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Project Rebirth

By Andrew Malekoff

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on America, several artists joined together to produce a soft cover book entitled *9/11: Artists Respond*. The book of graphic art showcases the artists' responses to the terror that befell the world. One nine-frame piece by Jeph Loeb and Scott Campbell entitled "Please Stand By..." features a girl of about eight years of age watching cartoons on television. By the third and fourth frames, the image on the screen changes to a live feed of the Twin Towers ablaze. As the little girl stands transfixed, stuffed animal in hand and her face less than 12 inches from the screen, the commentator announces, "We interrupt this program to take you live..." the little girl turns away and calls, "Mommy..." The next three frames show her mother dropping a basket of laundry. Then, with her face contorted in anguish, the mother embraces her daughter to shield her from the unrelenting images. The final frame is a close-up of the little girl asking, "Mommy, when are the cartoons gonna come back on?"

Recently I had the opportunity of viewing another set of images in the form of a moving 30-minute preview of a feature-length documentary film by filmmaker Jim Whitaker that captures rebuilding of the World Trade Center (WTC) and 10 people coping with 9/11. Whitaker, who was visiting New York City to attend a wedding at the time of the terrorist attack, is the founder of Project Rebirth, a non-profit initiative aiming to chronicle living history and honor 9/11 victims and first responders.

The film introduces us to a diverse group of nine people, all of whom were impacted by 9/11 and agreed to participate in a series of interviews conducted by Whitaker during following years. These individuals include:

- A survivor from an impact floor on the South Tower
- A NYPD officer who oversaw recovery efforts at the Fresh Kills Landfill
- A fireman that survived the collapse of the Towers, but lost his best friend in addition to 343 fellow firefighters
- A teenage boy who lost his mother
- A young woman who lost her fiancé
- A construction worker who lost his brother and assisted with recovery efforts
- A Muslim American woman who became an advocate for religious tolerance
- A volunteer in the recovery effort who later assisted hurricane Katrina survivors
- A man who lost his domestic partner of 14 years and then moved to the West Coast

They generously offer us, and future generations no doubt, the intimate gift of their unfolding grief and resiliency in the face of disaster.

The film is scheduled for release in 2010. In addition to preserving history through this personal record of the long-term grieving process, it is the aim of this film to capture the rebuilding of the World Trade Center. This is accomplished through the use of 12 time-lapse cameras recording 24/7 at the WTC site.

It is the mission of Project Rebirth, beyond creating the documentary, to educate and inform students and future generations, and to help support victims of and first responders to major disasters. A Project Rebirth Center will be developed to integrate and improve on therapeutic, educational and training resources focused on grief and trauma suffered by victims and first responders to major disasters.

I am not sure whether Project Rebirth answers the little girl's question of, "when are the cartoons gonna come back on?" But I am certain that this astounding work of art will go a long way toward helping survivors and responders of disasters to find their ways out of the darkness.

For more information visit the Project Rebirth website at www.projectrebirth.org.