

9/11 10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY



Ellen, pictured with her new partner Sal, lost her pilot husband Victor (right) in 9/11. The mum-of-two has worked hard since the tragedy to open the Bucks County 9-11 Memorial Garden of Reflection to honour the victims.



Pilot's wife tells

I'VE FOUND LOVE AGAIN

Ellen thought her whole world was over when her husband died, but 10 years later she's finally found peace...

Ellen Saracini lost her pilot husband Victor Saracini – the father of her two daughters – on September 11. Here, she tells *New Idea* about moving on without her soulmate and how she found love again after heartache...

I remember the first time we met like it was yesterday. Vic was working on his MBA while teaching flight instruction at Louisiana Tech University, and I was just starting school there.

'We quickly fell in love and were together 21 years – and married for 18 of those – with two beautiful girls. I loved how devoted a family man he was. He was the best father.

'Tragically, Vic would never get to see our children grow up. He was captain of United Airlines Flight 175 that struck the south tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. It was the worst day of my life and a day that changed my family's lives forever.

'I was at my children's school that morning, volunteering, when the first person walked in and said: "A small aircraft has hit the World Trade Center!"

'In those days I didn't have a mobile phone so I drove home. As the television news continued to show live video of the burning towers, my first phone call was to Greg, a close friend who was the safety adviser for the north-east of America for United Airlines.

Tragically, Vic would never get to see our children grow up

He lived about 15 minutes away. Greg told me he would find out what was going on. Suddenly, the doorbell rang and when I opened the door, I saw Greg standing there. I saw the look on his face. And I just knew. I felt like my world had fallen apart.

'When I look back, I realise I was lucky. Unlike almost every other person who lost someone in

9/11, I knew straight away. Victor had checked in with United, we knew he was on that flight. I didn't have to wait, wonder and hope he would be found alive in the rubble. I knew my husband was dead that morning, and I knew we had to start grieving.

'We try to celebrate the anniversaries, the birthdays and I still honour our wedding anniversary. But a while back, I realised I had to start dating

again. I hated the dating scene – I went on one blind date and it was a nightmare!

'Every year, all the pilots throw a party on Vic's birthday and I go along. And two years ago, I was invited as usual, but Kirsten, my eldest, had had her wisdom teeth out and was home sick. I said to her: "I'm not going to go this year," but to my

surprise, Kirsten said: "You must go and I'm coming with you!" When I arrived, I realised it was all set up. "Meet my friend, Sal," Greg said. I politely shook hands with Sal, who was a very handsome man. Greg introduced him as part of the pilots' motorcycle team. We talked and talked some more, and I was so comfortable with Sal from the first moment we spent together.

'In November last year, Sal asked me to marry him. I was delighted. Although there are no plans for a wedding yet, when the time is right we'll marry. People say time heals, but it does not heal your heart. Time just gets you used to a new way of life.

'This year, for the 10th anniversary, it'll be different. We'll have a big ceremony and I'll remember that terrible morning a decade ago. But I won't be alone because I'll be with Sal. There was room in my life for a good man and I found him. We're beginning a new journey together.' **NI**



2008

Twin Towers terror SURVIVOR GETS HER LIFE BACK

Elissa got out of the collapsing World Trade Center just in time, but her survivor's guilt almost killed her

Elissa Williams escaped from an elevator in the World Trade Center as the hijacked planes struck the buildings. However, instead of counting her blessings that she'd made it out alive, her survivor's guilt almost destroyed her second chance at life.

Dodging burning debris as she ran from the south tower, a terrified Elissa assumed she was going to die.

An administrator for financial company Guy Carpenter, the then 29-year-old escaped after pushing her way out of an elevator on the ground floor.

Then, like her many screaming colleagues, she ran for her life. 'Somehow I got out of Manhattan and onto a bus, which took me back to Long Island where my family lived,' she tells New Idea.

'That was when I finally

broke down. Until then, I hadn't shed a tear. But I had no idea the effect September 11 would have on the rest of my life.'

Instead of counting her blessings that she survived, Elissa became a shadow of her former outgoing, confident self.

When she returned to work at another New York office in the weeks that followed 9/11, she was gripped by debilitating panic attacks that left her scared to leave her house. Eventually, Elissa quit her job and moved to South Florida where she tried to move forward with her life.

'By 2002, I had gone on disability allowance and doctors put me on antidepressants to deal with the panic attacks,' she says.

The only thing that provided Elissa any comfort from her survivor's guilt was food – and plenty of it. But by 2006, five years after September 11, the

former fitness fanatic had gained a staggering 73kg and tipped the scales at 136kg.

'I'd been skinny all my life and never been a yoyo dieter but it was comfort food, and not exercising, that did it.'

Unhappy and unhealthy, Elissa knew she had to overhaul her lifestyle if she finally wanted to move forward with her life.

'It took a lot of courage to walk into a weight-loss meeting, but soon I got into the swing of things,' she says. 'I didn't need a gastric band or surgery, I just started to eat right again and work out. I bought some new gym clothes and hit the gym with a vengeance.'

It wasn't long before Elissa began to feel like her old self for the first time since 9/11.

'The kicker was when my youngest niece said: "I have my old Aunt Elissa back." I was like: "Wow,"' she says. 'It feels good

when I look in the mirror and see the old me.'

This year, Elissa bravely returned to New York for the first time in almost a decade for her niece's 16th birthday party.

She's also worked through her guilt with the help of counselling and friends and, after months of healthy eating and exercise, has started to think about dating again for the first time since before September 11.

'Everything feels like a new beginning,' says Elissa, who is back to her original weight.

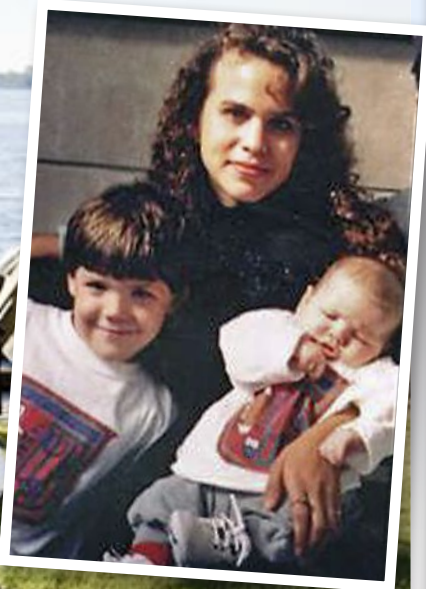
'An anniversary doesn't mean closure for me – moving on was something that happened inside of me. I was overweight and reclusive, and now I'm ready to start living my life again.

'I volunteer for a charity that makes me feel like I'm giving something back. At last, it's time to move on.' **NI**



2011

Elissa, who survived the horrific 9/11 attacks, says that the extra weight she put on afterwards was 'like carrying around an extra person'. Now, 10 years after the attack, she finally feels like she's back to her old self.



Vanessa with her brothers, who were her 'very best friends in the world'. Ten years on, mum Donna (left) is still coming to terms with her loss.

Grieving mum

MY GIRL'S SECRET

Donna was shattered after losing her daughter, but there was more heartbreak to come

As she strolled through the streets of Canada with her husband one sunny morning in September 2001, Donna O'Connor had no idea it would be the last happy, carefree moment of her life.

Answering her mobile, the 47-year-old teacher's heart sank as a friend informed her of the horror unfolding in New York, where her 29-year-old daughter Vanessa worked as an office manager for an international leasing company.

A beautiful, bright newlywed, Vanessa – who had recently told her mother of her plans to start a family with her husband of a year-and-a-half – was at work on the 93rd floor of Tower 2 in the World Trade Center when the first plane struck the first tower.

'Every second after that call was a mix of panic and terror,' Donna tells *New Idea* exclusively. 'I just had this absolute need to touch my daughter. All I wanted to do was get as close to my daughter as I could.'

In the aftermath of the attacks that claimed 2819 lives, Donna was able to piece together her daughter's last hours.

She learnt that five minutes

after a plane smashed into the first tower, Vanessa was working hard to keep the other six members of her team calm.

'Unbelievably, they were instructed to stay in the office and continue to work,' Donna says.

Then, horrifyingly, at 9.03am, a second plane slammed into the south face of Tower 2, between the 77th and 85th floors. Finally, Vanessa and her co-workers frantically began to evacuate.

But, as the petite brunette fled the terrifying scene, the building began to collapse. The air filled with toxic dust and pulverised concrete as the gigantic towers crumbled to the ground.

Only 18 people who were located above the impact zone managed to get out alive.

Around 13 days after the attacks, Vanessa's body was pulled from the rubble just three metres from an alley where she may have found safety.

But it wasn't until four months later – in January 2002 – that Donna and her family received a call from the Office of Chief Medical Examiner of the City of New York, confirming her body had been identified.

'When that phone call came in January, I was actually

relieved,' says Donna. 'We were finally able to have a proper funeral for Vanessa.'

'But it was hard, seeing her brothers, who were Vanessa's very best friends in the world, break down and cry. We had all experienced such pain.'

However, their ordeal was far from over. After being granted permission to sift through Vanessa's charred Ford Explorer, which was later pulled from a crumbled parking garage, Donna made a harrowing discovery.

'[The car] was the last place my daughter had spent her personal time,' Donna says. 'It was the last evidence of her everyday world. But in the glove box, I found something that would haunt me forever. It was a positive pregnancy test.'

'On the day of her death, Vanessa was five months pregnant. I would have been a grandmother if it wasn't for the terrorists.'

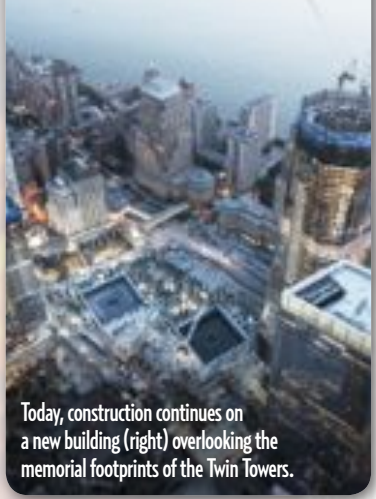
The overwhelming grief that sent her into a 'deep, frightening emptiness' forced her to quit teaching. 'I taught American Public Discourse, and I just couldn't do it, not after all this.'

She is also trying to forge a new life for herself, but there's

9/11 IN NUMBERS

THE TRAGIC FACTS OF SEPTEMBER 11

- There was a total of **2819** deaths, including the **19** hijackers and **2800** victims.
- No-one escaped from the floors above where the plane hit the north tower.
- Only **289** bodies were discovered 'intact'.
- **115** nations lost citizens in the attack.
- **63** babies were born to a parent who perished.
- **36,000** units of donated blood was received by the New York Blood Center.
- **258** units of donated blood were used.
- **1609** spouses or partners were lost.
- **3051** children are estimated to have lost a parent.
- Just **18** people were found alive in the rubble. None were found after September 12.
- It took **102** minutes to destroy the towers, from the first impact to the collapse of the second tower.



Today, construction continues on a new building (right) overlooking the memorial footprints of the Twin Towers.

not a day that goes by where she doesn't think of her daughter and the grandchild she never met.

'Today, my grandchild would be over nine years old and I often think about what her little girl would look like,' she says. 'But for now, I'm really trying to craft a new kind of life for myself...'

'Sorrow and happiness will always go hand-in-hand for me. At every joyful occasion we have as a family, Vanessa's chair will always be empty.'

'But I know she's still with us. I can still feel her.' **NI**