

9/11 Survivor: How God Sustained Me in the Aftermath of Terror

Note: On 9/11, Christina and Brian Stanton fled their Financial District apartment, six blocks from the World Trade Center, after watching a jet fly into the Twin Towers. They returned less than two weeks later and found a neighborhood that was barely recognizable and barely inhabitable. Little has been written about what the 25,000 people who lived in the neighborhoods surrounding Ground Zero faced in those days.

Nine days after 9/11, we were encouraged to return to our Financial District apartment. The management company emailed that our building had been declared structurally sound, electricity had been restored, and asbestos levels in the neighborhood were very low.

Brian was delighted. I was not. Fires were still raging at Ground Zero. Two million tons of debris had been spread over 16 acres of devastation smack in the middle of our neighborhood. The search for human remains continued just blocks outside our apartment building's front door.

However, building management, Mayor Giuliani, the Environmental Protection Agency and President Bush were all telling us it was safe to return. So on Sept. 23 we headed back to our apartment.

As we ascended from the subway, the sulfuric stench seemed as pungent as it had been on 9/11. Papers, dirt and chunks of concrete were piled haphazardly on top of dust and debris-covered cars, awnings, and trash cans. Scraps of twisted metal hung from window sills and fire escapes.

Our apartment building—a 1931 office that had been converted

into 294 apartments on 33 floors—was coated in dust so thick I could barely tell the difference between windows and the brick facade. However, the lobby appeared to have been freshly washed, and the gold art deco elements shined.

We learned this gleaming lobby had sheltered people when the Twin Towers crumbled and later provided a break room for firefighters working at Ground Zero. A few employees had been taking turns sleeping in the lobby, climbing stairs in the dark to check on abandoned pets and watch for looters.

Our apartment had been cleaned, but soot and fine dust coated everything. We stepped onto our terrace to scenes from a combat zone: mounds of debris at Ground Zero, crushed cars in an open-air parking lot, twisted metal and debris everywhere. A burned-out fire truck was resting in a small park nearby. A five-story piece of exterior hung precariously from the corner of a building in the World Trade Center complex.

Whenever Brian and I ventured into the neighborhood, we would walk block after block looking for signs of a cleanup. Instead, we discovered destruction and chaos. Heavily damaged buildings dominated Broadway. The battered three-story tenement that used to house our local Burger King now served as a center for police operations.

The two subway lines closest to our building had imploded and were expected to be out of operation for at least a year. The Financial District had never sported as many retail and service providers as most Manhattan neighborhoods, and now many of those few grocery stores, clothing stores and pharmacies were shuttered. Residents had to venture farther and farther to find essentials.

Missing person flyers and posters fluttered from every wall and fence, while candles and flowers piled up beneath them. Charred and battered bikes had been turned into shrines. Handwritten notes and flyers were taped on every inch of the

fence surrounding St. Paul's Chapel.

Many streets remained off-limits, and pedestrians wore white masks to filter out the dust that hung heavy in the air. The area had been home to many schools, from nursery schools through college campuses. All were now closed, and most students had been reassigned to other school locations.

Bulldozers, trucks and cranes moved wreckage from the Ground Zero pile 24 hours a day, kicking up clouds of dust and who knew what else. As the weeks went by, I continued to step out onto our 24th-floor terrace, where the shock of the new view never lessened. The beautiful, awe-inspiring Twin Towers were gone, replaced by a gaping black hole and a pile of rubble.

Before the attacks, my dreams for my future had soared as high as the Twin Towers. But those dreams and my confidence had been destroyed along with those buildings.

For the first time in my life, I couldn't see my way out of the destruction and darkness that surrounded me—both literally and emotionally. Brian and I were both unemployed, living in a neighborhood of destruction and suffering from PTSD. My prayers were shallow and faltering, but I know now that God heard them.

He sent friends into our lives who helped lift us up. He placed a therapist in my life who helped me understand the trauma I had experienced and find a path out of that dark place. And He sent us to Redeemer Presbyterian Church. I went there initially to seek financial aid; when they handed me a check to help pay for some of our expenses, I felt hope for the first time in weeks.

We returned to Redeemer and discovered a Christian community that took us in and helped us heal. As we grew in our faith and our hope, I began to understand that the worldly success I previously craved is not a sign of God's love or approval. I also came to believe that I could trust Him to walk with me

through the darkest of places.

The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., remain the deadliest acts of terrorism in world history. Almost 3,000 people died and 6,000 were injured that day, and people are still dying from cancers and other illnesses from exposure to the toxic gases and dust released in those attacks.

As I look back on the last 20 years, I am more aware than ever of how 9/11 changed my life. Although it had been difficult to live among daily reminders of 9/11 in our Financial District neighborhood, it was there where I began to live with the assurance that through faith in Christ, I don't have to fear anything. As the neighborhood slowly revived and restored, I became rebuilt in His image. And that journey brought me to a place of peace when I learned how to sink the foundation of my life deep in the promises of Christ.

When I walked through the valley of the shadow of death on 9/11, God was with me. And He still walks with me through every valley and every mountain peak. He meets me in my brokenness with His strength so that I may offer His strength to others. {eoa}

Christina Stanton *is the award-winning author of Out of the Shadow of 9-11: An Inspiring Tale of Escape and Transformation and Faith in the Face of COVID-19: A Survivor's Tale.*

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