

Commentary: 9/11, 16 years later: The scenes then and now



The only World Trade Center presentation model still in existence is viewed during a preview of the National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York City. (Spencer Platt / Getty Images)

By **Joanne Cleaver**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2017, 8:00 AM

I nearly stepped on her as I walked down West Broadway in Lower Manhattan on a fine day with a bright blue sky last April.

About to step off the curb, I glanced down and she smiled up at me from the sidewalk, glossy brown hair, perfect teeth, wide optimistic eyes.

I jumped back. How had they overlooked her? Had her photo peeled off the wooden fence and floated down to this square of concrete, overlooked and stepped over for years?

As I picked up the photo it unfolded: It was a page torn from a magazine. It was new, not a missing-person flyer from Sept 12, 2001.

I tossed the damp page into a nearby trash can and kept walking toward the National September 11 Memorial and Museum. It was only a few blocks south.

It feels so yesterday, doesn't it? Like the Challenger disaster, like the day JFK was assassinated. I stayed home from kindergarten and watched his funeral on TV where I saw Caroline and her little brother stand so still by their thin mother and wondered why my own mother, sitting beside me on the sofa, was sobbing. When the Challenger disaster happened, I was taking my preschooler to a play program and a friend stopped me on the staircase of the Evanston YMCA and told me. Then she disappeared into the locker room to dry off kids after their swim lessons and I stood on the stairs thinking of Christa McAuliffe, the first "everyday" woman astronaut and a mom, on that shuttle.

On Sept. 11, 2001, I was typing away in my then-home office in Wilmette when another writer called. "We're under attack," she said breathlessly.

"What?" I asked, stupidly.

"Turn on your TV," she said.

I turned instead to CNN.com, which clutched and staggered under its sudden popularity. I gave up on the internet and went into the family room and turned on the television and was still sitting there when the kids came home from school.

But then just two months later I was in New York with my then-high school senior, visiting colleges. We went down to the steaming pile that was once the twin towers and watched the workers in hard hats in their finest moments and picked our way past St. Paul's Chapel and its construction-zone lawn.

"How can you think of letting her go to school in New York?" asked several women in my circle of friends.

How could I not? That was where the best school for her was, and so she went.

Sixteen years later, I went back.

How do you memorialize an event that is both past and present? It happened that one day but replays endlessly on television, in news references, and in our shared awareness. The posthumous 9/11 babies are now in high school. It will be another 85 or so years before they, the final ones directly linked to the 2,977 people who died, are themselves gone and the past is completely in the past.

At the museum's plaza, the two square footprints of the towers are now black holes with water endlessly flowing down out of sight. The museum places a cut rose on each victim's name on his or her birthday, which means that something is always dying there.

You'd think that with the endless loop of coverage on every anniversary there would be nothing left to experience in the dark geometry of the museum's lower levels, down beneath the falling water.

But there is.

The totem-pole steel beam painted with the numbers gone from the NYPD, the NYFD and the other Ds. The upside-down mushroom clouds of the towers' collapse loom overhead on huge photo murals as they cannot on our home screens. Witnesses said office papers rained down like confetti and piled up like snow: Here framed on the wall are a handful of tattered, partly burned memo pages. Witnesses said the glass rained down like glitter: Here in a glass case are broken shards the size of paperweights. The photocopied missing persons flyers are preserved in panels, black and white, urgently written, not slick and produced like the page that I nearly stepped on a few blocks north.

The museum is as much about American resilience as it is about those erased on that day. Exhibits of collective determination abound: a quilted cityscape is made up of patches, one for each victim, including official insignias for police and firefighters, the stitched skyline fading to ever-lighter blue and white squares and victims' names threaded in the cotton atmosphere.

A museum is only as good as its gift shop. The 9/11 museum is stocked to the ceiling with NYPD and NYFD swag; the official report of the 9/11 Commission in thick hardcover; stuffed dogs wearing "first responder" vests; The museum has made a pretty logo of a Callery pear tree, now called the Survivor Tree, because it was transplanted from the rubble and blooms every spring. It makes for pretty dishes and magnets. They sell briskly.

I rode the escalators back up to the light and strolled out of the black memorial under the blue sky and found myself walking again by St. Paul's Chapel, by arching flowering trees. The breeze was light and pink petals sifted down like confetti and banked the walls like memos, like snow.

Joanne Cleaver is a communication consultant who lives near Traverse City, Mich.