

# A Radio and a School:

## Using Stories to Teach 9/11 15 Years Later

Megan Jones and Noah Rauch

*Here, at this memorial, this museum, we come together. ... We look into the faces of nearly 3,000 innocent souls—men and women and children of every race, every creed, and every corner of the world. We can touch their names and hear their voices and glimpse the small items that speak to the beauty of their lives. A wedding ring. A dusty helmet. A shining badge.*

*Here we tell their story, so that generations yet unborn will never forget.*

—Barack Obama, 9/11 Memorial Museum dedication ceremony, N.Y., New York, May 15, 2014.

Standing within the architectural foundations of the original World Trade Center, President Barack Obama spoke these words, surrounded by thousands of

artifacts, at the May 15, 2014, ceremony dedicating the 9/11 Memorial Museum. His words remind us that it is the “small items”—a wedding ring, a dusty helmet,

a shining badge—that help us process that day, that humanize the incomprehensible, that ensure we never forget.

Some artifacts are massive, some fit in the palm of a hand, all serve to tell the story of what happened on 9/11 and in its aftermath. Throughout the year, students use these artifacts, and the stories behind them, to examine the attacks and their significance, why they happened, how people and institutions chose to respond, and how (and why) we remember what happened.

With the 15th anniversary of the attacks, these questions take on a new importance. Our individual and collective memories (most of us can picture where we were; we all have a 9/11 story) are quickly coalescing into a historical narrative. What feels like yesterday for some of us is a historical event for our students. How do we impart the significance of the day, while underscoring its ongoing relevance 15 years later? How do we substantively explore a complex and emotional topic in the first days or weeks of school? Why is 9/11 important? Why do we remember? The answers lie within artifacts and the stories they tell, artifacts like a handheld radio and its connection to a story of survival, loss, and compassion.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Ada Rosario Dolch, principal of the High School for Leadership and Public Service, observed her building brimming with activity. Located just



A museum staff member uses a handheld radio similar to the one used by Ada Dolch on 9/11 to teach during a tour. Photograph by Noaa Stoler.

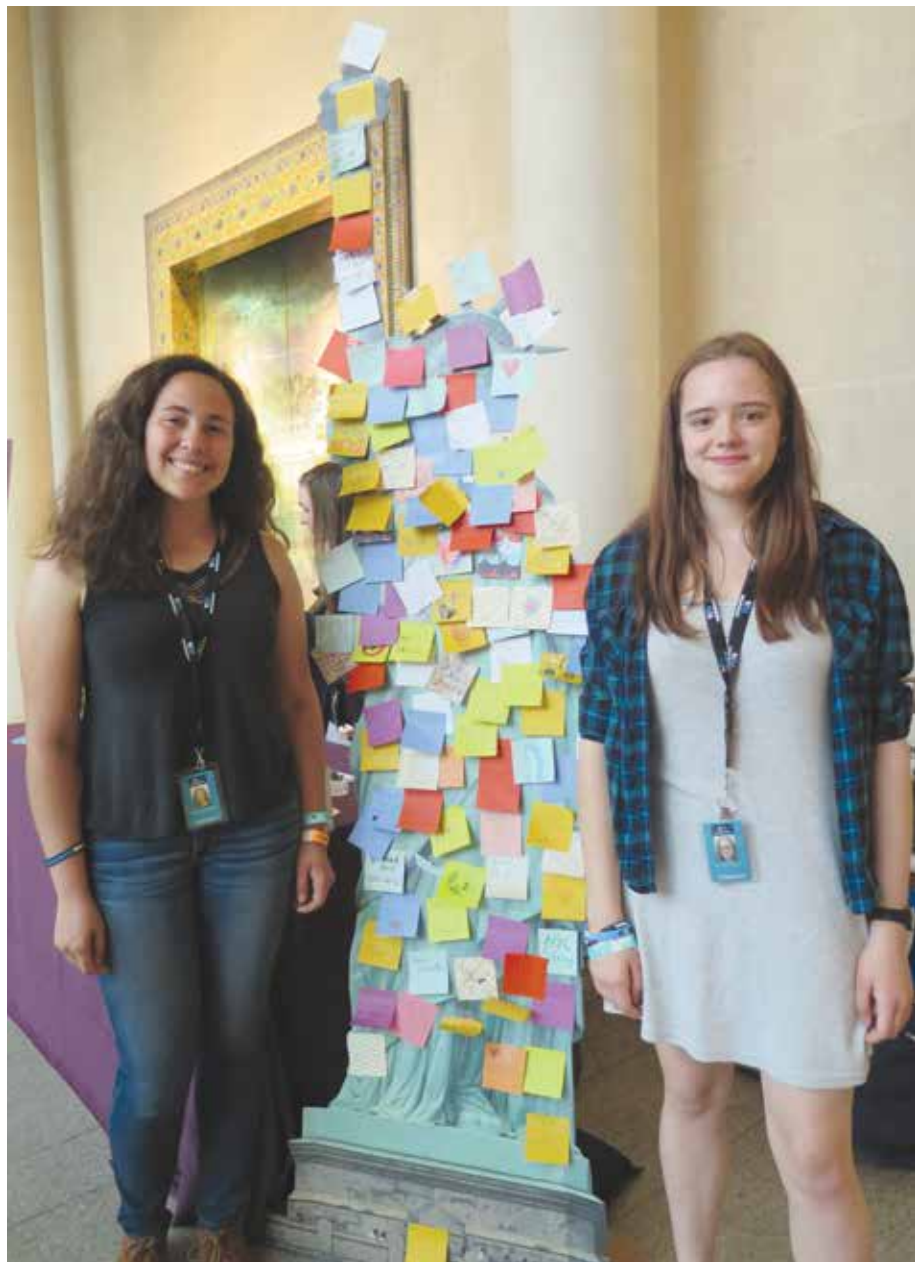


**Wendy Rosario Wakeford. Collection 9/11 Memorial Museum, Gift of Ada Dolch in memory of her sister, Wendy Rosario Wakeford**

two blocks south of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers, the school was full of students preparing for classes and local residents casting votes in the city's mayoral primary election. At 8:30AM, Dolch grabbed her keys and handheld radio—an essential tool for communication in a 14-story school building—and headed downstairs, intending to walk across the street to the World Trade Center to buy a replacement battery for her watch.

She never made it there. As she reached the lobby, the lights in the building flickered off and then back on, and after a brief moment of confusion, she heard a tremendous boom. People began pouring into the school's lobby with descriptions of a large airplane striking the North Tower. Among them was the assistant principal, who had seen the damage from the school cafeteria's 14th floor windows. Dolch's first thought was "Oh my God, Wendy is there. God please, you have to take care of Wendy because I have to take care of the kids."<sup>1</sup> Ada's sister, Wendy Rosario Wakeford, worked on the 105th floor of the North Tower for Cantor Fitzgerald, a large investment bank.

Seventeen minutes later, at 9:03AM, the South Tower was deliberately struck by a second hijacked plane. Everything



**Two high schoolers who participate in the museum's year-long after school youth program stand next to the Lady Liberty display created by visitors.**

shook, burning debris filled the air, and Dolch knew it was time to evacuate. Realizing that Stuyvesant High School—the original evacuation destination—was not a viable option because of its proximity to the World Trade Center, she immediately directed her staff to evacuate to Battery Park, a location safe from the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan and large enough to accommodate all of the students and staff. Dolch stood watch at the front door of the school as large groups of students, led by teachers, held

each other's hands as they began making their way to the park. Dolch picked up the rear.

She was within one block of the park when the 110-story South Tower collapsed at 9:59AM. She watched her students run away from an overwhelming dust cloud, filled with debris. Fearing for her life, she jumped over a fence and huddled beside a tree with a group of women before becoming overwhelmed by darkness, her throat filled with dust. All went dark, then gray, and as light

began to peak through the dust, she immediately thought of her students. She grabbed her handheld radio, communicating with school safety officers, deans, and the assistant principals, who confirmed their safety. The students, having scattered after the collapse, had eventually ended up in government buildings, gyms, City Hall, Staten Island, even New Jersey across the Hudson River—ferried there by boats transporting people to safety from lower Manhattan. Dolch was reunited with many of her students and staff from the school by 11 a.m. when they made the decision to break into small groups, depending on where they lived. After walking home to Brooklyn with a group of her students, Dolch's focus shifted to Wendy. She recalls thinking, *Where's Wendy? Has anybody heard from Wendy?*<sup>2</sup> She would learn later that, tragically, along with 657 of her Cantor Fitzgerald co-workers in the offices that morning, Wendy had been killed.

Soon after 9/11, volunteers from across the country descended upon New York City to help support rescue, recovery, and clean-up workers at Ground Zero. Among them was a group of real estate brokers from California, including Kathy Ollerton and Steve Smith. After reading about Ada Dolch and her school, Kathy Ollerton reached out to her and

they met over breakfast during their weeklong stay in the city. That meeting set in motion a lasting bond of friendship that brought them together again on the first anniversary of 9/11. That day, they asked Dolch what she believed was Wendy's legacy. She replied, "I'm an educator; there's only one thing I know, and that's education. And if we don't teach, how will we ever learn? So we have to do something about schooling to memorialize Wendy."<sup>3</sup> In that moment, they decided to build a school in Afghanistan.

Once back from New York, the California team began fundraising, sponsoring golf outings, car washes, and reaching out to friends. Ibrahim Mojadiddi, an Afghani colleague whose brother was abducted and had disappeared during the Soviet-Afghan War, became a strong advocate for the project. Mojadiddi's father agreed to donate land in Afghanistan for the creation of the school. A year later, on July 4, 2006, the school opened its doors to over 200 students, including 25 girls. Girls had been banned from attending school in their town during the previous 25 years. A sign adorned with the name "Wendy" in Farsi stands at the school, along with a small garden created in her memory—growing flowers on the otherwise barren, hard land.

## Additional Resources

1. Lesson plans for K-12 classrooms developed by the 9/11 Memorial & Museum in partnership with the New York City Department of Education and the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education. Lesson plans are organized by theme and grade level: <https://www.911memorial.org/lesson-plans>
2. Interactive timelines chronicling the events of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, September 11, 2001 and the nine-month recovery effort at ground zero. The timelines use images, audio and video as well as first-person accounts that are part of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum's permanent collection: <https://www.911memorial.org/interactive-911-timelines>
3. 9/11 FAQ: <https://www.911memorial.org/faq-about-911>
4. Primary sources including speeches, executive orders, legislative acts and debates, government fact-finding and personal and collective memorialization: <https://www.911memorial.org/911-primary-sources>



### Activity: Lady Liberty

#### Materials needed:

- Post-it notes or note cards
- Colored pencils, markers
- Chart paper with an outline of the Statue of Liberty

A replica of the Statue of Liberty—called "Lady Liberty"—was placed outside a firehouse in New York City after 9/11. People walking by soon began adding messages and tributes, covering the statue. Each item on Lady Liberty is a tribute—a symbol that honors the memory of those killed on 9/11. What would you attach to Lady Liberty? Create a piece of tribute by writing a message or drawing a picture. Add your tribute to a larger outline of Lady Liberty to create a class "Lady Liberty." Take a photo and share with us at [youthprograms@911memorial.org](mailto:youthprograms@911memorial.org).

## TEACHING STRATEGIES



Handheld radio used by Ada Dolch on 9/11. Collection 9/11 Memorial Museum, Gift of Ada Dolch, Photograph by Jin S. Lee

1. As an entry point into lessons connected to 9/11, conduct an inquiry-based analysis of Ada Dolch's handheld radio to help students discover the story behind it. Project an image of the radio or hand out copies of the image to students in small groups. Ask students to analyze the image closely and lead a class discussion using the following questions:

- What is the object in this image?
- What do you notice?
- Who might use this object?
- When might this object be used?
- How might it have been useful on 9/11?

Share Ada's experience on 9/11 with students throughout the discussion, based on student responses.

2. Ask students to select a victim's name on the 9/11 Memorial Guide: <http://names.911memorial.org/> and research that individual, creating a snapshot of his or her life. Ask students as a guiding question: What would you want people to know about the individual you selected? Ask students to share their research. Conclude the activity by asking, why are personal stories important for recording and interpreting historical events?


3. Introduce the concept of memorialization by leading a class discussion focused on the following questions: What do we memorialize? Who do we memorialize? How do we memorialize? Solicit and record student responses. Then direct students to view 9/11 memorials around the world by visiting: <https://registries.911memorial.org/#/memorials>. Ask students to analyze the memorials by responding to the following questions:

- What is the subject of the memorial?
- What design elements and symbols are used?
- What memorial(s) resonated with you?

4. Conclude the activity by asking, how has 9/11 been memorialized in different ways?

5. Ada Dolch responded to the attacks by drawing upon her own experiences and expertise to build a school in Afghanistan. Lead a discussion with your students as to how they might respond to recent terrorist attacks, acts of violence, or natural disasters and support those in need today. What skills and experiences would they draw upon?

When walking home to Brooklyn on 9/11, Dolch had three items in hand: the \$5 she had intended to use for a new watch battery; a keychain with her name tag and keys to the school; and her handheld radio, a seemingly ordinary object that has come to represent Dolch's story and its thematic resonances. Hers is one of thousands of stories told through objects—including Dolch's radio—that are contained within the walls of the 9/11 Memorial Museum.

As a part of our commitment to education, the Museum will host a free webinar for students across the country on September 12 and 13, 2016, to commemorate the 15th anniversary of 9/11. Participants will be introduced to the Museum, learn about 9/11 first-hand from Ada Dolch, and interact with her through a live, online discussion. The webinar will also be recorded and available online for those unable to view the live broadcasts. For more information about the webinar or to register, visit: [www.911memorial.org/webinar](http://www.911memorial.org/webinar). 

### Notes

- Dennis Smith and Deirdre Smith, *A Decade of Hope: Stories of Grief and Endurance from 9/11 Families and Friends* (New York: Viking, 2011), 62-81.
- Ibid., 75.
- Ibid., 79.

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