsept11.org or call (203) 966-3911.

