

# 9/11 MEMORIAL

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UNIT: Individuals and 9/11

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GRADE LEVEL/S: 9-12

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TIME NEEDED: 1-2 sessions

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TEACHER: Jill McCracken

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## LESSON TITLE: STAIRCASE OF VESEY STREET

### Common Core Standards

**R 1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**R 7** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

**W 1** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

**W 8** Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

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### Key Questions/ Issues Addressed

What happened on 9/11?

What were the Vesey Street Stairs?

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### Lesson Goals/ Objectives

Students will articulate the importance of the Vesey Street stairs by discussing their role and completing the Critical Thinking Questions on the reading.

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### Key Terms

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### Materials

NIST Response to the World Trade Center Disaster Federal Building and Fire Safety Investigation of the World Trade Center Disaster:

[www.nist.gov/el/disasterstudies/wtc/wtc\\_about.cfm](http://www.nist.gov/el/disasterstudies/wtc/wtc_about.cfm)

The Survivor Steps of Vesey Street: See [Appendix A](#).

Tom Canavan Oral History Transcript: See [Appendix B](#).

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### Background for lesson

The teacher should preview the materials prior to instruction. It is instrumental in introducing the topic of 9/11 to students, as well as briefly explaining what happened that day.

Some Youtube links are given for further explorations, however, these aren't required for completion of the activity.

**Instructional  
Activity/  
Procedures**

1. Introduce the topic of 9/11 to students. Present the reading, The Survivor Steps of Vesey Street, along with the Tom Canavan oral history transcript to the students (see Appendices).
2. With students, read the NIST report section: “Summary of findings” outlining the collapse of the towers: [www.nist.gov/el/disasterstudies/wtc/wtc\\_about.cfm](http://www.nist.gov/el/disasterstudies/wtc/wtc_about.cfm).
3. Review discussion questions based on that section, The Survivor Steps of Vesey Street, and transcript.
4. Listen to and/or read Tom Canavan’s story of what happened to him on 9/11 and the importance of the Vesey Street Survivor Staircase. His oral history can be found here (runs approximately 8 minutes): [www.911memorial.org/sites/all/files/audio/TomCanavan.mp3](http://www.911memorial.org/sites/all/files/audio/TomCanavan.mp3)
5. Discuss the importance of the staircase on 9/11 and why it is an important artifact in the 9/11 Memorial Museum.
6. Critical Thinking Questions for the NIST Report, Podcast and Transcript:
  - *How did the damage to the North and South towers differ?*
  - The vast majority of people below the impact zones in the Towers survived. Why is there such a disparity between below and above the impact zones? *How did the differing states of the stairwells in the North and South towers after the crashes dictate survival for those above the impact zones?*
  - After the collapse, Tom tells the Security Guard with him, “Either you’ll burn to death or suffocate down here, and I’m not going to do either one of those. So if you want to come with me, I’m leaving.” *Do you think this attitude helped in his survival? Why?*
  - *Why did Tom tell himself he was seeing mannequins as he clawed his way out of the debris after the collapse of the South Tower?*
  - When Tom arrives at the hospital, he is stunned that the doctors and nurses had nothing to do. *Why is this such a surprise to him?*
  - *Why didn’t the full impact of the Towers collapse hit Tom until he was home?*
  - *Why is it important to include the Vesey Street Survivor Stairs in the 9/11 Memorial Museum?*

**Evidence of  
Understanding**

Formative:

Discussion of video  
Critical Thinking Discussion Questions

Summative:

Write an essay on why the Vesey Street Survivor Staircase is a critically important artifact at the 9/11 Memorial Museum.

**Extension  
Activities**

David Brink testimony, 9/11 Memorial Museum website:  
[www.911memorial.org/recovery-stories](http://www.911memorial.org/recovery-stories)

Vesey Street Stairway, 9/11 Memorial Museum website:  
[www.911memorial.org/survivors-stairs](http://www.911memorial.org/survivors-stairs)

Listen to more WTC Survivors and Tom Canavan's description of the importance of the Vesey Street Stairs:

[www.911memorial.org/911-events-day](http://www.911memorial.org/911-events-day)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyyGT\\_DlizA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyyGT_DlizA)

## APPENDIX A

**The Survivor Staircase of Vesey Street****By Jill McCracken**

September 11, 2001 was a beautiful, crystal clear Tuesday. A Primary Election day in New York City, commuters, workers, and residents traversed the neighborhoods and streets of Manhattan, heading about their business as they normally did. September 11, 2001, however, was not destined to be a typical day, but instead another “date which will live in infamy.”

At 8:46 a.m., American Airlines Flight 11 hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center. First thought to be a plane that veered off course due to mechanical problems, soon it was known that this was no accident, but instead a terrorist attack. This was confirmed at 9:03 a.m. when United Airlines Flight 175 struck the South Tower. Many died immediately. But for some, for the next 102 minutes, life and death struggles in the Twin Towers would alter lives forever.

American Flight 11 struck the North Tower between the 93rd- 99th floors on the north side of the building. It destroyed all three emergency exits, trapping everyone in and above the impact zone. When the South Tower was struck by United Flight 175, it struck between the 77th-85th floors, hitting the south side at an angle, sparing one of the emergency staircases in the South Tower. This permitted 18 people from in and above the impact zone to find their way to safety. Much would be determined by locations of staircases. Survivor Richard Zimble explains: “*The stairways are the common denominator in most 9/11 survivor stories.*”<sup>1</sup>

Below, at the Austin J. Tobin Plaza of the World Trade Center, the Vesey stairway gave access to Vesey Street from the plaza. For many, it would prove to be the only route of escape, and thus, it is now known as the “Survivors’ Stairway.”

Kayla Bergeron, the chief of public and government affairs for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, was one of the survivors who traversed the Survivor’s Staircase. Ms. Bergeron recalls that after her own 68 floor descent, “*They were the path to freedom.*”<sup>2</sup>

Struck lower, the damaged South Tower floors had to carry a heavier load, thus collapsing first only 56 minutes after being struck. Another Port Authority employee, Patty Clark, who was descending stairwell A in the South Tower, was on the 4th or 5th floor when she heard a horrible rumbling noise, then a violent vibration as the South Tower collapsed.<sup>3</sup>

Surviving the collapse, Ms. Clark and Ms. Bergeron now had to navigate out of the debris that threatened to entomb them. Wading through eight inches of water as shredded electrical wiring sparked around them, they were relieved to see a firefighter appear, directing them outside.

Exiting, they saw an unrecognizable world. The thick dust cloud threatened to clog their lungs, while obscuring their vision. The women cautiously made their way to 5 World Trade Center and finally the Vesey Street staircase, exiting to the streets beyond. Ms. Clark called the Vesey Street staircase a “*monument to all of us that embodies the metaphorical power of steps.*”<sup>4</sup>

Another survivor who used the Vesey Street stairs was Tom Canavan. “*Without that staircase I don’t know how I would have gotten out of the plaza alive,*” he remembered. “[It’s] like in a cemetery with a tombstone,” he said. “*It means something.*”<sup>5</sup>

**APPENDIX A**

(continued)

As Canavan told the New York Times, “*There was no other way for me to get out of there. The plaza had collapsed in front of me.*” He believes he might have been the last survivor to descend those steps.<sup>6</sup>

At 10:03 a.m., the South Tower collapsed above him, burying him briefly in a tangle of girders and concrete. When he tunneled out of the twisted rubble, Mr. Canavan navigated a plaza that had become an impassable mess of steaming wreckage and confusion. The Vesey Street staircase was the only remaining option for escape. Moments after he reached the street below, the North Tower gave way, destroying everything below within seconds.

The importance of the Vesey Street Survivor’s Stairs is clear as they are the last remaining above-ground remnant of the World Trade Center. The Survivor Stairs are already located in the 9/11 Memorial Museum, set to open in the fall of 2012.

Mr. Canavan gave an interview to the 9/11 Memorial Museum about his story of survival on September 11, 2001. See Appendix B for the transcript of Mr. Canavan’s interview.

WORKS CITED

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3. Dunlap
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5. Hinckley, David. “Workers move WTC staircase cherished as 9/11 escape route.” Fox News.com, March 9, 2008.  
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7. “Workers Move WTC Staircase, cherished as 9/11 Escape Route.” Fox News. March 9 2008.  
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## APPENDIX B

**Tom Canavan**  
**Transcript of podcast**

“The thing I remember most about that day was how beautiful the weather was that day. [It was a] normal day going to work, a Tuesday, just trying to get through the week like everyone else. Got upstairs to work, I was a little earlier that morning because we were having a meeting.

At the time everything started to happen, I was in my boss’ office with 4-5 other people just on the conference call sitting there. Then, there was a big explosion, a tremble, and the building started to sway back and forth. Of course, we all jumped up. [I] didn’t know what it was at the time.

Our offices face south, so, when I looked out the window, I could see pieces of metal, pieces of glass falling, sheets of glass, big sheets of metal, the aluminum colored metal of the sides of the buildings.

I looked out the window, I looked down which was the back of the Marriot Hotel, was right below us. The roof was on fire there, a lot of cars in the street were on fire, and there was just debris all over.

The fire department was just pulling up to the building. I remember saying at that point that “Everything would be okay now.”

So, we had one exit back of the office, so I went to that one door. I put the hand to the back of the door, and it was kind warm and we had some smoke coming out underneath. I knew we weren’t going to go down that way.

And, at this point then, I went I went back into the hallway, and I noticed I that could hear a lot of people coming. So, I opened the door, everyone was coming down those steps. I went back to my office, and said, “You know what, we need to get out of here.”

And, now the fire department started coming up the steps. I remember some of the guys sitting down, because they had all their equipment on and it was hot.

So, somebody broke into some of the machines on the floors, they were taking water and soda out, giving them to the firemen. I grabbed a bottle of water, and when a fireman sitting on the steps, I was pouring water over his head.

Then, we started noticing that on the floors were very dark, water pouring down the steps at that point, just cascading like a waterfall. So, we had to take it easy that point, it got a little slippery, we went down a little slower.

We got down the 1st floor and where the steps let out was in between the elevator banks in the lobby of 1 World Trade on the concourse level. A big security guard [was] standing there, just pointing, pointing east, saying “Just go”.

I remember looking around, almost all the elevator doors were almost knocked off; they were all crooked. So, we made the turn, we went through the turnstyle at that point we could see the concourse level through the doors, all the lights were out, but sprinkler were on. All of the glass in all of the doors and windows were shattered.

**APPENDIX B**  
(continued)

Soon as I turned around, we started to walk again. But, at that point there was a huge rush of air, straight down just like I'd imagine what a wind tunnel's like. And the sound of, I'd like to say a locomotive, but it had to be a thousand times that noise and next thing, I know I was smashed to the ground like a bug. Completely down.

My first thought was 'I'm dead'.

My 2nd thought was "And you know what, it didn't hurt, it's not that bad if this is what it's like. Then, it's really not that bad."

I felt pretty warm. I felt pretty good at that point. And, that point I started to taste grit, sort of like sand in my teeth, in my eyes, in my nose, brushed sand away from my face to take a breath. It was very smoky, very hot. As I turned my head down, I noticed the cuffs of my pants were on fire.

And I really couldn't reach it, so I was taking hands full of dirt, and I have no idea where the dirt came from, because at this point, I tell you it was like instinct-- I don't know what I was thinking. I just threw everything I could on my pants, and put that out.

Then, I could notice around me little fires starting. All this time I was on my stomach, I couldn't really even get up onto my knees.

Just pieces of paper that were there would all of a sudden just flame up. I felt above my head, it was a slab of concrete on an angle; it went all the way down in front of me and just fell to the sides. [I] couldn't feel the edge, so I said alright, I'm going to have to move here.

So, I started to digging and I started to go to my right, and I hear somebody behind me, and he said, "Don't leave me!"

I couldn't see who it was, and I said "Who's there?"

It ended up being a man. He said he was a security guard.

I said, "Are you alright?"

And he said "Yeah, but let's stay here because they'll find us."

At which point I said, "Either you'll burn to death or suffocate down here, and I'm not going to do either one of those. So if you want to come with me, I'm leaving".

And I started moving to my right digging, he grabbed my ankle, I guess he was under some debris also, he, I could feel him pull himself on my leg up. Then, I started digging to the right, and he started digging behind me.

The only thing I remember is going at an angle now trying to get up. Cause, I finally got around the slab and we started just going up. But, everything was concrete, and mostly rebar and iron.

There were what I thought, I tell my mind, were mannequins. I know they weren't, but it was easier at the time because knowing that there was the Banana Republic there, the Gap was there, so I'm figuring, you know what, that's what I'm seeing here.

**APPENDIX B**  
(continued)

Finally, going up at an angle, I could see a little pinhole of light coming from the sky.

I remember saying to him, "Oh, we're in the street!"

I went toward that little pin hole, and I stuck my hand to it, and started pulling down the stuff. And I got to where, I would say like a rabbit hole, and I stuck my head out. All I could see at that point were whirling papers and dark clouds was like being in the middle of a blizzard. I squeeze through the hole, I scraped my whole body down getting through it.

I was standing on a girder, and I could feel the bottom of my shoes melting into the girder, just like you'd walk on tar on a hot day in the street in New York, and you feel that give. And that's what it was like up on that girder. And, I looked up, it was looking through the eye of a hurricane or something, because I could see blue sky straight up but everything else was all swirling and paper.

I looked down into the street, and it was like a blizzard had hit and left. The sun was out, but there was a white covering on everything in the street. There were two port authority workers standing there on what is now called the "survivor staircase". There were steps and sort of like a gang plank going down to the street level from the plaza.

They waved me "Come this way".

When I got down to Vesey Street, I started walking up hill toward Church Street.

The FBI came over at that point, a couple agents, one grabbed my arm, and said "We gotta move." As we started to walk away, I felt that whoosh again in the air and that noise again, and the two of us look back as my tower was falling, I just kept walking up Broadway.

And a couple of police officers came over, and they said to me, "Where are you going?"

"I'm going home".

They said "Where do you live?"

I said "Upstate, but I'm walking, I've had enough today, I'm done with this."

They grabbed me, they put me in an ambulance. The ambulance gave me oxygen and took me to Beth Israel Hospital, 14th St. and 1st Ave. We pulled up the side street by the back of the hospital. They opened the doors, and I looked out, there was nothing there but doctors and nurses standing in the street, nothing. There were gurneys and nobody had anything to do.

As they took me out, I heard someone say, "He's critical."

I said "Critical? Who's critical? I feel fine".

I went out to the phone booth and called home, and I spoke to my mother-in-law who was watching my child at the time. Through her, I got to speak to my wife, and I told her I'd meet her at Grand Central. I'll get there as soon as I can.

I just started walking through the streets at that point.

**APPENDIX B**  
(continued)

When I did finally get home, I turned on the TV, that's when I found out really towers came down, where it really sunk in I mean, it was like a death in the family. You remember everything about it.

I go there today, I stand on that corner, I can see those buildings, and the vendors outside, and I can see the farmers' market that was there that morning clear as day. You get over the loss but you never forget."