

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

# *From* TERROR *to* HOPE



Candlelight vigils held after the attacks



The Twin Towers on September 11, 2001



The Pentagon after being attacked



The wreckage of the Twin Towers



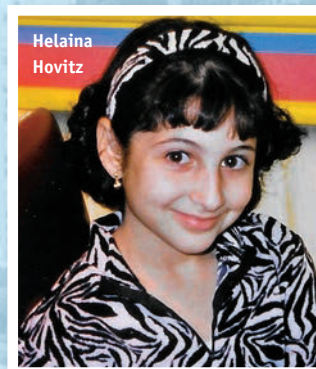
Ground Zero in New York City



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. Helaina Hovitz was 12. Like most of the 8 million people who lived in the city, she was getting ready for the day. 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 downtown Manhattan to their middle school. Around them, the city teemed with life. Men and women in spotless suits emerged from the subways, clutching 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 RAEDLE/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 business and culture, a place where anything could happen. Step into any subway car, and you might be sandwiched between a millionaire banker, a tattooed teen speaking French, and a journalist 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. The two silver skyscrapers could be seen for miles around. Helaina passed under their shadow daily on her way to school.

On the morning of September 11, she did not know 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. Helaina was in science class. The students looked at each other in surprise. What was that strange noise? Helaina raced to the window, trying to see what was going on. She guessed a passing truck had popped a tire. In fact, terrorists had deliberately crashed an airplane into one of the Twin Towers—the North Tower—just 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 that someone had bombed the World Trade Center. Students were to gather their things and head to the lunchroom. Rumors flew. The bomb squad appeared. Someone said a second plane had been crashed into the South Tower. The principal announced that the school was to be evacuated in 5 minutes.

Parents arrived and grabbed their kids. Students whose parents couldn’t get there 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 they couldn’t get to her school anytime soon. She saw her neighbor Charles and his mother, Ann.

“Take me with you,” she begged.

Ann cleared it with the principal. The three stepped

outside. What they saw shocked them.

### Who Were the Terrorists?

The 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. During the 1990s, the group operated mainly in the countries of Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Bin Laden and Al Qaeda followed an extreme form of the religion Islam, a form that most Muslims don’t support. 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 United States 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 bombed two U.S. embassies, in Tanzania and Kenya, in 1998. It bombed the Navy ship USS *Cole* in 2000.

Investigations would later show that 19 Al Qaeda operatives carried out the attacks of September

11. They had been planning it for years. That morning, they **hijacked** four planes 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, in Washington, D.C. The fourth plane may have been intended for the White House. But 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 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 people

from the burning buildings. New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani addressed the public on radio and TV. President George W. Bush was reading to a class of second-graders when he got news of the attacks. He was rushed to the White House, where he **convened** with military leaders.

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

Helaina felt like she’d been plunged into a disaster movie. Paper and ash rained from the sky. The injured were being loaded onto ambulances. Shouts filled the air. Some people just stood and stared at the fire and smoke gushing from holes in the sides of the Twin Towers.

### Ghosts

The World Trade Center was a huge complex. It included a plaza, an underground shopping mall, and seven buildings. Some 50,000 people worked there.

The Twin Towers were the crown jewels of the World Trade Center. They were the tallest skyscrapers in New York City. They were as **iconic** as the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Hollywood sign in Los Angeles. To many, the Towers symbolized America’s economic power. But to Helaina, the World Trade Center was just part of the landscape of home. It was the place where she and her mom got doughnuts, where she shopped for books, where



### 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.



she could go on hayrides in the fall or see concerts.

Now that landscape was forever changed.

Smoke stung Helaina's eyes and nose. Ann told her to cover her face with her shirt. 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 she looked the same.

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 North Tower, 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 TVs, staring in shock as two of the world's best-known modern buildings crumbled.

When the smoke 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 mom that afternoon and her dad the next day.

Throughout the city, friends

and family rushed to find each other. For many, the news was bad. Nearly 3,000 people 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. In the meantime, New Yorkers tried to get back to normal. But for many living near the World Trade Center, 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 dad checked on elderly neighbors. He delivered food, water, and medications. He also acted 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, though it would take nine years to catch and kill him. Many countries showed their support for the U.S. International leaders rallied behind America.

On October 7, U.S. forces began bombing and raiding Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda was believed to be hiding. The Taliban

were ousted from power. This was the start of a bloody conflict that continues to this day.

The events of September 11 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 procedures were overhauled. President Bush created a new agency called Homeland Security.

But perhaps more important, the attacks shook our sense of safety. They changed the way we go about our lives. On trains, we shift nervously in our seats when we hear announcements about unattended packages. We practice emergency drills at school and work. And sadly, the word terrorism is now part of our everyday vocabulary.

### Rebuilding Hope

For Helaina, dealing with the



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



"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

horrors of what she witnessed on September 11 has been a long and painful process.

Three weeks after the attacks, she and her classmates returned to school in a temporary space. They stayed there until the spring, when their school could reopen. Helaina and her family went on living near what became known as Ground Zero. Like so many, she has struggled with sadness, nightmares, anxiety, and depression.

Helaina was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome. This psychiatric disorder can occur after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event. But after hard work and treatment, Helaina is doing well. Now 27, she's a successful journalist. She started a news agency called Headlines for Hope. She reports on people who are changing the world in positive

ways. Helaina also interviewed her former classmates about their memories of September 11. Her memoir, *After 9-11*, goes on sale this month.

The city of New York is recovering too.

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

Each year on September 11, two streams of light are beamed from the World Trade Center. They can be seen for miles around. The lights remind us of what New York lost that day 15 years ago. But they also remind us that New York is a city of tolerance, beauty, and grit that no act of evil can destroy. ●



# 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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ACTIVITY  
ONLINE



COURTESY OF RJ KHALAF