

Mary Fetchet

Fighting Back after the 9/11 Attack

by CHRIS HODENFIELD



This New Canaan mother lost her son during the attacks on 9/11. Since then she has been fighting for changes to prevent attacks and to help 9/11 families.

“You can throw the book out on the cycles of grief...each family is taking it differently.”

People have been telling Mary Fetchet for years that she should write a book. Her usual response is that she'd have no idea what to write, but after one conversation with the energetic New Canaan woman, the theme seems pretty clear: resiliency in the face of disaster.

People know her now for her work at the helm of the VOICES of September 11th organization, which has grown to such a dimension that even the likes of the Clintons and Tony Blair throw their weight in support of it. But Mary's worldview extends past the events of 9/11. Every day, somewhere in the world, disaster strikes. She thinks of the Gulf Coast. She thinks of Haiti, where 200,000 people died in one day. After what she has been through, she thinks a lot about survivors everywhere who have been left alone to deal with the inexpressible.

Mary knows what it is like to be traumatized by grief. The present trajectory

of her life was set by the sound of her son Brad's voice on her home answering machine. He had called from the South Tower of the World Trade Center at around 9 a.m. to report that the other tower had been hit. “Love you,” he said. He was only twenty-four years old.

In the first year after the 9/11 terrorist strike, Mary went on the warpath to demand that politicians explain how it could have happened. But then a larger picture began to form. Trained as a clinical social worker, she had spent the previous decade talking to people who needed, more than anything, someone to talk to. She has a soft, soothing, slightly southern lilt in her voice, which was doubtless calming to patients at the Bridges, a mental health clinic in Milford where she once worked.

Her workday now commences in New Canaan, where, from the Cherry Street headquarters of VOICES of September 11th, she directs a staff who helps the bereaved record the histories of those friends and relatives who lost their lives. She describes their mission this way: “In 2006 VOICES launched the 9/11 Living Memorial Project to commemorate the nearly 3,000 lives lost and document the firsthand accounts of survivors and rescue and recovery workers. Since the project began, our staff has met with over 800 family members and hundreds of survivors to create an online collection of over 40,000 images, including photographs, written materials, and photographs of personal keepsakes. We have hosted workshops in hundreds of communities around the country. The archive is an ongoing project that will continue to expand over time and also includes video interviews and oral histories.”

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Frank and Mary Fetchet with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Mr. Blair was keynote speaker at this year's Voices of September 11th Annual gala, called *Always Remember*. Held in New York City, the event's honorary chairman was former President Bill Clinton

The project is part of the healing process for the survivors, including children who were too young to have many memories of a parent or other family member. In a video on VOICES' website, Mary calls the digital archive the families' project; "VOICES is only the facilitator."

For those who just need to talk, six social workers are on call in their offices in New Canaan and New Brunswick, New Jersey. Advice is plentiful and free. "Our social work staff provides the support and guidance needed to assist the families and survivors through this emotional but very healing journey of creating a meaningful tribute to those lost," she notes.

The hallways are usually swarming with volunteers. Mary looks across the clutter of her desk and smiles as she says, "It's multitasking, for sure."

And the calls keep coming. "Every day we hear from someone who is calling us for the first time. They may need scholarship information or a service provider. They might need information about a memorial event. It could be information about identifying remains of their loved ones almost nine years later. So we share that information."

Everyone gets a chance to tell his or her story. Among the newcomers they might be helping is a thirteen-year-old who lost

a parent on 9/11 at the age of four. "With the access to technology, they can see and read anything they want to. And that's pretty frightening when you're trying to protect a child and build resiliency—you don't want them exposed to a video of the buildings falling down or some of the horrific visuals of the day."

She smiles gently. "You can throw the book out on the cycles of grief. 9/11 is a national tragedy, and due to the media coverage each family is dealing with it differently.

"As we're approaching the tenth anniversary, we're finding ways to reach out to people who may not recognize what they went through. Giving them a chance to tell their story both documents history and validates the experience they went through. That in itself is a healing process."

The organization has hosted workshops where twenty-five family members—from grandparents to nieces—sat in a room together for the first time and talked about what happened nine years ago. "A lot of people are still having a difficult time. They don't want to go through pictures and videos. Some people are very

"There was a whole group of people who were overlooked. Think about siblings and extended family members, uncles, aunts, who have lost someone."

organized—that's all they've done since 9/11, put together photo books and organize foundations. But for other people, it's still too painful a process.

"So some people come with the photographs nicely put together, and other people bring it in a box in the trunk. We scan it and help them go through it all. There's a real strength in building communication and sharing. It's not about collecting the content, it's about providing the support and guidance that empowers the families to honor their loved ones.

"I also think there was a whole group of people who were overlooked. Think about siblings and extended family members, uncles, aunts, who have lost someone they might have known forty years.

"If you worked at Cantor Fitzgerald [headquartered in the World Trade Center], you may have lost 600 friends in one day. People don't realize the challenges that person may have as a result of that loss. Or the people who were down there that day and witnessed the experience," she says.

Now the Living Memorial is reaching further afield to meet with families and friends who live around the country and in other nations. The farther families live outside the tristate area, the more disconnected they feel. "This year we began meeting with the families and survivors of the Pentagon attack living in Washington, D.C.; we travel to the Boston area regularly; and last November we traveled to London, England, to meet with families of the sixty-seven UK victims who perished on 9/11. Over ninety countries lost citizens on 9/11," she says.


Fundraising is proceeding and the 9/11 community is expanding as extended family members, survivors, and rescue and recovery workers are contacting VOICES for the first time. "The more time that passes, the fewer resources are available. We don't have VA hospitals, for instance. Victims of terrorism—or any natural disaster—don't have an organization that they can stay connected with, that would provide information and support like a VA hospital would."

The risk, Mary says, is the urge to "pathologize" the survivors. "People think everyone should be in therapy, when often times they just need support and guidance from someone who understands." She wonders if the first service providers were equipped to deal with post-traumatic stress. "They didn't have the skills because they were traumatized themselves.

"VOICES has created a unique model, which is guided by the evolving needs of the 9/11 community we serve."

So where does a social worker pick up the considerable skills it takes to lash together such an organization? Mary says they come from her life experience as the mother of three energetic sons and the strength and determination she learned from her mother and father. Her husband, Frank, worked at IBM and his job required them to move seven times in eleven years. "So, personally, I did a lot of organizing with my three sons' school and sports activities. My background as a clinical social worker has guided the organization." Not long ago Frank Fetchet retired from IBM after thirty-five years to be a full-time volunteer at VOICES of September 11th.

It would follow that anyone so driven to get people to share their thoughts would make sure that the stories they've gathered are not hidden from the world. That goes for the 40,000 images collected as well. The group has formed partnerships with many other organizations, including the Museum at Ground Zero.

Survivors, Mary notes, almost live on a September-to-September calendar, and she knows the tenth anniversary of 9/11 next year and the upcoming trials of the terrorists will bring added pressures on some survivors to finally come forward with their thoughts. Her sense, however, is that building a supportive community and empowering individuals by giving them a voice to tell their personal stories will create a historical record and promote resiliency in the challenging years ahead. Life will only get better with more voices rising. 

Bonnie & Eamon

A New Canaan Author's Message about 9/11

by KIKI KOROSHETZ



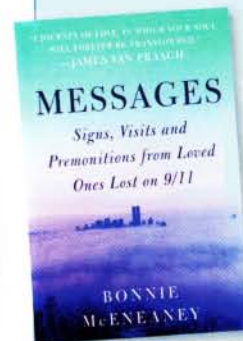
Bonnie McEaney

New Canaan resident Bonnie McEaney lost her husband, Eamon, in the terrorist attacks on 9/11. In her new book, *Messages: Signs, Visits and Premonitions from Loved Ones Lost*

on 9/11, she points to signs that suggest that lost loved ones remain close. She recalls stepping outside her home a few days after Eamon passed and feeling him all around her.

In the book Bonnie weaves together spiritual experiences of

friends and family of the victims, including a neighbor who saw her daughter's godfather after his death and a friend in London who was visited by Eamon ten days after the



This new book deals with redefining loss after 9/11

attacks. Each story has deepened Bonnie's conviction that death is not a permanent event and that relationships with loved ones continue. Reflecting on her work, she tells us, "It's about hope. It's about life, and love," and speaks fondly of connections she has made with fellow New Canaanites, including Mary Fetchet of VOICES of September 11th.

Bonnie recently appeared on ABC's 20/20 and will be reading from *Messages* at the Darien Community Association, October 26, 10 a.m. messagesbook.com