

## after the fall

BY HILLARY QUINN

**n**o American will ever forget what happened on September 11. The tragedies in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania hit hard in many ways—and the country is still dealing with the aftermath. For families of the victims, it changed their lives forever. For the rest of America, watching the horrific events unfold on television bonded a nation in grief, while strengthening our patriotic resolve.

For brides caught up in the whirlwind of planning a wedding, September 11 threatened to suck all of the joy out of this blissful time, leaving many altar-bound women feeling guilty and self-absorbed. Somehow, getting excited over a crystal tiara or demi-sec champagne just didn't seem right when the country was mourning the loss of thousands of people. "I felt almost selfish," admits Kali Pappas-Gabriel, 31, of New York City, who was in the process of putting the finishing touches on her September 22 nuptials. "My God, so many had lost their friends and families, and all I was thinking about was my wedding," she says. Her distress was not uncommon. However, along with these feelings came a new sense of awareness and gratitude that has transformed weddings across the country.

## hitting close to home

Nothing could have prepared Liz Frohlich, 32, of San Francisco, for the devastating call she received from her fiancé, Joe Salama, on September 11. A shaken Joe informed her that his good friend—and usher—Mark Bingham, had been en route to their September 15 wedding when his flight, American Airlines No. 93, went down in a Pennsylvania coalfield. "It knocked the breath out of me and I found myself completely dazed," recalls Frohlich. The world soon learned that Bingham was one of the passengers who apparently prevented the aircraft from hitting its intended target.

Along with intense grief came the worrisome decision about whether to postpone the wedding. "Even though we were so sad, we realized that canceling wouldn't bring Mark back," Frohlich explains. But the decision to proceed was easier said than done, given the couple's far-flung family. Frohlich's parents, who live in Colorado, jumped in their car and hit the road. "It took them thirty hours, but they got here," she says. Two of her bridesmaids—her sisters Peggy, in New York City, and Barbie, in Boston—weren't so lucky. After spending three days on the phone with the airlines, it became clear they weren't going to find flights. "There were tons of tears, but the situation couldn't be helped. So Peggy drove up to Barbie's and they called me as I was getting into my dress so we could all share the experience," recalls Frohlich.

At the ceremony, an empty place of honor was left for Mark Bingham, who was

says 30-year-old Amy O'Kane of New York City. "He told me, 'A bomb's just gone off,' and then he hung up." Five nerve-racking hours later, O'Kane got another call from her fiancé, saying he had managed to leave his building, but had spent hours walking around the city looking for an available pay phone to get in contact with her. Relieved that he was safe, O'Kane's attention eventually turned to their wedding, which was scheduled for September 14. "We had no idea what to do. About one hundred and ten guests were coming from all over the world—Hong Kong, Europe—and Barney was still reeling from his eyewitness experience." Meanwhile, the bride's parents, undeterred by travel chaos, had started driving from their home in South Dakota; Barney's mom and dad had arrived from London shortly before the disaster. "We eventually agreed that as long as our (Continued on page 402)

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remembered in the Reverend Brian Lyke's opening remarks: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." It was a perfect tribute and a cathartic beginning to the day. "The words affirmed what was important and allowed us to deal with those emotions at the beginning of the service," explains Frohlich. "I will always cherish the tenderness of my wedding day."

## eyewitness news

"Barney called me from a conference room in his office building, which looked out on the World Trade Center,"

## just do it

**C**arolyn Avila, 33, of Hartford, had been dating Bradley Tice for eight years. The "M" word often came up, but both seemed content to enjoy the status quo. "We wanted to get married, but there was a lot of delaying," recalls Avila. "I started to actually wonder if we were ever going to do it."

A few nights after the disaster, as they were watching people on television recount their survival stories, Tice turned to Avila and said, "You know what, why don't we just do it? What are we waiting for?" Three weeks later, they were married.

"Couples have been making more solid commitments as a result of September 11," confirms Judy Kuriansky (aka Dr. Judy), a clinical psychologist in New York City and author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to a Healthy Relationship* (Alpha Books, 2001). "It heightened the value of life and death and helped people reset their priorities. I say it's the silver lining to the dark cloud that surrounded the towers as they fell." Avila agrees: "What occurred on September 11 moved our time line dramatically forward, but we're both happy with our decision."



parents could be there, we would have a wedding," says O'Kane. "Whoever else made it was icing on the cake."

Ultimately, the icing totaled a grateful gathering of 47 friends and family. "We were really worried about our guests," remembers O'Kane. "The emotion was right at the surface and I felt like it was asking a lot for people to switch that off and celebrate." In a show of sensitivity for their loved ones, the couple asked that their Catholic nuptials include Prayers of the Faithful to honor the many lives lost that day. Patriotism also played a role in the wedding festivities. "Barney is English, so we had planned to hang a large British flag at our reception site," she says. "We did that, but we also hung an American flag in honor of our countries' strong bond."

## Dollars that make a difference

If you want to take the occasion of your wedding to contribute to charity, consider registering with the I Do Foundation, an on-line organization that enables a couple to direct, at no charge, monetary wedding gifts to the charity of their choice. It also allows them to register for traditional items like china and crystal with retailers who will automatically donate to a charity with each purchase. I Do will set up a wedding web page for you and even help you create a Family Fund, so you and your husband can make giving a lifelong part of your union. For more information, log on to [idofoundation.org](http://idofoundation.org).

## model behavior

Before September 11, if you'd asked model and TV correspondent Hunter Reno, 33, of Miami, how she envisioned the perfect wedding, she'd likely wax poetic about an elopement on the beach of some offbeat island. Her fiancé, Peter Rabbino, would have painted a picture of a classic ceremony with plenty of people as witnesses. In the end, they compromised and planned a small but traditional affair for 125 guests at the Fairchild Tropical Gardens in Miami. They set the date for December 9.

Then came the disaster—and a fresh perspective. "Peter and I were both very impacted by the tragedy," admits Reno. "It made me realize that spending our wedding day with as many friends and family as possible was the priority." To help offset the costs of a guest list that jumped from 125 to 200, Reno looked at extraneous expenses, like decorating with a forest of

figus trees, and scaled back. Gift-giving was also reevaluated. "Rather than buy a strand of pearls for my twelve bridesmaids, I contributed the money to Shake a Leg, a community water-sports center in Miami," she says. "I wanted the focus to be on people, not material things."

The bride got her wish as a multitude of well-wishers shared her special day. "Beforehand, Peter said to me, 'I know it's a lot to ask you to have so many people at our wedding, but I hope you can look around and feel grateful we invited everyone.' He was so right—I really did appreciate having those who are most important to me there."

## same time, different place

Kali Pappas-Gabriel was expecting 470 people for her September 22 wedding to Demetrios Gabriel at New York's Regent Wall Street Hotel, just four blocks from the World Trade Center. But by September 16,

the hotel had been turned into a relief center for the rescue workers; the ballroom where the reception was to take place was stocked with beds and sandwiches. "We wondered if we should just do the church ceremony and postpone the reception," recalls Pappas-Gabriel, "but a lot of people had already come in from Greece and everyone encouraged me to go ahead with our plans."

The question became, where? Friends and family manned the phone lines and began frantically calling catering halls. While there were plenty of openings, no one could accommodate a party of nearly 500. No one, that is, until Gabriel struck gold. "He called me and said, 'We're getting married Saturday at the Waldorf-Astoria. They had a cancellation and the manager is waiting for your call.'"

Coincidence to some, but destiny to the couple, who believe the stars aligned for them in the wake of tragedy. "Demetrios's mother, who passed away a few years ago, loved the Waldorf. It was her favorite hotel," Pappas-Gabriel says. "So in a way, it was almost as though she was our guardian angel making this special place available to us." That same meant-to-be attitude carried the couple through a wedding day filled with sentiment. "A girl waits for this moment her whole life," she says. "But what's truly important, especially in light of what happened in our country, is that you spend it with the people you love." ■

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