

## **OUR STORY OF 9/11 - IN HONOR OF ITS 10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY – SO WHY TODAY?**

By: Mary Lahti – September 2011

I don't write a blog because I don't really have the time, nor do I really have a whole lot of interesting things to say and why would anyone care to read my word combinations when there are so many out there much more interesting. So why today? Well, recently my husband Jim and I were at a gathering at a dear friend's house and we talked to one of the guests about some of our experiences during the events of 9/11 and she mentioned how she noticed that some of her memories of that time were starting to fade.

Although that day's events are still very clear for me and it is hard to believe it has been ten years, they made me realize I did not want to lose those memories and felt I should document them. Not because I have to hang on to them or because I can't let go, but because during one of the scariest and most shocking events in many of our lives, I experienced heart-warming and even funny stories that showed the opposite side of human behavior worth remembering and documenting, perhaps even more so than the horror. September 2011 also marks my husband Jim's and my ten-year anniversary in New York City.

Therefore, I decided to document and share my personal story and dedicate this especially to our personal angels (named at the end of the story) who helped provide a balance of humanity among the chaos while of course remembering those lives lost, the survivors, and the heroes.

If you read this story of my personal experience, I hope you find it to be a story of survival, hope and perhaps are even able to crack a smile.

### ***The story begins...***

#### **Good Bye Golden Gate Towers, Hello World Trade Center Towers:**

August 2001 my husband Jim and I sold our Bernal Heights home in San Francisco and were in the process of purchasing a co-op in Washington Heights in New York. Yup, we were moving to New York City! Jim was already in New York staying with a friend while I took care of things in San Francisco sending our belongings off to storage until the sale off our co-op was complete. Why on earth was I leaving my home, my family, and my comfortable job and acting career for a place where I didn't know anyone or had any real connections? Oh, and I hate hot weather. Granted, there were more opportunities in New York for Jim as he was joining on as one of the members of the OMNI Ensemble and starting to work on another musical project. One night, Jim was being interviewed live on WNYC by George Preston and I was listening to the interview on the internet while I was packing in S.F. There was excitement in his voice as he discussed his compositions, his new CD and one of the pieces being programmed in a future concert. It was obvious New York was the place to be.

August 31<sup>st</sup>, I celebrated my brother's birthday which was a bittersweet event since I was leaving on September 1<sup>st</sup> with our cat, Casper. That was one of the most emotional and *long* coast to coast flights I have ever experienced as I said good bye to my home and San Francisco's beautiful Golden Gate. Cramped in a carrying case under a seat

on the airplane, I'm sure Casper was writing up this experience in his kitty memoirs as one of the top ten reasons he hated his owners.

### **LOFT Sweet Temporary LOFT:**

Jim was able to find a temporary place for us to stay for a month until our co-op was ready. An artist friend let us house sit his art loft in Tribeca on Warren Street while he was away. This was perfect because it was only a block away from where I was relocating my job from the SF office to the NYC office in Tower Two of the World Trade Center. Walking distance! After spending the first week trying to take care of relocation business and following up on our purchase of the co-op with the loan officer from hell, I requested a couple more vacation days just to try to relax a bit before starting in the new office.

### **No Accident:**

September 11, 2001 we were going to take a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. I woke up around 8:30am and it was an absolutely beautiful fallish feeling day. Jim and the cat were still asleep. As I was sitting on the couch, at 8:46am, I heard a very loud engine noise over the loft and then a sudden crash and explosion. I froze as Jim woke up saying, "What the hell was that?" I said, "I don't know, but it sounded like an attack." I'm not sure what made me say those words. I then heard loud voices on the street. I told Jim I was going to go outside and see if I could figure out what was going on and come right back.

I saw a crowd forming at the corner. When I got there, I looked up and against a crisp blue sky, I saw a perfect hole in the middle of the North Tower with flames and billows of smoke pouring out. When someone said a plane had crashed into the building, I just knew it was no accident. It was unreal. I couldn't help thinking how there was no hope for those poor people on the floors above the crash. As I ran back into the loft, I was shaking and could hardly talk when I told Jim what happened. We turned on the TV to find some news and we started to hear sirens and helicopters outside. Bits of news started coming in but nothing confirming whether the crash was an accident nor how those people might be saved if at all. Jim said he was going to take a walk to the corner and look for himself. As I watched the news, at 9:03am, I heard another big explosion and screaming from the street. As I ran to the window to look for Jim, he was running back inside yelling that a plane hit the other tower. We were both feeling sick to our stomachs as we sat together in shock not knowing quite what to think or to do as news reports were starting to confirm this seemed to be a terrorist attack. Luckily, our cat seemed to be oblivious of anything that was going on and yet, we still tried not to show that we were stressed about anything in front of him after his little life change ordeal.

The news reported that New York bridges and tunnels were closed and the FAA had halted all flight operations at U.S. airports, then the news about another crash into the Pentagon came in. There wasn't much of a window from the loft and any sound of a helicopter or plane shook us up not knowing if it was another attack.

At that moment, realization sunk in that perhaps my future office mates might be trapped in the building or might not even be alive since they were above the 20<sup>th</sup> floor. I only had a couple of company phone numbers with me. I attempted to call my new

manager but of course, I couldn't get through. My next attempt was to call our company HR rep in New Jersey but I got her voicemail -- I really wanted to talk to a human being. Instead, I just left a message saying I was okay since I had the day off but I was unsure of the lives of those employees in the building. Jim and I didn't want to wake up family in California or worry them but thought we'd better call and let them know we were okay especially not knowing how the news was being reported out there.

We had lost reception on the TV all together since the TV antenna on top of one of the towers was no longer functioning but luckily we were able to get some reception on a radio.

### **Shake Rattle and Rumble 10:05am:**

Around 10:05, we heard a rumble and felt the loft shake. We started to notice it getting dark but not like it gets when it clouds up, more like when the sun sets. Jim and I just went to the couch holding each other as it went to pitch black and the rumble and noise got louder. We heard the radio announcer saying, "Oh my God, the South Tower is collapsing!" and we thought the tower was falling directly on top of us! We didn't say anything -- we just sat there holding each other as we heard screams outside and my only thought was we were about to die. After the rumble subsided we noticed that light started to shine through again. We looked towards the window and saw a rain of ash and debris flying in front of the window. It appeared that the building had missed us. We walked to the window to witness the streets, cars, and buildings completely covered in ash, dust and debris and not a soul was in sight. At first we couldn't tell if people were buried or if they had found cover. For a few minutes, there was total silence outside and the only movement was the few files and pieces of papers floating down from the sky landing on the fire escape. Jim and I didn't know what to say to each other. We were numb. The radio announcer reported that the building had fallen straight down. We started to hear more sirens, and saw more police and even tanks rolling down the streets. The news reported that a plane had crashed in Pennsylvania.

### **10:28am:**

The rumble happened again but this time the light did not go to pitch black. Tower One had fallen and also fell straight down. The smoke, dust and debris seemed to last a bit longer this time and the devastation was unbelievable.

At that point, we no longer had any running water. Eventually I saw police walking around outside and a few people with dust masks carrying water bottles so I told Jim I would cover myself up and go find out if there was a place to get water. The fallish air had turned to a hot dusty and smoke-filled sky making it very difficult to breathe especially since I have asthma. A police officer told me there was a place around the corner providing whatever water they had. I was able to get a couple bottles of water and started to rush back. But as I tried to return to the loft, an officer stopped me at the corner and said I could not walk into the frozen zone. I explained that I had left the loft just to get water and I was going back. He asked for my ID to prove I lived there but I explained my husband and I had just arrived to New York and were staying at the loft. He said I couldn't go through. The officer said people were being evacuated and pointed to Tower 7 which was on fire and told me it could go at any minute and I had to leave. I begged him and explained that nobody had come to tell us that we needed to

evacuate and I needed to go back to get my husband. Finally the other officer with him told him to just let me go. I could hardly walk up the stairs I was so shaken. I told Jim we needed to evacuate but where, we did not know.

Just then, we were both surprised to hear the phone ring. It was the brother of the loft owner. He was equally surprised to hear a strange voice answer. When we explained we were just visiting and told him the loft itself seemed to be in okay condition, he said, "Well, if you need anything..." and Jim mentioned that yes actually, we needed a place to go and by the way, we had a cat. He graciously provided his address and told us to come on over.

### **GROUND ZERO:**

We were about to leave what was now defined as Ground Zero! In an odd way, I felt strange and didn't want to leave the area and in another way, I wanted to get the hell out of there. Luckily our destination wasn't too far of a walk (1.5 miles, as it happens) considering my asthma and bad back to deal with. We grabbed a couple overnight items and put a big wet towel over the cat's travel case to protect him from the dust. When we left, an officer gave us masks to wear.

As we started our walking journey through the thick ash, we couldn't believe the devastation we were seeing. The twin towers were replaced by heavy billowing smoke and Tower 7 was in flames. There were numerous damaged buildings and crushed cars hit by falling debris. More emergency vehicles and tanks were going towards the site as people evacuating walked away from the area against the photographers and news crew trying to get closer. We were told by officers that once we left we couldn't get back into the zone. We didn't really know what that meant but figured that meant just for the day.

### **Our Kind Hosts in Washington Square:**

We arrived at our hosts' apartment in Washington Square. They were very kind and even built a kitty litter box for Casper! Although we were not that far away from Ground Zero and it was still hard to breathe, we were far enough away to feel safe and it felt good to be around more intact civilization.

### **JANICE HUFF!!**

We returned to the apartment where our hosts had made us a nice dinner. Although we were safe and I was very thankful we had a place to stay, I was still anxious and in a bit of shock. So much had happened all at once going from leaving my comfort zone in San Francisco to an evacuation zone in New York. Our hosts had their television on showing news coverage most of the day. I then heard Janice Huff's voice reporting the weather and somehow her voice was very comforting. Janice Huff was my favorite meteorologist in San Francisco before she moved to New York, and there she was – a familiar and calming voice that as silly as it sounded, made me feel a bit like I was home. Since then, I have always wanted her to know just how much her voice provided some comfort to me that day.

### **The Morning After and A Burnt Sky:**

It was a sleepless night with periodic sounds of sirens and the smell of burning air through the night. In the morning, Jim and I ventured out of the apartment for a bit and found fresh brewed coffee being given away for free at the Porto Rico Coffee store. As we sat at the little park nearby, the atmosphere was like a science fiction movie. We sat against a burnt sky with the distant view of smoke as tanks rumbled down the street. People wandered around rather aimlessly as if they wanted to talk about the events of the day but didn't know what to say.

That morning the news reported residents were not being allowed back into the area or into their homes and there was no estimate on when the restriction would be lifted. Understandably so, our hosts said they were leaving town and they really couldn't have us stay there. At that point, it had finally hit me and I started crying uncontrollably. We didn't know where we would go. Jim was somehow amazingly calm. He had made a few phone calls and an actress friend of ours in San Francisco contacted an actress friend of hers in New York and asked if she could help some friends in trouble. This woman – this *angel* – said she would be happy to take us in.

In order for us to get to our next destination on the Upper West Side, Jim called a friend he knew who lived up there who agreed to drive us there. Our hosts were kind enough to drive us to the “border” so we could catch our ride. Jim's friend was waiting on the other side. The “border” was 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

### **Our Upper West Side Angel:**

We already felt better as we traveled further away from Ground Zero into fresher air and into a neighborhood where it was almost as if nothing had happened. When we reached our host's apartment, she was standing there with her arms wide open like wings of an angel welcoming us into her home. It was as if we had been old friends. She had a studio apartment and I couldn't believe she had taken the two of us and our cat into her home. That first night when we went to bed, Casper gave us a dirty look and then turned around and slept with our host. I guess this experience too was getting included in his memoirs of the top ten reasons he hated us. Unfamiliar with and not yet used to the sound of New York City busses, their engines sounded much like the plane that flew overhead. Therefore, each time I heard a bus, it jarred my nerves.

The next day, I found out that all of my new office mates from Tower Two had survived since they left the building before the second plane hit. Only one colleague was in Tower One at the time of the crash and did not survive. I was told I could assist in opening up a temporary office downtown and therefore had a job at least for awhile. Since I could not get to any of my clothes that were still in the loft, our host was kind enough to lend me a couple of her dresses and she even had pants and a shirt that worked for Jim, although he did mutter quite a lot about the buttons being backwards..

Days went by and Jim and I worked tirelessly trying to get our closing date set so we could move into our place. We were also trying to find another place to stay to give our host a break since we had stayed much longer than expected. She never complained. During that time, we discovered other complications: since we didn't have a current address, we couldn't open up a checking account to take care of money issues or even

get access to money and we couldn't update our license which was the only ID we had which didn't do us too much good especially with heightened security everywhere.

After two weeks, our host had to leave town and we were once again looking for a place to stay. She had gone way above the call of duty to help us out but it was time to go.

### **Some Miracles Happen On Street Corners:**

Jim and I were literally standing on a street corner with cat in hand wondering where to go. Jim's cell phone rang and it was a miracle call that took us by surprise. Wonderful people from California called to tell us that we had a pet friendly room waiting for us at the Mayflower Hotel (which is no longer there) for at least 5 days. They had paid for our stay to give us a bit of extended time to work things out. I was weak with relief and in awe of such generosity. We discovered that the Mayflower Hotel was housing a number of residents with pets who had been evacuated from their apartments.

Our hotel housekeeper was just as sweet as could be. When she came to clean, she would check on Casper and talk to him. She even gave him his own bath mat to sleep on (when he wasn't under the bedspread).

### **There's No Place Like Home – Wait, How Many Heel Clicks Does It Take?**

FINALLY!!! A closing date set for September 25<sup>th</sup>! Perhaps if we had Dorothy's ruby slippers, this could have sped up the process. The closing should not have taken that long but at least we had an address and our own roof over our heads without having to rely on or burden others.

### **Hello Hello Hello Hello hello hello:**

There was quite an echo in our apartment. The moving company was giving us the run around about when they could deliver the furniture which had not yet even left California like we thought. Therefore, it was going to be awhile before we saw any furniture or clothes, dishes, etc. and it took numerous phone calls to follow up. We made due with some borrowed folding chairs, a cheap air bed and a small inexpensive TV purchased from a neighborhood store called El Mundo. Almost 3 weeks later, our furniture finally arrived. Some valuables were missing but at this point, we just wanted it all to end and we were happy we got what we got. Casper immediately identified the living room carpet and ran through the middle of it before we could even uncurl it so we just left him there awhile and let him enjoy the moment. If I could have fit, I would have joined him.

## **Miscellaneous Little Fun Mini Stories of “Thanks!”**

### **212:**

We could not get an appointment to have a phone line installed until December due to the allocation of resources needed to restore service in the downtown area after the attack. Jim was really hoping for a 212 area code but the lady on the phone said she didn't have any more 212 area code numbers available. While she was setting up the account information, Jim was telling her about the *Seinfeld* episode where Elaine couldn't get dates because she didn't have a 212 area code. When the lady was done and repeated back the information to set up the appointment, she said, “*Okay, your phone number will be ...(pause)... 212 ...(pause)....*” and you could just hear her smile over the phone.

***~ Thank you!***

### **Loan Officer From Hell:**

For some reason, we had the worst loan officer in the world. She would sit on our paperwork for days, wouldn't respond to our phone calls and lied. I contacted her manager but I got the impression they were best buddies because she would respond with a yes response but would not do anything even after explaining that we were homeless. Eventually, I contacted the main office to complain and requested that someone else take over our loan. Luckily our request was granted and our new loan officer was a breath of fresh air and took great care of us.

***~ Thank You!***

### **Got Room?**

Our wonderful real estate agent spent a good portion of his free time trying to find a temporary space for us. He even tried hard to get the building owner of our future co-op to allow us to stay in our place even though our closing date had not yet been set since this was an emergency situation. This apartment was among a number of empty, renovated apartments and they *still* would not allow us to stay in the place that was practically ours. The real estate agent found one woman who had offered us a room for a couple days which we almost accepted until she told us we would have to pay her \$1,000 -- money we did not have. When I questioned to see if I heard right, she said she was actually doing us a favor. He was not aware that this lady was going to do that. Oh well, he tried.

***~ Thank You!***

### **Hail to the Inhaler Lady:**

During the first week of the attack, I experienced breathing complications from the bad air and my rescue inhaler was back in the loft that we couldn't get to. My standard inhaler was not enough. I was able to get a hold of my doctor in California to request a prescription at a Duane Read pharmacy for pick up. She verified that the prescription was requested. Later when I went to pick up my inhaler, the pharmacists said he did not have a prescription under my name. I gave him the doctor details and he said he didn't have it. I told him I was having a lot of trouble breathing and asked if he could please call the doctor to verify since I didn't have a phone with me. He refused until I

started to get upset and then he looked like he was making a call but then quickly said he couldn't get a hold of her. He said if I was that bad then I should walk to emergency. I didn't have the strength to deal with him so I left.

We found a CVS Pharmacy and I attempted to see if someone there could help me get a prescription. A very nice lady at the counter took the time to listen to my story and took the doctor's phone number and made every attempt to contact her. Once she did, she said she would take care of getting the prescription filled as soon as possible and to come back in a bit. When I went back, it was indeed ready for me and she wished me luck.

***~ Thank You!***

Jim suggested that he get her some flowers and a thank you note for providing such great customer service and I thought that was a great idea. After Jim got the flowers, he walked into the pharmacy and kind of hid them so she wouldn't see them. He spotted her and asked for her business card (so he could see how to spell her name on the card). She looked a bit concerned by this. Jim wrote her name on the card and then presented the flowers and the card. Customers stopped to observe at that point. She asked what they were for and Jim told her it was for being so kind and helping me out. She then said, "I was just doing my job." And Jim said yes, but you did it so well. She teared up, said it was her pleasure and got a little applause from the onlookers. Jim announced to her and the people watching that by the way, it was okay, his wife knew he was giving her flowers. 😊

### **Oh, What Beautiful Flowers, I'll Take These!**

When Jim was looking for a place to buy flowers as a thank you for the lady at the pharmacy who provided such wonderful customer service, he came across a stand and picked out a nice bouquet he wanted. He walked around towards the front to find someone to ask the price only to notice that it was actually a firehouse and the flowers were part of the remembrance display for the firefighters who lost their lives. Thank goodness Jim actually looked up and figured it out before asking someone for the price. 😊

### **The Officers And A Gentleman:**

We tried a number of times to return to the loft as the city slowly started allowing more people back into the area to retrieve property and in some cases, move back in. But the loft was so close to Ground Zero and without proof of residence it was virtually impossible. While at the Mayflower Hotel, Jim got a call from a friend who was able to explain our story and elicit NYPD Chief of Departments Joseph Esposito's help in allowing us access to the loft. He sent around a cop car to pick up Jim from the hotel and take him directly to the loft. When they arrived at the loft, Jim was trying to take clothes out of the closet and one of the officers, a female, just looked at Jim struggling with my dresses and told him, "Oh give me those; let me do it." They were extremely nice and helpful and Jim perhaps learned a tip on how to properly hold a dress.

***~ Thank You!***

## **How to Respond to “How Are You” in a Christmas Card After a Terrorist Attack**

Christmas time had arrived and the challenge presented to us was how on earth to tell our friends who were not aware of our life change about our move and what happened without turning the holiday greeting into a downer. I decided to design a storybook greeting card that told the story through our cat, Casper in a cartoon format. That made it much lighter, let everyone know we had moved, explained how we handled the events and that we were okay. Oh, and happy holidays. 😊

## **Project RISE AND SHINE – A Tribute for a Neighborhood:**



Almost a year later and pretty settled, I wanted to give back and do something to try to help services still in need around Ground Zero. Jim and I thought of putting together a benefit concert at Symphony Space called “*Rise and Shine – A Tribute for a Neighborhood*” to raise money for the rebuilding/recovery efforts in Lower Manhattan. I had never really produced anything like this before but we spent every free moment trying to put it together. I changed the lyrics to Sondheim’s *Putting It Together*, *The Ladies Who Lunch*, and *Side By Side*; and Jim wrote wonderful arrangements for them. These lyrics were written to celebrate our heroes. I sent a letter to Mr. Sondheim’s office along with the lyrics and Jim’s arrangements requesting permission to use them for the special event. We were soooooo very close to getting approval after a number of back-and-forth conversations but the final decision at the end was no. In addition to wonderful participants and celebrities (listed below this story) I had received a handwritten response from Jerry Orbach thanking me for asking him to participate, and an apology for having another commitment that day, but wishing us luck. He was an amazing man! We had a lot of support for this benefit concert but unfortunately, it was September and the couple of sponsors who offered to provide support found that the company had already used their total funds for the year and were not able to follow through as planned.

~ ***Thank you!***

## **So The Question to Me Had Been, Why Did I Stay?**

I don’t know! I got that question a lot. Even Jim thought I would up and leave him or blame him. I left my safe place and arrived in chaos. But among the trauma, the thought of going back hadn’t really crossed my mind and I’m really not sure why. It wasn’t Jim’s fault and it wasn’t New York’s fault, that’s for sure. I love New York and I celebrate those who helped us cope with the chaos 10 years ago.

**THANK YOU!**

## **Celebrating our 10 year anniversary in New York by remembering our own heroes we will never forget!**

### **OUR PERSONAL ANGELS WE WILL NEVER FORGET:**

Below are some of the people who helped in some form or fashion and who we thank and appreciate to this day including those I may have failed to mention.~Thank You!

- Kelly Ground (SF) who contacted her friend in NYC to see if she could house us.
- Mary Baird the angel who housed us and our cat for 2 weeks in her studio
- Debbie Sepe who gave us free tickets to a Broadway show.
- The guy at the local store who donated the kitty litter box.
- Jack (RIP) and Barbara Mahalivich and the Mahalivich family (Calif) who stayed in contact, helped with cash and donated a week at the pet friendly hotel for 5 days.
- Don McGeen & Susan Lurie who picked us up from the zone's border to take us to our next destination for comfort and safety.
- Chief Esposito and the 2 wonderful officers who assisted in getting my husband in the loft to retrieve the medicine and our clothing.
- David & Robin Wechsler who helped get Chief Esposito to assist us and also provided a place for Jim to stay until I arrived to NY.
- Dan & Elaine Christensen who provided us a safe place to stay and built a kitty litter box the day of the attack.
- Janice Huff's (meteorologist) who was the one *familiar* voice that somehow provided comfort just from hearing her voice.
- Lisa Barto (SF) who provided emotional support and collected a donation from the office to help us out.
- The Red Cross who were amazing in providing a place of solace, beverages, use of a computer to contact friends and family and use of a phone.
- Lady at CVS Pharmacy who went out of her way to make sure I received my emergency asthma inhaler.
- Cleaning lady at the Mayflower Hotel who was so kind and looked out for our cat too.
- Country Wide loan officer who took over the loan from the loan officer from hell!
- The Temp Office space who gave us some mugs and water glasses.
- FEMA personnel who gave us enough emergency cash for food and some necessities.
- Bonnie Burgess & the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y who both lent pianos so Jim could practice for an upcoming concert.
- Real Estate agent who tried all he could to find us housing and tried to get the property owners to let us stay in the empty apartment that was basically ours.
- The WAMU employee (SF) who went above and beyond to help transfer money to us even though we had already closed our account and were no longer customers.
- The Porto Rico Coffee Company in the Village for giving away free coffee.
- Project *Rise and Shine* – thanks to the following who supported the effort:
  - George Preston from WNYC for agreeing to be Master of Ceremonies.
  - Leslie Motiwalla for having JP Morgan Chase consider funding our project.
  - Donna Lynn Champlin for agreeing to perform in the show.
  - The OMNI Ensemble and other professional musicians for agreeing to volunteer their talents.