

'My dad was a 9/11 hero now I'm living for him'

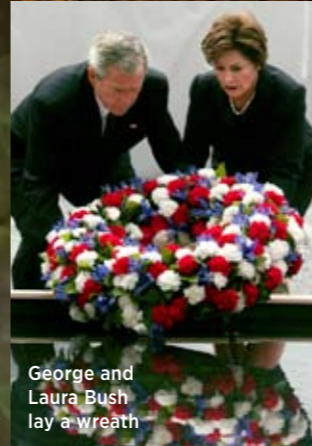
This September marks the 10th anniversary of when terrorists hijacked two planes and crashed them into New York's Twin Towers. It was an event that changed the world... but few lives more than that of Brielle Saracini, now 20



Marking the end of the recovery operation, after nearly nine months



Brielle's parents Victor and Ellen



George and Laura Bush lay a wreath



Brielle's father Victor was pilot of the second plane that crashed into the Twin Towers after being taken over by hijackers



A service held six months on from 9/11



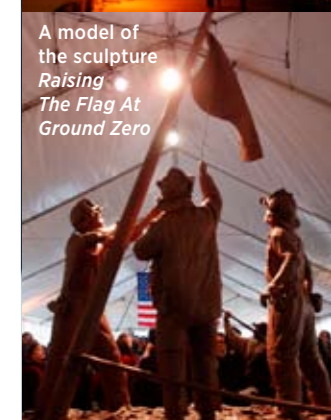
A firefighter takes a break from the clean up op



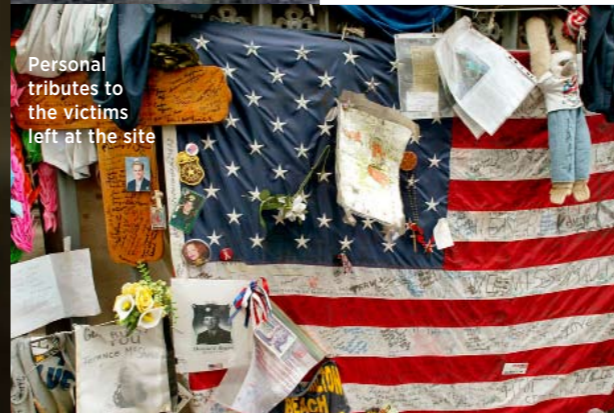
Devastation in NYC



The Tribute In Light has marked every anniversary of 9/11



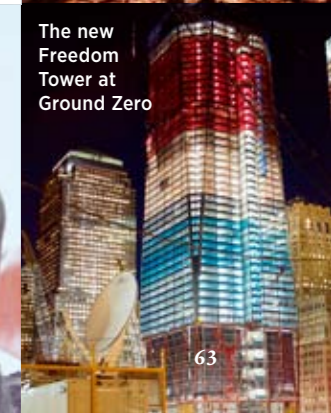
A model of the sculpture Raising The Flag At Ground Zero



Personal tributes to the victims left at the site



Victor was an inspiring father



The new Freedom Tower at Ground Zero

S

eptember 11 2001 began as just a normal day for 10-year-old Brielle Saracini. She was at school at 9.03am, blissfully unaware, like the rest of her class, that nothing would ever be the same again – from her safe childhood in Yardley, Pennsylvania to life in the rest of the world.

As she sat at her desk, she had no idea that 60 miles away her adored father, airline pilot Victor, was tragically making history as the pilot of Flight 175 – the second plane to be hijacked and flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. He, along with 65 passengers, was killed instantly.

In all, 2,977 people died that day, when 19 Al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger planes and flew two of them into the World Trade Center – causing both towers to collapse within two hours – and another into the Pentagon, while the last crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. There were no survivors from any of the flights.

A loving dad

As *Cosmopolitan* sits down with Brielle to talk about the impact of that day, it's clearly painful for her remembering her life before 9/11. Brielle looks like she has her father's eyes. While we talk in her picturesque garden, she smiles widely recalling happy times with her father – like days at the beach. She looks away, out over the horizon, when she speaks about her dad.

"My fondest memories are of family holidays at the coast," says Brielle. "We were so close. Dad loved playing with me and my elder sister Kirsten [now 23]. We were such happy children."

Victor Saracini was a hands-on father and loved nothing more than spending time with his daughters. "He had a great sense of humour and was always coming up with exciting stuff to do," says Brielle. "If we had a school science



Sisters Brielle (left) and Kirsten with a colleague of their dad's



Brielle's parents Victor and Ellen on a family holiday

project, other kids would pick a picture of an animal to talk about. But Dad and I would build a rocket and fire it into the sky from our backyard! He was so cool. He would invite my sister and me up to the cockpit. I loved being a pilot's daughter – I was so proud of him. When he wasn't around I would look at the sky, comforted that he was somewhere up there."

Although his job took him away from home for long periods, Brielle cherished every moment with her dad. "We'd rent a house on the beach every summer. Once I remember picking mussels with him, and when we got back at the house he showed me how to steam them, then we ate them together." That was the summer before 9/11 – what she didn't know was that they would never spend another one together. The last time Brielle ever saw her dad was a couple of nights before the tragedy. "He was going away for work. Dad was big on us saying good night and 'I love you' before bed. Looking back, I'm so glad."

The world changes

Then came that fateful morning. "That day, we were watching a movie in class," Brielle recalls. "Suddenly our teacher stopped the film. 'There's been an incident in New York,' she said. 'Does anyone know people in the area?' I wondered if my cousin

Drew was OK as he was a policeman there. I knew something serious had happened but I didn't worry about Dad. I just thought, 'He's in the sky, he'll be fine.'

"Mum picked me up after school with Kirsten and the church pastor. I knew something was wrong – it was obvious they'd been crying. But Mum was calm as she told me, 'There's been an accident, Dad's been hurt.' I just said, 'OK, when can we see him?' But Mum shook

her head and said, 'I don't think we're going to see him again.' I didn't get the severity of it all – I guess I couldn't take it in. Still, Mum somehow held it together for our sakes."

When Brielle got home, everything felt eerily normal. "It's not like Dad was always there, so it didn't seem that different," she says. "But later our street filled up with journalists trying to get near the house."

The press were so hungry for stories, they began to harass Brielle's friends.

Despite the media attention, Brielle still couldn't comprehend the loss of her dad. "I waited for good news. I was certain there would be a miracle; that Dad would turn up. It just didn't sink >

"I knew something serious had happened, but I just thought, 'Dad's in the sky, he'll be fine.'"

in that he was gone," she says. While others around the world watched the shocking images on the news, Brielle's mum kept the girls away from the TV as it played a constant loop of the final moments of their father's life.

Dealing with grief

Incredibly, Brielle went back to school the next day. "Everything at home was a bit weird. Mum tried to stay strong, but there were times when she broke down. So it was easier to be at school, to have that focus. And I knew how important education was to Dad. I wanted to be at school for him."

Two months after the tragedy, Brielle's mother suggested the family 'complete' their father's journey, flying from Boston to Los Angeles. "On 11 November, Mum, Kirsten and I flew the journey Dad never finished. At the end there was a memorial and many of the victims' families attended. I wore Dad's pilot hat and felt so proud," says Brielle. "It was hard, as it finally hit home to us that Dad wasn't coming back. But that was important too. And sharing it with other victims helped me see we weren't alone."

Over the years, the Saracini family attended various memorials. "I met President Bush at the 2003 service at Ground Zero," says Brielle. "I remember them reading out the victims' names, and when Dad's was called, we held each other tightly." At another, in Victor's hometown of Atlantic City, thousands turned out to pay their respects – including every pilot who had ever flown with him. Eventually, though, the family decided to spend subsequent anniversaries doing something more low-key. "We spend the day with another 9/11 family, listening to music and remembering our loved ones," she says.

Tough times

Over the years, Brielle and her family have tried to live as normally as possible. "Kirsten and I argue like all sisters do, but 9/11 has made us stronger and closer," she says. But there have been painful points. "My graduation was bittersweet. Dad would have been proud and I was so sad he wasn't there. And Father's Day is always hard, but my friends are so supportive."

One of the things Brielle found most helpful was Camp Better Days, a summer camp for grieving 9/11 children. "I have

gone every year since I was 12, and it's been my rock. It's like a big support group. It's better than therapy because they don't force you to talk about anything. You jump in the lake, you play games. Of course, 9/11 is the reason we're all there, so eventually we share, but in our own time. The most important people in my life are from that camp."

This September she will have to deal, once again, with the anniversary, as TVs start showing the awful footage. "I can't



Brielle is proud to be a pilot's daughter

watch it," says Brielle. "I don't watch the news, and I still haven't seen that moment properly. It isn't how I want to remember Dad." Despite everything, Brielle refuses to feel anger towards the terrorists. "They want us to be angry, that's why they did it. I was shown at camp to take negative situations and come at them with love."

Moving on

Brielle is now a counsellor at Camp Better Days. "There are kids going there now who never knew the people they lost. It helps that I can share my experience." And two years ago she began helping Tuesday's Children, a charity that provides support and services for kids affected by terrorism around the world. "Giving something back helps me," she smiles.

Brielle knows there are tough times to come. "It's hard knowing that Dad won't be at my wedding. But I try to focus on all the amazing times we did have, and doing things that would make him proud. I've just started dating someone, I'm studying Human Development at Boston College, and I'm going to Ireland for a term." That's where Brielle will be on the 10th anniversary. "I know Dad would love to see me travelling the world and enjoying my studies. The events of 11 September have taught me that you shouldn't waste a second of life, and I don't intend to."

10 years later – is it time for a new chapter?



Kirsten Morehouse, 41, a model agent from New York, lost her 22-year-old sister Lindsay in 9/11.

"The bad guy has been killed; that's all the closure you can really get. The world is a safer place now that they've killed Bin Laden. What else can you do? We're not going to get an apology from the terrorists – but at least their leader has been stopped. The 10th anniversary is a day to help put the tragedy behind us. This is a time to look forward."



Beth Patterson, 60, a psychotherapist from New York, provided grief counselling for 9/11 victims.

"People should never close the book on 9/11. Instead, we have to continue our lives, carrying our loved ones with us. Anniversaries can be very difficult, especially 10-year marks. It isn't closure for victims, and it won't take the pain away, but it's an outlet for that grief – and people need that."

9/11: the legacy

* A survey revealed that, during the aftermath of 9/11, Americans swapped drinking, eating out and shopping for saving, going to church and giving to charity. A poll of New York singles showed that a third were more interested in

marriage and children after the attacks. Psychologists believe cataclysmic events like 9/11 make people more aware of their mortality, so they focus on the things that really matter. * Some reports suggested that

30% of New Yorkers suffered post-traumatic stress disorder in the six months after 9/11, causing sleep disorders and alienation – while eight million Americans reported feeling depressed.

* In the weeks after the tragedy, there were media

reports on the rise of 'terror sex' – where couples – (and singles) wanted to stay in and have sex because work and possessions 'didn't matter' and only relationships were 'real'. A resulting baby boom was widely predicted, but the 2002 birth rate actually fell. ♦