

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
reads like fiction but  
it's all true



Candlelight vigils held after the attacks

# From TERROR to HOPE



The Twin Towers on September 11, 2001



The Pentagon after being attacked



The wreckage of the Twin Towers



Ground Zero in New York City



The Manhattan skyline today

## One girl's incredible story of survival and healing in the wake of September 11

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



Helaina Hovitz

**AS YOU READ** Think about what the article's title means.

The morning of September 11, 2001, dawned cool and bright in New York City, a welcome relief after the steamy summer rain the day before. Like most of the 8 million people who lived in the city, 12-year-old Helaina Hovitz was getting ready for the day. An only child, Helaina lived in a tall apartment building at the southern end of Manhattan. She brushed her hair one last time and dashed out the door.

Outside, Helaina and her friend Nadine wove their way through the hustle and bustle of downtown Manhattan to their middle school. Around them, the city vibrated with life. Men and women in perfectly pressed suits emerged from the subways, clutching their coffee cups and newspapers. Police officers directed traffic. The sound of construction and honking taxis formed a familiar cacophony.



TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: THINKSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES; BRAD RICKERBY/REUTERS; BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: THE NEW YORK TIMES; MOLLY RILEY/REUTERS; COURTESY OF HELAINA HOVITZ; JOE RADELE/GETTY IMAGES; ETHAN MILLER/REUTERS; DOUG KANTER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; 2001 THE RECORD/GETTY IMAGES; MOMENT GETTY IMAGES

To many New Yorkers, the city felt like the center of the world—a place of opportunity, business, culture, and diversity. Step into any subway car, and you could find yourself sandwiched between a millionaire banker, a tattooed teenager speaking French, and a photojournalist from South Africa.

Perhaps nothing symbolized the power and possibilities of New York City more than the pair of buildings that rose up from the World Trade Center at the southern tip of Manhattan: the Twin Towers.

At 110 stories, the two silver skyscrapers were the tallest in New York and could be seen for miles around. Helaina passed under their shadows each day on her way to school. But as she walked to school on the morning of September 11, what Helaina could not have imagined was that the city she loved was about to be attacked.

### “Take Me With You”

The floor shook.

The shelves rattled.

It was 8:46 a.m., and Helaina was sitting in first-period science. The students looked at each other in surprise. What was that strange noise? Helaina darted to the window, trying to see what was going on. She guessed a passing truck had popped a tire. But in fact, terrorists had deliberately crashed an airplane into one of the Twin Towers—the North Tower—a few blocks from Helaina’s school.

Then the sirens began.

Helaina’s teacher stepped out



**THE DAY OF TERROR**  
The view of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, from across the East River in Brooklyn

for a moment. When he returned, he told the class to gather their things and head to the cafeteria. Rumors flew. The bomb squad appeared. Meanwhile, a second plane crashed into the South Tower. The principal announced that the school was to be evacuated in five minutes.

Almost immediately, parents began pouring into the building, hastily grabbing their children. Students whose parents couldn’t get to them were to be taken to a safe zone. Helaina’s mom worked far uptown, and her dad was across New York Harbor in Staten Island. Helaina knew there was no way they would be able to make it to her school anytime soon. She spotted her neighbor Charles and his mother, Ann.

“Take me with you,” Helaina pleaded.

Ann agreed, cleared it with the principal, and the trio stepped outside. Nothing could have prepared them for what they saw.

### Who Were the Terrorists?

The horrifying events of September 11 started before Helaina was even born. In the late 1980s, a man named Osama bin Laden formed a terrorist group called Al Qaeda (ahl KAI-duh). During the 1990s, Al Qaeda operated mainly in the countries of Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Bin Laden and Al Qaeda followed an extreme form of Islam that the vast majority of Muslims do not agree with. Al Qaeda adopted a hateful and murderous **ideology** of using **terrorism** to “punish” Western countries for their perceived crimes against Islam. They vowed to wreak terror on the U.S. in particular. In Afghanistan, Al Qaeda was protected by the Taliban, an extreme religious group that controlled most of the country.

Bin Laden was a longtime enemy of the U.S. Al Qaeda had bombed two U.S. embassies, in Tanzania and Kenya, in 1998, and the Navy ship *USS Cole* in 2000.

Investigations would later reveal that 19 Al Qaeda operatives carried out the attacks of September 11, which they had been planning for years. That morning, they **hijacked** four airplanes and turned them into weapons. They flew the first two planes into the Twin Towers, near Helaina’s school. An hour later, they crashed the third plane into the

Pentagon—the headquarters of the U.S. military, near Washington, D.C. The fourth plane may have been intended for the White House. But in an act of tremendous courage, the passengers managed to overpower the hijackers and gave their lives bringing down the plane in a field in Pennsylvania.

### Confusion and Chaos

In the confusion and chaos of that Tuesday morning, few understood what was happening. In New York, firefighters, police officers, and other first responders **converged** on lower Manhattan, risking their lives to rescue as many people as they could from the burning buildings. New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani addressed the public on radio and TV. President George W. Bush, who was reading to a class of second-graders when

he got news of the attacks, was rushed to the White House, where he **convened** with military leaders.

Meanwhile, Helaina, Ann, and Charles were trying desperately to get home.

Out on the street, Helaina felt like she’d been plunged into a horrifying disaster movie. Paper and ash rained from the sky. Injured men and women were being loaded into ambulances. The sounds of shouting filled the air. Some people stood transfixed, staring up in disbelief at the plumes of fire and smoke gushing from two gaping holes in the sides of the towers.

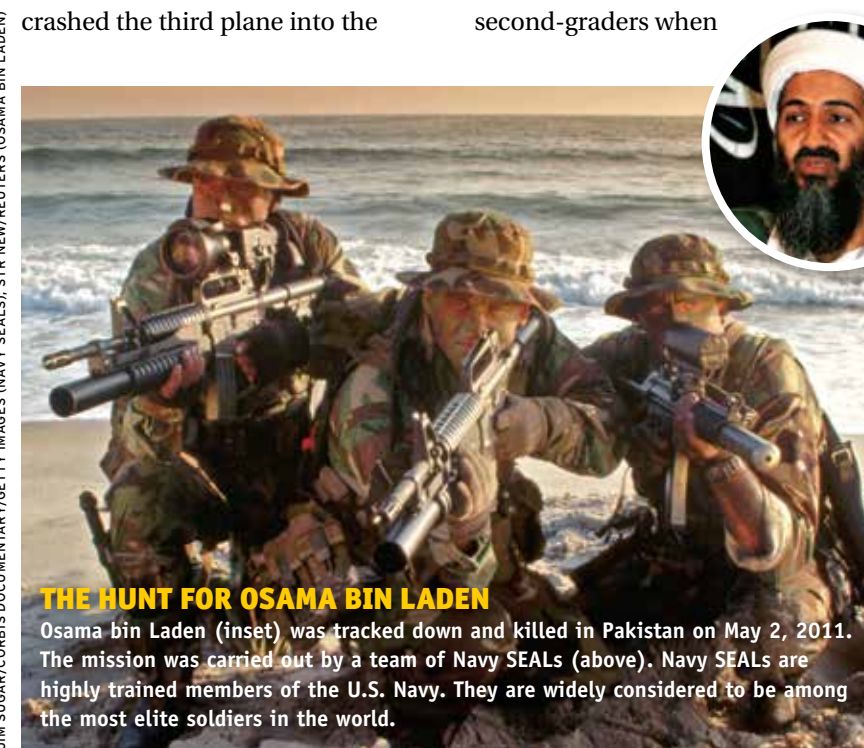
### Ghosts

The Twin Towers were as **iconic** as the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Hollywood sign in Los Angeles. And they were the crown jewels of the World Trade Center—an enormous complex that included a plaza, an underground shopping mall, and seven buildings. Some 50,000 people worked there.

To many, the towers symbolized America’s economic power. But to Helaina, the World Trade Center was simply part of the landscape of home—the place where she and her mom got doughnuts, where she could go on hayrides in the fall or catch music shows.

Now, as Ann led Charles and Helaina through the ash-filled streets, that landscape was unrecognizable.

Smoke stung Helaina’s



**THE HUNT FOR OSAMA BIN LADEN**  
Osama bin Laden (inset) was tracked down and killed in Pakistan on May 2, 2011. The mission was carried out by a team of Navy SEALs (above). Navy SEALs are highly trained members of the U.S. Navy. They are widely considered to be among the most elite soldiers in the world.

HENRY RAY ABRAMS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (TWIN TOWERS ON FIRE)

JIM SUGAR/CORBIS DOCUMENTARY/GETTY IMAGES (NAVY SEALS); STR NEW/REUTERS (OSAMA BIN LADEN)

eyes and nose. Ann told her to cover her face with her shirt. Surges of people pushed past, their clothes and faces thick with ash. Helaina thought they looked like ghosts.

When she caught her own reflection in a window, she was shocked to see that she, too, looked like a ghost.

The Twin Towers were designed to withstand powerful forces. But the fires burned so hot that they melted the buildings' steel frames. Seventy-three minutes after the first plane struck, the South Tower collapsed. Twenty-nine minutes after that, the North Tower fell. From Los Angeles to London, from Tokyo to Cairo, people sat glued to their televisions, staring in shock and disbelief as two of the most recognizable buildings in the world disintegrated.

When the smoke finally cleared, there was only sky.

### The Coming Weeks

It took nearly an hour for Helaina to get home—a trip that usually took less than 15 minutes. She spent the rest of the day with her grandparents, who lived a few floors above her. She was reunited with her mother that afternoon and her father the next morning.

Similar stories unfolded throughout the city as friends and family rushed to find one another. But not every story had a fortunate ending. In the coming days, there was an outpouring of grief for the nearly 3,000 people who lost their

lives in the attacks. Newspapers and magazines told stories of heroism—of firefighters who charged into the burning buildings to save others and of office workers who carried their injured colleagues down smoke-filled stairwells.

The wreckage of the buildings stood 17 stories high and would smolder for months, blanketing lower Manhattan in a toxic haze. New Yorkers tried to get back to normal, but for many living near the World Trade Center—including Helaina—this was impossible. Many were without power for days after the attacks. Some stayed in shelters. The residents in Helaina's building stayed put. Her father took on the job of checking on elderly neighbors, delivering food, water, and medications, and acting as a **liaison** with local authorities.

### The War Begins

As the country was **reeling**, President Bush mobilized the U.S. military. An international hunt for Osama bin Laden began. (It would take nearly 10 years to find him. He was killed in 2011 when U.S. forces raided the compound in Pakistan where he was hiding.) There was an outpouring of support and sympathy for the U.S. from many countries, and leaders around the world rallied behind America.

On October 7, 2001, U.S. forces began bombing and raiding Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda was believed to be hiding. The Taliban were quickly ousted from power. This was the beginning of a bloody



The 9/11 Memorial at the World Trade Center (above); the Freedom Tower (right)



features articles about people who are changing the world in positive ways. She also tracked down her former classmates and interviewed them about their memories of September 11. Her memoir, *After 9/11*, will arrive in bookstores this month.

The city of New York has been on its own road to recovery.

Lower Manhattan again teems with life. The smell of sizzling kebabs wafts from the food trucks that line the streets at lunchtime. Tourists snap pictures with selfie sticks. Cyclists weave through traffic. A new skyscraper called the Freedom Tower now rises mere steps from where the Twin Towers once stood. Every day, 4,000 men and women go to work there.

Each year on the anniversary of September 11, two streams of light are beamed from the World Trade Center. They can be seen for miles around. The lights ascend into the sky until they disappear into the night. They stand as powerful reminders of what New York lost that day 15 years ago. But they also symbolize a powerful truth: that New York is a city of tolerance, beauty, and grit that no act of evil can destroy. ●

conflict that continues to this day.

The events of September 11, 2001, profoundly shaped the world we now live in. In the U.S., new laws and procedures were put in place to protect against future attacks. Airport security was overhauled. President Bush created a new agency called the Department of Homeland Security.

Perhaps most important, the attacks shook our sense of safety and changed the way we go about our lives. On trains, announcements about unattended packages make us shift uncomfortably in our seats. We practice emergency drills at school and work. And sadly, the word *terrorism* is now part of our everyday vocabulary.

### Rebuilding Hope

Experiencing a devastating event will affect different people in different ways. For Helaina and



“These past 10 years have shown that America does not give in to

fear. The rescue workers who rushed to the scene; the firefighters who charged up the stairs; the passengers who stormed the cockpit—these patriots defined the very nature of courage. Over the years we have also seen a more quiet form of heroism—in the ladder company that lost so many men and still suits up to save lives every day; the businesses that have rebuilt; the burn victim who has bounced back; the families that press on.”

—President Barack Obama's remarks on the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks

MATTHEW T. CARROLL/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES (SEPTEMBER 11 MEMORIAL)

ATSUSHI TOMURA/GETTY IMAGES (OBAMA); OZGUR DONMAZ/PHOTOLIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES (FREEDOM TOWER)

# Growing Up Muslim in Post 9/11 America

By **RJ Khalaf** as told to Mackenzie Carro

I was only 5 years old on September 11, 2001. I watched my mom cry as she watched the news and held my newborn baby brother. I was so confused. Why were people on the news saying that Muslims were doing these terrible things?

I bought a pen with a photo of the firefighters raising an American flag over the rubble of the Twin Towers. “I’m an American,” I thought. “I’m on the same page as everyone else.”

When I got older, I learned what had happened—a group of terrorists had killed thousands of Americans. I knew the people who did this were not like me. They did not share my beliefs. And I knew that this was going to be something that a lot of people were not going to understand.

## Who I Am

I am Muslim. I believe in a religion where Islam means “peace,” a religion that teaches equality and fairness, a religion that teaches if you kill one person, it’s as if you’ve killed humanity. Our faith tells us not to look to the color of someone’s skin, for in the eyes of God we are all beautiful.

I am also an American. My father is from New Mexico, and my mom is from California. I grew up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. I believe in our country’s values of generosity and freedom, the importance of taking care of one another, and standing up for what you believe in.

The 3.3 million other Muslims in this country believe in those things too. We want life, liberty, and happiness. We work hard. We are doctors, lawyers, and engineers. We are firefighters and police officers. We serve in the military. We want our families to be safe. And when unspeakably violent acts take place—

like what happened in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, or more recently in Paris, Brussels, and Orlando—we share the same sadness and the same fears as everyone else. Islam is a religion of tolerance. Criminals who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam are missing that important **tenet**.

But that isn’t what I grew up hearing in the news. I grew up hearing that Muslims are terrorists. I didn’t see Muslims like me on TV or in the movies: The

Muslims on the screen were evil. When a certain narrative is repeated over and over again, people start to believe it—especially when the other side of the story, the peaceful story that 99 percent of Muslims have to tell, doesn’t always get told.

## Turn and Smile

That’s one reason I started a Muslim Student Association at my high school.

The club’s goal was to address negative stereotypes about Muslims. I also became my school’s first Muslim student body president, though I was told I wouldn’t get elected because of my religion. One classmate even tweeted, “If you vote for Rj, you obviously enjoy 9/11.”

I was so angry and hurt. But that sort of negativity fuels me now. It fuels me to stay involved. A lot of what we have to do is just talk to other people and learn about them—that’s how you change perceptions on a personal level. There is not one person on Earth who is exactly the same as you. We are all different. To understand the beauty behind those differences, we have to be willing to learn about them.

So if you are sitting next to a woman wearing a *hijab*, turn to her, smile, and say, “Hi. How are you?” Befriend her so you can understand her and realize that she’s so much more like you than you know. ●



RJ Khalaf

## WRITING CONTEST

Think about the title “From Terror to Hope.” Explain how the title relates to both the article and the essay above. Use text evidence to support your ideas. Send your essay to **FROM TERROR TO HOPE CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Dear Blue Sky* by Mary Sullivan.

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