

9/11: Helping at Ground Zero – a life altering experience

Publisher's note: *This is one in a 12-part series running from Sept. 1-12 about how Lake Tahoe is tied to 9/11.*

By Solange Schwalbe

On Dec. 20, 2001, I traveled to New York City to celebrate my annual Christmas holiday that I have traditionally done since 1980. Only, this time the world had changed. Not only were the World Trade Center Towers and the five other WT buildings destroyed, the destruction changed the face of the entire world.

The towers were a part of my Christmas tradition. Losing them was like losing a friend you look forward to seeing once a year.

After Christmas Day, my friends and I embarked on a journey that would change my life.



From Sept.
1-12, Lake
Tahoe News is
looking at
9/11.

We visited the perimeter of Ground Zero like thousands of other people. I was taking photos of what used to be there. Of

nothing. I don't know why.

When I realized what I was doing, I turned to my friends and asked about volunteering. Suddenly, I was full speed ahead to do just that.

Salvation Army has a 24-hour respite center that offered food, counseling, supplies, massage, anything the rescue workers may need. The food was rich and wonderful. All of the local restaurants donated their high-calorie dishes. Volunteers from Salvation Army served and cleaned-up the dining area 24-hours a day. Three shifts. I worked mornings, 7am-3pm.

Busing tables, I was able to connect with so many rescue workers. I would say, "Hi, my name is Solange, but call me 'Hollywood' – it's so much easier!" When I go Jeeping in the Rubicon, my handle is Hollywood. Everyone called me Hollywood.

A week before my time was up, a man came up to me and offered me a job because I could talk to anyone. He said his workers would listen to me. "What? I'm a sound editor in feature films. I don't belong here. I've never worn a hardhat in my entire life."

Two weeks of training and I was working with pay in the Pit for three months. My dad thought I was still volunteering.

I worked as a safety monitor in WTC6. This building was located in the northwest corner of the "Bathtub". It was built against the North Slurry Wall. Tower One fell on WTC6. In order to demolish the rest of WTC6, the Slurry Wall needed to be reinforced. My job was Safety Monitor for 30 drillers for a "Confined Space" – like a mine, no air and no way out. We were located underneath the debris pile of Tower One.

The being of my life was put into a box, put into the closet, shut the door and walk away. I ate, breathed, laughed, cried, wore, felt, saw Ground Zero 16 hours a day. Every day. No days off.



Solange Schwalbe says rebuilding her house after the Angora Fire was less stressful because of her experiences at Ground Zero.

The sight of the destruction was so overwhelming that we would use humor to get around the pit. I'd get a call on the radio, "Hey Hollywood, what's your 20?" "I'm at the pool boss, by the diving board!" The sound was overwhelming. Loud all the time with heavy-duty excavators and vehicles. The "Back-up Beeps" were heard all the time. The Nextel Chirps were always going off. The drone was never-ending.

Touch. What looks like dirt was really Zone Dust. Cement, glass, metal, and every possible element of our lives pulverized around us. It was really sticky and it smelled bad. The smell was like disgusting burnt hair. Everything was chemically and biologically based. Hideous.

The past 10 years has been way too difficult. My life in Lake Tahoe was put on hold. I did not work for two years. I stayed with my dad until his wife kicked me out just after the second anniversary of 9/11. I was so distraught I actually learned how it felt to not want to be around anymore. Never have I felt that. It's the sickest feeling I have ever felt.

Thank God one of my colleagues hired me on to his movie, and I landed a teaching gig that allowed me to get a place to live.

In 2005, I was diagnosed with a blood clot in the base of my brain. Ground Zero?

In 2007, my home burned down in the Angora Fire along with 253 other homes. Digging through my ashes for six weeks was like my own personal Ground Zero. This time I was digging for my own possessions. I rebuilt out of anger. My new house is beautiful.

I have my career back as a motion picture sound editor in feature films, and I am still teaching at Video Symphony in Burbank.

I will be attending the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center like I have every year. The biggest difference this year is that because of the political presence (including President Obama), the families of the victims are the only people who will be able to attend the ceremonies. No firefighters, no cops, no EMS, no rescue workers, no volunteers. If it were my decision, due to the lack of room at the site because of the new construction of the Freedom Tower, the ceremonies would be at Madison Square Garden for everyone. We could have a procession from Ground Zero to MSG.

Every year I am at the WTC Cross at 8am on 9/11. This year the WTC Cross has been moved underground for the new memorial. I am devastated. This will be the first year that I will not be able to be at the Cross.

I feel an incredible amount of anxiety getting ready to travel to New York City for two weeks. There are many events planned for the week prior to 9/11. I will probably not attend any of them. My main focus is to see and be with my Ground Zero family. We all worked together in the pit.

I have been able to heal from the Angora Fire. I will never get over Ground Zero. I have the WTC Cross tattooed on my shoulder. I wear my Cross chain every day. Ground Zero will always be a part of me. I suffer from anxiety disorder because of it. I fear nothing. Things don't matter anymore. How significant a person is in my life has changed. I always wanted to be friends with everyone. Now, I choose a few. My perspective, priorities and how I respond to events have totally changed. I'm more compassionate, less trusting.

How I dealt with the Angora Fire would have been completely different if I had not experienced Ground Zero. I would have been the "victim" in a pity party the whole time. Instead, I felt angry but empowered.

I am not afraid to die.