

Faith & Hope

Journalist **Robin D. Stone** shares the seldom-told story of a Black woman who lost her mother in an American tragedy—and, after picking up the pieces, ultimately found her way

They talked practically every other day, about everything and nothing: the usual stuff for a daughter, Jasmine Victoria, phoning home from college, and her mom, Celeste, in New York City. But the call on September 10, 2001, was different. “Before we got started,” says Jasmine, now 29, “I told her, ‘Hey, I just wanted to say that I love you.’” That was the last time that mother and daughter spoke.

Celeste Torres Victoria was one of 2,973 people who perished in the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. The surreal spectacle of airplanes crashing into iconic buildings in New York City and Washington, D.C., and into a rural field in southwestern Pennsylvania is seared into our collective memories. And the world we once knew turned hypervigilant

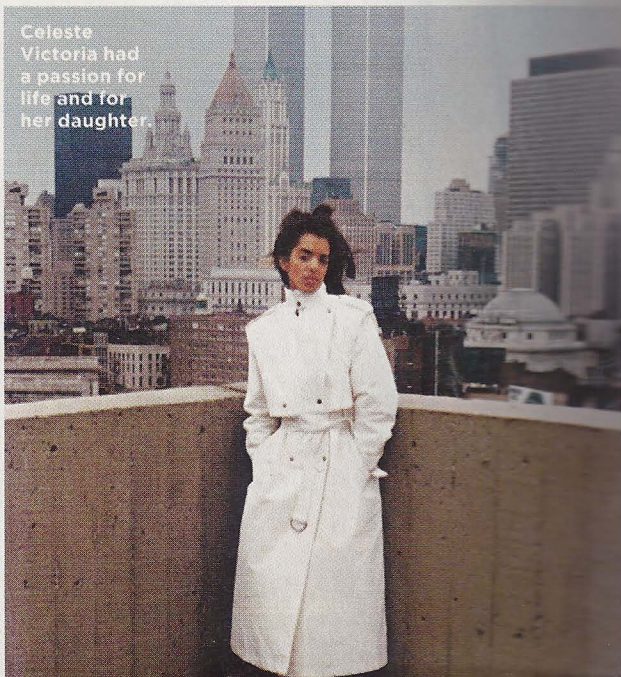
We’ve become familiar with the 9/11 profiles: the bond trading company that lost more than half its staff; the survivors who escaped yet still contend with physical and mental shrapnel; the suburban widows of investment bankers; the firefighters and officers who raced to their

doom; the scores of people who, because they caught a flight or just showed up for work, were never to be seen again. Although terrorism knows no color, in a decade of coverage, the impact of the attacks on Black women and their families has rarely been explored. You’ll find their faces among the memorial photo galleries—our sisters, our mothers, our daughters, our friends. Jasmine and her mother’s is one such story.

When she died, Celeste was 41 years old. She looked five years younger. Vivacious and energetic, always with a smile, she brightened a room just by walking in. She loved a great party, interesting people and new challenges. But her greatest love was her daughter. In so many ways, Jasmine Alalia Victoria is her mother’s child—confident and charismatic, poised and elegant, spirited and fiercely independent. And she has her mother’s warm, honey-colored skin—a result of her St. Thomas–Puerto Rican heritage. Jasmine is sitting in a café in the Brooklyn neighborhood where she once ran an ice cream shop and restaurant while in search of her true calling, recalling the day that changed everything.



Celeste Victoria and little Jasmine.



Celeste Victoria had a passion for life and for her daughter.



“I can’t live in fear,” says Jasmine, who lost her mom, Celeste Victoria.



“Jazzy, your mommy was in the building.”

On that bright, cloudless Tuesday morning, Celeste Victoria went to work early, helping to set up a conference at Windows on the World, the famed restaurant near the top of the North Tower of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. Celeste was new at her company, Risk Waters Group, selling clients on the idea of sending their employees to the company's risk management and financial

information seminars. Celeste didn't have to show up that morning, but she thought attending would give her a better understanding of her product. So she volunteered to help out.

About that same time, Jasmine was settling in to her linguistics class. It was the first week of her second year at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, where she attended on a full academic scholarship. She was interested in international business. At 19 she had come a long way from Manhattan's

gritty Lower East Side, the daughter of a single mother who often struggled through tough financial times to pursue her passions while encouraging her daughter to do the same. Jasmine did just that at Chapin, an esteemed all-girls private school, where, spurred by her mother's example, she excelled in academics and sports. “I remember her going back to college when I was 11 or 12,” Jasmine says of Celeste, who at one time worked as a model and then a paralegal before attending New York University to

study communications and journalism.

On September 11, classes ended early; Jasmine's professor announced there was an attack of some kind on the World Trade Center. Jasmine, jaded New Yorker that she was, didn't take the news seriously. “I remember thinking, *Oh, they already tried that,*” she says, referring to the 1993 bombing in which six people were killed and more than 1,000 injured. Her mother's office was farther uptown, and Jasmine had no reason to think Celeste would be in the Twin Towers that morning.

But she worried about an uncle whose commute by train took him under the Trade Center complex. “Is Uncle Richie okay?” she e-mailed her mother. “By the way, you still didn't send me that recipe. Call me when you get a chance.”

She became more concerned as she crossed the quad, passing clusters of students, some crying. She wandered into the bookstore to find everybody staring at a television: “One of the towers had collapsed in flames and they were saying, ‘Looks like the second tower is going to go.’” The TV featured replay after replay of the South Tower collapsing and of people leaping from the North one. “My first thought was, *Oh, my God—all those people,*” she says. As an intern for Goldman Sachs the previous summer, she had attended workshops at Windows on the World and had been in and out of the World Trade Center for lunch breaks almost daily. Her second thought, she says, was, *Coming home will never be the same.*

As she and other students stood transfixed, >

down came the North Tower, which boasted the restaurant near the top, where Celeste was planning the conference. “Little did I know I was watching my mother die,” Jasmine says.

She desperately wanted to talk to Celeste. She called and called but couldn’t get through. “There was a pre-recorded message saying there had been a tornado in Manhattan,” she says. She sent another e-mail: “Phones are crazy.... Let me know you’re okay.”

Finally in the early evening, she managed to reach the Manhattan apartment where her mother lived with her stepfather. Something in his voice told her it was not good. “It was as if he’d been dreading me calling all day,” Jasmine says. “Jazzy,” she recalls him saying, “Your mommy was

in the building.” Jasmine’s legs gave way.

“I can’t live my life in fear.”

“She wasn’t supposed to be there,” Jasmine reminds herself for the umpteenth time. “She wanted to go above and beyond her job. She only knew how to give more than expected, in work, in parenting, in life.”

By all accounts, that was Celeste’s way of being. Whether as a legal aide or as a producer for a local cable program or as a saleswoman for her last company, Celeste exceeded expectations. A performance review from one of her jobs cites her enthusiasm and professionalism and willingness to “go the extra mile.” Mother and daughter, who could pass for sisters, did just about everything together, Jasmine says, laughing at

the time when Celeste attended a campus party with her just for kicks, and Jasmine had to fight the brothers off with “Hey! That’s my mom!”

In the blur of events that immediately followed the attacks, Jasmine’s adviser and dean arranged for her to take a break from school. “They suggested a year, but I asked for only a semester,” she says. “I knew I wanted to come back.” As soon as planes were airborne again, Prep for Prep, a New York City organization that supports urban kids in select private schools, arranged for Jasmine, an alumna, to fly home a few days later. The thought of not flying did not occur to her. “I can’t live my life in fear of anything,” she says. “And I refused to allow that to be the defining moment in my life.” She hit her hometown on a mission. Jasmine joined her aunt in canvassing Red Cross and FEMA centers downtown searching for clues about Celeste.

As fall drew to a close, Jasmine slowly came to accept that her mother was gone. “I cried. I prayed. I asked God for guidance to help me understand the purpose of all this,” she says. Then she applied for financial assistance. “I was independent at 19 and needed to support myself. I had to learn to be my own parent.”

In December, her family’s Episcopal church held a Eucharist service to celebrate Celeste’s life. Jasmine, who was living with an aunt, prepared to return to school. “At some point there was nothing left for me to do,” she says. “I was just sitting around and feeling her absence.” Everybody was worried about her. “People’s mothers die every day—from violence,



Celeste’s treasured passport was recovered from Ground Zero.

from illness, from accidents, from natural causes,” she says. “I lost my mom—that’s the thing I’m saddest about, not the way she died.” In February 2002, around what would have been Celeste’s forty-second birthday, two uniformed officers arrived at Jasmine’s aunt’s house bearing a flag. “They said they found her remains—largely intact,” Jasmine says. The body was unrecognizable and missing a foot, but Jasmine welcomed the gruesome discovery. “I’m so grateful I got my mom—most of her. Some people still don’t know where their loved ones are,” she says. The find was confirmed by dental records and hair samples that the family had supplied. Recovery efforts retrieved Celeste’s ash-covered wallet, a couple of melted credit cards and her passport, almost pristine. The latest stamp was a visa for travel to Brazil, in 1999. “That was my closure,” Jasmine says.

“At night, when I’m alone, I cry.”

Celeste was buried in the same Queens, New York, cemetery as her mother, Marilyn Victoria. Jasmine recounts how Celeste took her mother’s maiden name >

Jasmine, here in Barcelona in August 2010, inherited her mother’s love of adventure and travel.



Jasmine volunteered in Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JASMINE VICTORIA HILL, NEIGHAN WOODS. ALL OTHER PHOTOS, COURTESY OF SUBJECT.

because she felt her mother was more of a parent than her father, Felix Torres. Jasmine feels no need to visit the grave site. "That's where her body is buried, but her spirit is with me all the time," she says.

Jasmine eventually earned a degree in international business—"On time," she proudly points out. She saw a psychologist at the encouragement of school officials. By the second visit Jasmine shared her revelation: "I am well aware that I lost the most important person in my life. I'm not in denial. At night, when I'm alone, I cry. I do. I don't choose to do that in front of people." With the therapist's support, Jasmine ended the visits. After graduating, she went to work for Goldman Sachs. It wasn't a good fit. "I gave myself a year," she says. Six months after her deadline, she quit, donated all her corporate suits to charity, and, following her mother's example, began to follow her heart.

With a boyfriend she ran a Brooklyn ice cream shop in 2005, which expanded into a fusion restaurant that did so well she sold it in 2008. Still, running restaurants didn't speak to her heart. What resonated most was a class on divinity and healing, which she'd taken at Duke. The students traveled to Haiti for spring break to do medical missionary work. "I loved the charity and working with my hands," she says. She went with 9/11 rescue workers to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to help build houses in the Ninth Ward and then returned to Haiti to help after the earthquake.

Her business experience led to a high-level job with a green-energy biodiesel company. "I liked the good-for-the-planet aspect of it, and I liked the paycheck, but..."

Again, it didn't speak to her heart. She quit in April—"that was a very Celeste Victoria thing to do," she says with a laugh. She becomes serious at the mention of the killing of Osama bin Laden, cited as the architect behind the 9/11 attacks, last May in Pakistan. It was an end to a harrowing chapter in history, but Jasmine had already erased the Al-Qaeda leader from her mind. She did not cheer when she heard the news of his death. "My mother and everybody who died were innocent bystanders. They were casualties of war."

Jasmine is not certain if she will join in any tenth anniversary ceremonies. "I like to remember my mom in life, not in death," she says. "I want to be smiling, not sad." Just like her mother. "I always tried to live up to my mom's expectations because she treated me like I was better than her." Celeste would be proud that Jasmine has finally found her calling: She's pursuing certification as an emergency medical technician. She should be done by press time, and if that happens she will enroll in a one-year paramedic course. She wants to become a first responder—one of the brave souls who rushes in when disaster strikes. "Even if I save one person's life," she says, "maybe my mom would've died so that one person could live." Jasmine pauses. "If I learned anything in life, it's that everything happens for a reason. It's His grand scheme, not ours."

Robin D. Stone was a journalism colleague of Celeste Torres Victoria and knew Jasmine when she was a teen. A regular contributor to *ESSENCE*, Stone is at work on a project focused on Black women and weight.

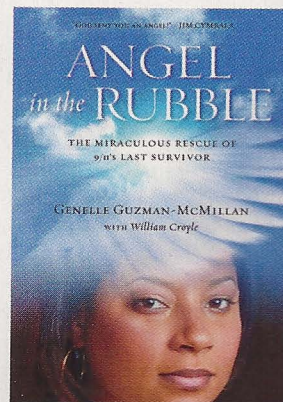
TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL

Buried beneath the debris from the World Trade Center's North Tower, Genelle Guzman-McMillan (right) took stock of everything. At 30, she was living her dreams. She was a temp by day, and loved partying at night with hopes of gaining fame as a music video dancer.



God had other plans. Genelle was on the sixty-fourth floor of the North Tower when the plane hit. As she and her coworkers reached the thirteenth floor in a frightening descent down a smoky stairwell, the 111-floor building collapsed. During the 27 hours she lay pinned between concrete and steel in darkness and smoke, Genelle had a talk with God. In her heartfelt memoir, *Angel in the Rubble: The Miraculous Rescue of 9/11's Last Survivor* (Howard Books, \$24), she details how she grasped the hand of the mysterious "Paul," who assured her that help was on the way. Genelle was the last person pulled out of the wreckage alive. After four surgeries and six weeks in the hospital, she made good on her promises to God: She became a U.S. citizen; married her live-in boyfriend, Roger McMillan, now 48; and brought her daughter Kimberly over from Trinidad, where Genelle was born, to join her.

Today Genelle is surrounded by portraits of her happy family (Kimberly, 22, a recent college grad; Roger's son, Kadeem, 20; and the couple's children together, Kellie, 5, and Kaydi, 7) in her Long Island, New York, home. The Port Authority supervisor, now 40, jokes at the irony of her fame, which she says she shares with the angel "Paul." The only lingering scars from her ordeal are two tracks down both sides of the right leg that she almost lost in the attack and a crescent on her left calf. "No more miniskirts," says the once aspiring dancer with a laugh.



Genelle Guzman-McMillan recovering after being buried beneath a 111-story building. She recounts the 27 hours of horror and healing in her new book, *Angel in the Rubble*.