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A quarter century after Al Qaeda terrorists murdered 2,977 people on American soil, millions of visitors a year stream into the 9/11 Museum, where they encounter heartbreaking yet uplifting stories about American unity, courage and service.

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IT TAKES A CERTAIN DISCIPLINE OR LOYALTY OR REVERENCE TO choose to visit the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. Its displays and exhibits aren't entertaining. They're painful, horrifying even, to watch or see. Moreover, pretty much everybody already knows the basic story it tells. It's a story that has been told and retold endlessly since September 11, 2001, when 19 Al Qaeda terrorists murdered 2,977 people on American soil.

Yet every year, more than 2 million visitors stream into the museum, making it the sixth-most visited museum in America, even though at age 12 it is the youngest of the top six by 73 years. Together, the Memorial & Museum draw about 12 million visitors a year, ranking ahead of all other NYC attractions except Central Park, Times Square, Grand Central Station and Rockefeller Center.

Compared with those other attractions, however, the 9/11 Museum is somber. Relatively few visitors can make a 60- to 90-minute trip through the museum without crying. Afterward, many may find it difficult to sleep for a few nights, unable to stop thinking about victims for whom the start of a beautiful Tuesday 25 years ago turned horrifying. An ordinary morning rich with ordinary choices—coffee

YEARS LATER



Officially named *Reflecting Absence*, twin reflecting pools are located in the exact footprints of the original towers.

or tea?—suddenly presented the choice of dying by fire or by jumping from the top of the Twin Towers in New York.

To visit the museum is to pay tribute to the victims of 9/11 without regard to their political affiliation, income level or race. To visit the museum is a gesture of unity with the human race, 12% of the victims not having been American (excluding the suicidal perpetrators). To visit the museum is a gesture of defiance against blood-thirsty terrorists who seek, as the 9/11 hijackers did, to kill as many innocent people as possible.

Yet more than ever on the 25th anniversary of 9/11, the museum is also a tribute to American heroism, service and sacrifice. If, as culture after culture and religion after religion holds, the height of nobility is to give one's life for others, then there are no heroes greater than those 421 first responders who died seeking to rescue people in the Twin Towers. The attacks precipitated thousands of other acts of generosity and kindness at the attack sites and beyond, including rescuers putting themselves in harm's way. Since 9/11, about 10,000 rescue and recovery workers have died from illnesses associated with exposure to attack-site toxins. A recent video from the 9/11 Museum introduces contemporary first responders who are the descendants of that day's first responders, the heroic dead having become role models.

People come to the 9/11 museum to grieve and mourn, but also to remember that moment when divisiveness in America seemed to vanish. In the moments and days after 9/11, political adversaries became allies, strangers became friends, journalists doubled as social workers and patriots. *The New York Times* turned full-bore egalitarian, publishing biographies of every single fatality, from CEOs to maintenance workers. Across America rose a rallying cry: "How can we help?"

Early in my interview with Elizabeth L. Hillman, CEO of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, I was reminded of that spirit of cooperation and kindness that followed 9/11. Hearing that I'd worked as a *Wall Street Journal* editor on 9/11—and for months afterward—Hillman said, "Journalists actually suffered a lot of mental—and physical—health problems related to 9/11." That may have been the first time I'd ever heard empathy expressed toward journalists, and it was as if she'd lanced a boil. On 9/11, I wasn't working out of New York or Washington. I was covering the story out of Chicago. And yet, inevitably, it was traumatic.

As CEO of the museum, Hillman understands

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very well that 9/11 trauma afflicted people who witnessed 9/11 on television in American states far from the attack. In one powerful account written about that day, *The View from Mrs. Thompson's*, the late David Foster Wallace described watching 9/11 on television in the crowded home of an elderly neighbor in rural Illinois. As the world-famous writer stared in disbelief at a small screen, on which well-dressed victims could be seen jumping from the Twin Towers, the differences between him and his companions—Midwestern, church-going women—vanished. Other debris fell as well, including a pair of shoes that earlier that morning an office worker had chosen from her closet. "Something about the shoes also falling made it worse," wrote Wallace.

Of course, many Americans—about 100 million in fact—are too young to have experienced 9/11. It doesn't surprise Hillman that the museum is a powerful experience for these Americans too. "Many of the things that are most important in life we have to learn rather than experience," notes Hillman.

Listening to Hillman talk about the sense of unity that followed 9/11, I pointed out that we now live in an age of polarization, and asked if that might detract from 25th anniversary ceremonies? Just the opposite, suggested Hillman. "Sometimes a milestone gives the world exactly what it needs," she said. "This 25th anniversary milestone is a reminder that nothing can keep people from coming together when they face a shared challenge."

Hillman holds a BS in electrical engineering from Duke University, an MA in history from the University of Pennsylvania, a JD from Yale Law School, and a PhD in history from Yale. Before joining the 9/11 Museum in 2022, she served as President of Mills College, as Provost and Professor at the University of California Hastings College of the Law and as a professor at Rutgers Law School. Earlier, she served on active duty for seven years as a space operations officer at Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Base and as an instructor of history at the US Air Force Academy.

As CEO of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, how would you describe your mission?

Our mission is to commemorate the people who were killed on 9/11, to educate the world about what happened, why it happened and what's happened since, and to inspire an end to hatred and intolerance. That last piece we can't do without lessons about how people came together. About how unity was a part of the responses to 9/11, about how compassion and courage made all the difference that day and in the aftermath of 9/11. Also part of the story,



A visitor contemplates the last foundation pillar from the fallen Twin Towers inside the 9/11 Memorial Museum.

of course, are the anger, the frustration, the search for blame. You can't embrace the courage and compassion that follows 9/11 without reckoning with how we got there. So in this story there's a balance between the darkness and the light.

Your powerful "Never Forget" video features firefighters and police officers too young to have personally experienced 9/11, but who know all about it because of having lost parents or other relatives in the tragedy. Is it harder to connect with the 100 million Americans who have no memories of 9/11, and who maybe heard about it only in school?

What drove the design and creation of the 9/11 Memorial Museum was authentic, engaging storytelling that connected people. That's still the principle behind the museum today. What it offers is more than a history lesson. Anyone today who's facing a challenge—a health challenge, economic challenge, whatever it is—can be inspired by what we offer here.

The sacrifices people made to heal each other, to rebuild this site into a place of beauty and serenity, the people who persisted and endured despite enormous loss—those are the stories told here, and they're inspirational.

Now, learning about this does require people to pause, to think, to engage, and there's no arguing that it's harder to get people's attention than it was 25 years ago. But our visitor numbers are growing, and



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what we find is that the stories of 9/11 are every bit as compelling and powerful to new generations.

For older generations, too, there are lessons we forgot, or were too traumatized at the time to absorb. Twenty-five years later, we can tell stories that we couldn't tell at first, because we didn't know them yet or it was too soon.

History is like that. It isn't static. It keeps changing as we learn more about it over time. So the story of what happened before 9/11, what happened that day and what's happened since is more complete, better told and more powerful than ever.

Also, we rotate artifacts. We tell new stories in our educational programs and in the lesson plans that we put out. We did a program on hip-hop and 9/11, because the Twin Towers were so iconic in hip-hop. We tell stories of people whose lives 9/11 changed, the first-year student at Fordham who came down to the rubble, joined the military and became a Green Beret. In a career now in finance, he's part of our network to raise awareness about 9/11. He has had multiple lives, but they were all affected by what happened on 9/11.

A former colleague of mine, Matt Pottinger, quit the WSJ after 9/11 and joined the Marines.

Exactly.

How did your museum, open since 2011, so quickly become a tourist draw akin to Times Square, Statue of Liberty, Central Park—attractions dating back to 19th Century New York?

We get upwards of 10 million visitors a year to the memorial; 100 million have visited the memorial since it opened on the 10th anniversary of the attacks. And 28 million people have visited the museum, whose proceeds enable us to keep the memorial free and open to the public. We also make many educational tools available digitally. Every year on September 11th, we publish a new 30-minute video that has stories of survivors, of responders, of family members, of community members, people who were in proximity to the attacks. We reached a million students last year with that program. We'll certainly reach that many again on this milestone anniversary year of the 25th.

We also make lesson plans available to teachers around the world, and we run an educational institute for teachers. They learn about Al Qaeda and the path to 9/11, including the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. They learn about conspiracy theories and how to combat them. They also want to know how to talk to kids about terrorism, and that's one

of the lessons that we find downloaded from our site frequently too. How to talk to your children about terrorism and how to talk to your students about it.

Did I read that you also offer leadership programs?

Our program is called Leading Through Crisis, and we think 9/11 is a great canvas for those lessons.

For many years now, we've offered leadership training programs to the agencies closest to 9/11, FDNY, the New York Police Department, the Port Authority Police Department, the FBI, National Intelligence Agencies, the TSA. Now we've built a program for the private sector that shares 9/11 leadership lessons from members of our board of trustees, who were leaders on 9/11.

People like Mike Bloomberg, who became Mayor two months later. People like Ken Chenault, who was the CEO of American Express. Frank Bisignano, who was at Citi, he opened the stock exchange after 9/11.

Many in the finance community in Lower Manhattan had to reckon with a set of circumstances they hadn't anticipated. And let's not forget ConEd. Its substation under World Trade Center Seven was destroyed, and what they did to restore power to that area was amazing.

Much of what you do sounds like public service, yet you're a privately run nonprofit institution. How do you support your operations and programs?

Being an independent nonprofit is essential to our mission. New York City responded to these attacks against freedom, these attacks against the independence of the West, by creating a memorial through a nonprofit foundation, independent of government, and subject to oversight by auditors and our governing board. The Memorial & Museum is a tribute to democracy and freedom, to our way of life that those terrorists attacked.

Recently, to ensure our future, we launched a \$75 million fundraising drive. After we quickly raised \$25 million, our Chairman Mike Bloomberg said he would match the next \$25 million. Our independence is important, and nobody has done more to ensure it than Mayor Bloomberg. That \$75 million campaign is the biggest fundraising campaign since the original capital campaign to build the museum raised \$650 million.

We've been running as a successful nonprofit operation for some time now, and we want to make sure we can continue to do that for the next 25 years. Our fundraising site is neverforget.org.

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You’ve led in the Air Force. You’ve led in law school, as a college president. Is there one leadership instinct or principle that you live by or that stands out for you?

I think the same qualities that make people successful in the armed forces make them successful in other leadership environments. The leader I think about most may be Omar Bradley—even though he was an Army rather than Air Force general. He organized D-Day, while Eisenhower directed it. Bradley believed you have to empower small groups, giving each the authority to make decisions because not every group is encountering the same circumstances. His leadership could be seen as crucial to the success of D-Day. He was called the soldier's general. He said: “Compassion was not a handicap to command. It was actually the measure of it.”

Is there anything in particular about 9/11 or in general that you wish more people understood or remembered?

It's been a revelation to me how many communities were formed by 9/11. Communities formed around first responders, family members, survivors who live here and survivors around the world. I've visited communities in other countries that lost family members on 9/11, most recently in London just a few weeks ago. Communities grow in the aftermath of loss in ways that really do uplift and enrich people, notwithstanding the terrible losses they've suffered.

We have family members say, “We want you to tell people how much help we got, how many people rushed to help. We want to tell people how chefs around the country came together and raised money so that the children of people killed in Windows on the World, the restaurant on top of the World Trade Center, had their health insurance covered, and in some cases their tuition.”

The fact that many Wall Street firms donated profits to Cantor Fitzgerald, because Cantor had lost 658 people that day.

And, of course, the firefighters. We lost 343 firefighters that day, including the oldest member of the department, Chief Bill Feehan, 71 years old, Deputy Fire Commissioner.

There is no forgetting among the firefighters. Besides those 343, the FDNY has lost more than 450 firefighters to the health effects of searching the rubble for their colleagues. ♦

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