

Stories of hope are collected in 'Hero's Heart'
By Guy Keeler / The Fresno Bee
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Although she lives nearly 3,000 miles from New York, Sue Okenyi of Clovis feels close to the hearts of those forever scarred by the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center.

In the years following the disaster, Okenyi has shared telephone conversations and e-mails with hundreds of people who were directly affected. As a literature clerk for Pelco, the Clovis-based manufacturer of video security equipment, she was responsible for answering requests for additional copies of a special edition of the Pelco Press, published as a tribute to the heroism of rescue workers who lost their lives that day.

Okenyi still communicates with many firefighters, police officers and relatives of those who died and has compiled some of their stories into a self-published book, "Healing the Hero's Heart."

"I got so many calls and e-mails from people who shared their stories," she says. "I started keeping track because I wanted to remember them. I never intended to do anything except keep them for myself."

But New York firefighter Neil Malone encouraged her to turn the stories into a book. Malone knew 40 people who died on September 11, including his closest friend, Michael Bocchino.

Okenyi listened as Malone shared memories of his buddy, "Botch," and was moved as his grief tumbled out bit by bit during their long-distance communications.

"All I did was listen," she says.

Those listening ears, however, became magnets for Malone and other survivors who wanted to share their stories.

Firefighter Tom O'Neill told Okenyi about being assigned to clean out the firehouse lockers of men who died. She heard from Letitia Driscoll, whose son, Stephen, was one of the New York police officers killed on Sept. 11.

Okenyi devotes most of her book to recounting Malone's struggle to cope with life after Sept. 11. For Malone and others who were there, she says, dealing with the aftermath is an ongoing process.

"The anniversary of Sept. 11 is still a painful time for them," she says. "But many are finding new reasons to go on and new reasons to live."

Okenyi says her experience with survivor's guilt may have made it easier for Malone and others to open up to her.

In a letter she sent to Sept. 11 survivors, she told about being born with hydrocephalus, a birth defect in which fluid builds up in the brain and destroys tissue if the pressure is not relieved. She explained how she nearly died three times before she reached the age of six months and how doctors did not expect her to live more than a few years.

Today, 43 years later, Okenyi has four children, lives an active life and often wonders why she is not mentally retarded, confined to a wheelchair or needing a shunt to drain fluid from her skull.

In the conclusion to her letter, Okenyi noted how she finds purpose in life by recognizing that her triumph over hydrocephalus gives her opportunities to encourage others.

"My letter, meant to encourage someone, has inspired many," she writes in her book. "A woman whose daughter was a survivor of 9/11 explained why it has helped so many. 'What your letter expresses,' she said, 'is that we are all survivors in one way or another.' "

Okenyi is in the process of setting up a Web site for the book and says "Healing the Hero's Heart" eventually will be available for \$27.95 at sue@healingtheherosheart.com.