When a Hero Needs a Friend

Written By: Sue Okenyi

When a disastrous situation takes place anywhere in the world and we are not in the disaster, though our hearts ache for those affected, still, we are glad it is not us. We say, “Thank God my loved ones are okay.” We pray for those involved and hope the survivors will recover. We contribute to charities that help bring relief to victims. We admire the heroes and hope the disaster is not repeated in our lifetime.

When a devastating event happens somewhere in the world that pierces our heart, we all remember where we were when the event took place. The event will always stick out in our minds. While we pause for a moment; for us, life goes on.

When the attacks of September 11, 2001 began to unfold, I was getting ready for work, putting on my make-up. My husband was watching the morning news and called me into the living room to watch what was happening 3,000 miles away. We watched in shock at terror unfolding before our eyes. As details were gathered and eye-witness reports were broadcast, my heart ached for those faced with such an awful situation.

At the time, I had never been to New York. I have no family on the East Coast. I only knew a few people who worked for the same company I did in the New York location. Prior to 9/11/2001, I did not know rescue personnel personally. I did not know fire fighters or police. That was all about to change.

I have worked for Pelco, a local video security manufacturer, for more than 14 years. I am a Literature Services Clerk handling the mailing lists for the company. One of my main responsibilities is handling the mailing/subscription list for Pelco’s quarterly trade magazine – The Pelco Press. I have always enjoyed my job. I get to talk to so many intriguing people on a regular basis – Pelco’s manufacturer’s reps around the country and some around the world and many of the company’s dealers and distributors. Also, Pelco’s community involvement and the company’s commitment to make people the priority over business has always been an endearing characteristic of the company.

Pelco’s support of the East Coast began immediately after the attacks took place. East Coast employees, unable to communicate with the home office here in Clovis, began immediately working with the NYPD’s Technical Assistance Response Unit, installing cameras on buildings surrounding the area that quickly became known as Ground Zero. They also opened up the doors to the Salvation Army to house supplies for the workers of Ground Zero.

In Clovis, the Fall edition of the Pelco Press was ready to go to print. But the issue was stopped and a special edition was created. This special edition contained pictures of that fateful day of 9/11 and had a letter of resolve from our then President and CEO David McDonald. The issue was meant to properly recognize the heroism of the rescue workers and help bring us together as a nation. The issue was sent first to all our regular recipients of the magazine and then to every fire house and precinct in New York. A letter was included with the magazine to the New York heroes to let them know they were in

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out our thoughts and prayers. In the letter there was an open invitation to them to request additional copies.

When that issue of the Pelco Press hit the hands of New York’s Bravest and Finest, it set off a chain reaction, one event leading to another that would give birth to the California Memorial and establish coast to coast friendships. For me personally it meant being thrust into the lives and heartaches of 9/11’s most affected survivors.

Daily I went in to work and as I walked in the door the phone was ringing as men and women of every rank within the different New York agencies called in to receive additional copies of the special edition of The Pelco Press. Each call was filled with tears. Each one had a story to tell. As each one shared their story and shared what they were facing, I soon learned that the cliché ending to a conversation of “have a nice day” was not an appropriate thing to say. These people were not having nice days. I would instead say “our prayers are with you”; “you are in our thoughts and prayers.” “God Bless you.” I was not the only one to receive calls. Obviously many went to Dave McDonald and other members of Pelco’s Executive Staff. But I was the single – non-executive employee to be inundated with these calls and have deep one on one involvement with our East Coast friends.

In response to the calls, the lives of the owners of Pelco were touched and led them to create the California Memorial which still stands on the Pelco property. Plans for the memorial began in mid-October, 2001. It was completed by the end of November 2001 and plans for a dedication ceremony were underway. Invitations went out to the different New York agencies inviting any who would come to escape for a few days from their pain to participate in the dedication of a memorial in a little town far way, all expenses paid. Pelco was overwhelmed by the response. They knew each one who responded needed to come. Over 1,000 New York City Police, Fire Fighters and Port Authority officers were flown out on charted planes. There were five planes named Hero 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

After the ceremony, all our New York guests went back to their homes, their families, their fire houses, their precincts. They went home encouraged, touched by the reception they received from our community. Clovis had a place now on the maps of those who lived in New York. Calls, e-mails, letters of gratitude poured in. Fire fighters and Police officers unable to fly out and be with us at the ceremony were also encouraged. Spirits were lifted.

The ceremony, for me, was the cork removed that allowed the wine to come gushing out. As busy as I was prior to the ceremony, taking calls, and answering emails – now it only increased. A lot of friendships were established for me over the months after the ceremony.

A few friendships gained with some FDNY members have become very close. In the beginning, my distance from them, being a faceless voice on the other end of a phone line, or being just an e-mail was what some deeply hurting heroes needed to be able to comfortably share their pain and begin healing.

One thought that kept going through my mind as I listened to their stories was “How are they feeling about surviving when their ‘brothers’ did not?” I’m a survivor of Hydrocephalus which is a deadly birth defect of the brain. I’m a very rare survivor as today I live without treatment though the condition tried hard to take my life early on. So surviving something others do not, and wondering why, is a familiar thought for me. I put my story in a letter and I shared with those who were calling in hoping it would somehow help someone. I had no idea who it would reach.

Sharing my story became a link to those calling in and I began to build close relationships with them. One FDNY member began to e-mail me every time he went to another funeral, every time more remains were found in the rubble. He is from Brooklyn. Forty of his friends were killed that fateful day. When he would write me, I would respond back with words of encouragement, prayers, scripture and, when appropriate, humor. My heart ached for him and all he faced each day. This is one who later told me the only reason he kept contact was because I was 3,000 miles away and he didn’t know me. All my fears regarding what these guys felt was revealed through his words. It was as if God had led me to write my story just for him.

I have learned it is very hard for a fire fighter or a police officer to share the pain of what they are facing. I’m sure this is also true of our military. They must always be strong and solve the problem, save the day. This problem could not be solved. The people could not all be saved. But this one connection grew increasingly deep and lead to my book – Healing the Hero’s Heart.

These friendships for me continue. A couple of the guys...
sent other callers my way to get our memorial items but mainly to have conversation – including my Brooklyn Bud. I don’t know that I have had anything special to offer other than just a listening ear. I am a devout Christian and have drawn from my faith in trying to help individuals crossing my path. I have used scriptures and prayers to encourage. But mostly, I have just tried to be a friend.

For more information about my book, take a look at my website: [www.healingtheherosheart.com](http://www.healingtheherosheart.com). Portions of the proceeds go to The New York Rescue Workers Detoxification Project and to the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation.