

# With distance, New Yorkers reflect on 9/11 exhibit

BY JERRY TALLMER

She thought she was watching a cartoon.  
 “Here was this little airplane two inches long,” said Sylvia Feiman, holding thumb and forefinger somewhat closer than that, “this little airplane flying into a building, and I thought: Who’s crazy enough to watch cartoons this early in the morning? Then I began to see the smoke, and then I saw the second plane hit a building ...

“My first thought was: How the hell am I ever going to explain this to my husband? How do you explain this to somebody with Alzheimer’s? I sort of not-explained it to him six times, because who could comprehend it anyway?”

Death took her husband three years ago. Sylvia Feiman came in alone from Forest Hills Tuesday morning to absorb the “Here Is New York: Remembering 9/11” exhibit of 1,500 (yes, 1,500) photographs and a dozen or so “found objects” (the smashed hood of N.Y.P.D. car 1250, the battered doors of a Rescue 2 fire engine, a hunk of a jet’s landing gear, a dust-caked desk clock stopped at 9:04 a.m., etc.) that opened yesterday at the New-York Historical Society, Central Park West at 77th St.

What had brought her in?  
 “I *had to come*, I *had to come*,” said Feiman. “To relive the horror. Part of my family died in the Holocaust. This is the parallel, in our own backyard.”

Chris Evans, on the other hand, on holiday from her nursing job in London, just happened to be walking past the Historical Society’s entrance Tuesday, saw the sign announcing the exhibit, and came in.

New Zealander Evans was on another holiday, in a little village in Greece, on 9/11/01. “There was a crowd all around a television screen. I thought they were watching a football game. But then there was another crowd around another screen. I went and looked and couldn’t believe it. Shock, horror.”

Sitting on a bench at the exhibit, jotting down some notes, was Cal Snyder, a member of the historical society. He’s finishing a book on 9/11 memorials. Working title: “Raising the Stones and the Words.”

That morning six years ago Snyder was at the corner of 88th St. and Columbus Ave., handing out political literature. It was primary day — remember?

“A woman came up to me and said: ‘Have you heard what’s happening? A plane hit the World Trade towers.’ I assumed it was an accident, and said: ‘That’s too bad.’ Then the fire engines came screaming down Columbus — engines from as far away as the Bronx and Westchester.

“The woman came back and said: ‘The Pentagon’s been attacked!’ I said: ‘The United States is at war!’ She said: ‘I think you ought to stop this’ ” — handing out campaign literature. I said — he chuckles at the absurdity of it — “



Photo courtesy of Fred George

**Fred George’s photograph of firefighters at the W.T.C. at dusk on Sept. 12 is part of the New-York Historical Society exhibit. Firefighters and others search for victims underneath the W.T.C. bedrock area throughout the late night of 9/11.**

‘But the polls haven’t closed yet!’ I think that in my own way I didn’t want it to be true.”

By far the youngest person taking in the exhibit in its first hour was Rodney Deavault, tall, slim, coffee-colored, 25. Princeton graduate Deavault was there to do a report for his class at New York University’s journalism school.

“I would love to be a theater writer some day,” he said. “I was reading a book by Frank Rich on the way here.” Deavault, whose father works for the Department of Defense and mother is a psychiatric social worker, was in a European history high school class in St. Louis on 9/11/01. “I was ... I was ... shocked ... horrified.”

He particularly remembers the teacher whose daughter in New York was stuck in a subway car directly under one of the towers. The daughter was there many hours, but got out alive.

Anita Hyams, who lives in the Kips Bay section of Manhattan, remembers with anguish the pictures of missing

people being posted on walls at Bellevue Hospital. She has never been to ground zero, whereas Doris Cornell, who also lives in the East 20s and until retirement worked at Hanover Square, has been back to ground zero “several times.”

Joseph Catinella was teaching a class at a school in Queens that day — a class in English as a second language. “I had many Muslim students at the time, which gave the moment extra sensitivity,” he said. “The teachers all went into the faculty room. Even from there you could see the smoke rising, in stunning silence.”

Has he ever been to ground zero?

“No! Not at all. I felt it would be masochistic.”

But he’s here to look at those 1,500 pictures — walls and walls and walls of them.

Gladys Fischhoff of Rego Park, a retired high school guidance counselor, was in a post office when 9/11 happened, and ran to a phone to call her son and daughter in Manhattan.

“We had all been so self-satisfied within our safety,” she says. “Never thought we’d be hit by anything. It’s really a form of arrogance. One of my daughter’s friends, a young man who worked at Cantor Fitzgerald, had carried a hysterical woman down all those flights of steps the first time the W.T.C. was bombed. And then he died in 9/11.”

Why had she come here, on opening morning?

“I wanted to ... reconnect. I think we will never find closure with this. It’s exhibitions like this that sensitize people — most people — to why the Holocaust has to be remembered.”

The New Yorker and journalist you are reading remembers the first thing that flashed into his head the first instant a woman in an elevator on West End Ave. said an airplane had just crashed into one of the World Trade Center buildings. It was of the B-25 that, in rain and fog, had crashed into the 78th and 79th floors of the Empire State Building on Sat., July 28, 1945, killing 14 people and injuring 25.

“Yes,” said Snyder, the fellow who’s writing a book about 9/11 memorials. “I’ve thought about that, too. And somewhere in my book somebody points out that the entire volume of the Empire State Building could fit into the cellars of the World Trade Center.”

Everybody remembers the beautiful blue-sky weather of 9/11/01. Tuesday was gray and damp and touched with thunder. A good day to look at pictures.

“Here is New York; remembering 9/11”, an exhibit of photographs, videos, and “found objects,” will be on display at the New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, until Dec. 31, 2007. Admission is \$6 - \$10. (212) 875-3400, or [www.nyhistory.org](http://www.nyhistory.org).



Photo courtesy of Gulnara Samoilova

**Gulnara Samoilova’s photo of soot-covered pedestrians making their way to safety on Sept. 11.**

# Recounting the story of 9/11 through its imagery

## ON THE RECORD

BY SARAH NORRIS

Former Life photojournalist David Friend always wanted to assemble a book of photos generated over the course of one week, to prove the primacy of photography in our lives. The result, published last year, is "Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11," a book of richly mined accounts and photographs from Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001 through the following Monday.

Released in paperback this month, Friend's book offers up a vast array of personal narratives, and serves as a testament to the immediacy and power of digital photography. Here, Friend, who is now editor of creative development at Vanity Fair and also the award-winning producer of the CBS documentary "9/11" (2002), reveals the story behind the book, as well as the implications of life in a digital age. He'll also be speaking at the Skyscraper Museum, 39 Battery Place, on Tuesday, Sept. 18 at 6:30 p.m.

*The second thing was to examine the lives of people affected by 9/11 through the pictures that they saw, that they cherished or took, or appeared in.*

**What were your aims in writing this book?**

My chief impulse, six months after the attacks, was that our connection to the events was so related to the visual that if I were to merely look at the visual representation of the events and how we reacted to them I could prove this thesis about the power of pictures.

The second thing was to examine the lives of people affected by 9/11 through the pictures that they saw, that they cherished or took, or appeared in. Many of the people in news pictures could be tracked down and in fact, historians try to get eyewitnesses to events in history, but citizen photographers and people in pictures that day and week were eyewitnesses. I wanted to talk to the eyewitnesses while the heed of history was still aglow.

Since this time, the pictures have become even more important. With the advent of cell phone cameras and You Tube, neither of which existed in 2001, average citizens



Photo by Frank Ward

**David Friend, author of "Watching the World Change." He speaks at the Skyscraper Museum on Tuesday.**

with cameras are at the frontline of history. Journalism is the first draft of history. Yet journalists are often playing catch-up with the citizens themselves.

**How did you approach it?**

It wasn't like I was given an assignment. Two and a half billion people saw this event, but I felt compelled to write from a very particular perspective. There was enough information to just have it be distant credible third-person reporting, but I found that the personal stories of people, combined with my own reaction, created a new and yet naturally flowing way to get a sense of a week. Beginning on Tuesday, ending on the following Monday, it wasn't my diary, but a visual journal.

Our personal narratives connect to the bigger narrative and seem to matter more than at other times, and the reason is that for the first time since WWII, history came to our shores. We were witnesses. That's why

the personal voice and stories and documentary style of the book worked well together. Our stories intertwine and mean more than we think we mean at the time.

**Several of these images were not widely distributed because editors viewed them as too shocking. How do you draw the line between disturbing imagery and providing a record of an event?**

This relates to the subject of a Witnessing Atrocity conference in D.C. I attended. On my website ([www.watchingtheworldchange.com](http://www.watchingtheworldchange.com)), you'll see several of us talking about this very question.

In terms of news, you've got to see it now. You have to show what is real, and unvarnished truth is important in wartime and in the very skeptical times of our government lying to us daily. We need to see the truth, and I believe that not enough of these pictures were shown. We got too sanitized too quickly. We couldn't see it enough to show people what we were dealing with.

I am sensitive to families who've lost loved ones; over time, there's no real need to use more graphic footage when words will do.

**Images from 9/11 often bring up a great deal of emotion for people. What was your experience of assembling these photographs?**

I've covered conflicts in Afghanistan and Lebanon, tragedies and news events, so it

wasn't the subject matter per se that was difficult, though it was truly incomparable to other subjects.

I spent two years writing the book, but that's a pittance compared to people who were down there working or people who made extreme sacrifices and are still plagued by those sacrifices.

**Did you find that people's recollections of and reactions to this event have changed over time?**

It was much easier to do the book two or three years out. Over time, people understand the tragedy within the framework of their lives.

**Considering today's constant media coverage, to what extent does such easy access to an event distort our sense of reality?**

I think we all have distorted views of reality. It's tough to get an objective perspective because we're subjective viewers. In this time, where the Internet and 24-7 TV make immediate judgements, we assume things from their appearance. This easy access to information is sometimes a problem because it's difficult to get more than surface reactions.

**How do you think living in a digital age redefines our community?**

Both my kids have Facebook pages and are connected to more people. The editor of my book, Paul Elie, also edited Thomas Friedman's book "The World is Flat." Similar themes arose in both, about how the Internet connects us. It's very difficult to know where it's all going, but it's much easier for minority voices to be heard now because of the power of both the Internet and the camera.

**In collecting these stories, did you gain any insights about how people processed their experience?**

We forget that in that first month after the attacks people were not clamouring for war and "let's go figure out somebody to attack." As angry as we were — and rightfully so — the predominant mood in the city was more all-embracing. There was a sense of spirit and community; great loss brought us together. We forget that communities can be like that. I was extremely moved by how people brought back that sense of togetherness, which is too often lacking in our world.

## Moe Fishman memorial slated for November

A memorial for Moe Fishman, a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, made up of Americans who fought against Franco in the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War, will be celebrated on Nov. 10 at 10:30 a.m. at Judson Memorial Church, 55 Washington Sq. S.

Fishman, one of the last surviving veterans of the Lincoln Brigade and a resident for 15 years of the Penn South co-op in Chelsea, died Aug. 6 at the age of 92.

Friends and admirers are being asked to bring photos, letters and memorabilia, which will be added to a timeline of Fishman's life and times to be ranged around the walls of the sanctuary space in Judson.

Find it in the archives  
[www.CHELSEANOW.com](http://www.CHELSEANOW.com)