In the days afterward, Brian Clark would get phone calls from family members of his missing colleagues, pleading to know if he had seen their person on his descent from the 84th floor of the south tower. He found a gentle way to tell them that if they hadn’t heard from their loved one by then, they were not going to. “I took some comfort, if you like, in that I was already helping other people understand what had happened and I could be sympathetic,” he says.

Clark seems acutely aware that his basic emotional okayness as a survivor of 9/11—then, now and in the intervening years—seems unusual, but he’s always had a sunny outlook by default, and his Christian faith provides him with ballast. He never says no to any group that asks him to speak, though the endless retelling eventually became so onerous that now he directs them to a recorded version of his story and he’ll speak to them afterward to answer questions. “I can remember that day, it rolls like a movie in my brain,” he says. “Other than the 10 seconds when our building swayed after the second impact, after our building got hit, I was only terrified for those 10 seconds. At all other times, I had this feeling wash over me that, ‘Brian, you’re going to be okay.’”

While 9/11 does not haunt Clark to the degree it does so many others, he lives in its shadow. Recently, he called a real estate agent and the moment he introduced himself, she said, “I know exactly who you are, you’re Brian Clark of 9/11.” Other times in social settings, he can see it coming in the usual flow of small talk: the standard question about where he’s from leads to a mention that he moved from Toronto to New York when his company opened an office in the World Trade Center. The reactions vary from embarrassment to naked curiosity, but people are always kind about it. “I sort of internally say, ‘Oh damn, here we go down the rabbit hole again,’” he says. “I don’t mind telling the story but I make it a really brief summary.”

As for whether he has ever tried to make sense of why he was spared that day when so many were not, Clark takes a philosophical approach to what might otherwise be survivor’s guilt. “I don’t waste my time trying to answer unanswerable questions,” he says. “Because, by definition, they’re unanswerable.”

Very few of us are inundated with global media coverage marking the passage of another year in our lives and our distance from events etched into our memories, but Clark waves off the premise that this is distinct for him. “We’re all blistered or oversaturated in the 20th anniversary, but my 20th anniversary is no different than your 20th anniversary,” he says. At first, this doesn’t seem to make sense: 9/11 belongs to him and his life story in a way it doesn’t to the world at large. But then Clark elaborates and it becomes clear what he means. “The march of time since that seismic day is the same for all of us, because whether you were on the 84th floor fleeing to safety or somewhere hundreds of kilometres away watching on TV in horror, no one will ever forget where they were when the towers fell.”

A DAY RELIVED
By Shannon Proudfoot

LIFE IN THE SHADOW OF 9/11
TWENTY YEARS LATER, FIVE EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE REFLECT ON HOW THEIR WORLDS CHANGED

By Shannon Proudfoot
When she was a girl, Shirley Brooks-Jones, the eldest of nine siblings, needed a pair of glasses her family struggled to afford. It was a local Lions Club in southeastern Ohio that funded her first eye doctor appointment, and her first pair of specs. Imagine Brooks-Jones’s surreal gratitude at the age of 65 when, during a tumultuous few days that would change the course of her life, it was another local Lions Club that came to the rescue—this time in Newfoundland.

Brooks-Jones was one of some 8,000 travellers whose airplanes were grounded at Gander International Airport after the United States closed its airspace on Sept. 11, 2001. She remembers the community for taking such good care of me, “ she says. When it was time to go home a few days later, Brooks-Jones was racking her mind for ideas to repay the calm of the pilot as he explained that New York City’s twin towers had been attacked. That few days so altered the course of Brooks-Jones’s life that she says she pines herself every day: “How could I have been so fortunate?” The relationships that came out of the involuntary detour have blossomed over the two decades since. Brooks-Jones counts Lewisporte’s mayor and his wife among her closest friends—she jokingly refers to them as her 10th and 11th siblings—and she has been back to visit 20 times. After her 85th birthday this month, Brooks-Jones says she hopes to return for the 20th anniversary of her introduction to the place she calls her “second home.” As soon as she can make it, she says: “I’m on Air Canada, buddy.”

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By Adnan R. Khan

If it’s a question of hatred, David Adeeb Hassan would rather not talk about it. Hatred, says the 68-year-old London, Ont., native, resides somewhere deep within a person and eliminating it can be an exercise in frustration. Hatred is what drives terrorists like Osama bin Laden, or the Norwegian white supremacist Andre Breivik, or Nathaniel Veltman, the man who used his truck to murder three generations of a single family in Hassan’s hometown last June.

Hassan cannot be rationalized or reasoned with, Hassan says. By its very nature it is irrational and unreasonable. Islamophobia, on the other hand, is something else altogether. It creeps into society and infects people who are otherwise open-minded and generous. It can, like all structural racisms, evolve into a pernicious feature of our society.

The attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Hassan says, succeeded in triggering the rise in Islamophobia that bin Laden had hoped they would. Hassan’s hope, however, is that Canadians, including Muslims, can differentiate between the Islamophobes, who are merely afraid, and those who hate.

Since 9/11, the haters—white supremacists and other right-wing radicals—have been emboldened. They have crawled out of the fringes into the mainstream. But, Hassan cautions, they are not growing in number; they are merely “growing in spirit.”

The distinction makes a difference, he says. The key lesson he has learned over the past 20 years is that the vast majority of Canadians are open and accepting of Muslims. The attacks on 9/11 may have triggered fear of Muslims but they also opened up an opportunity for the Muslim community. “We also learned a lesson that day,” says Hassan, who was the chairman of the London Muslim Mosque at the time. “As a community, we realized that pre-9/11 people didn’t know us. The only place they were learning about our religion was on CNN and Fox. Canadians don’t realize this, but Muslims have been in this country for a very long time. My ancestors arrived in London in the late 19th century from the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. We are as much a part of the fabric of this community as anyone. But people didn’t know this. So post-9/11, we opened our doors. We took every opportunity to be out there, to be in the spotlight, to do things we always should have been doing but were perhaps not doing enough of, like giving back to the community, becoming more involved in the community.”

The results, he says, have been encouraging. Community engagement has created a much more integrated multi-faith support network in London. After the June attacks on the Arzad family, for instance, the outpouring of grief from every corner of London was overwhelming. “From everyday people to the police, there was this understanding that whatever we needed would be provided,” Hassan says. “It was such a moving experience.”

Hassan’s ancestors worked hard to gain the respect of their fellow Canadians, he says. The attacks on 9/11 were a setback, but over the two decades since, the understanding between London’s communities has deepened. And while hate has crawled out of the shadows, Hassan is confident it can be driven back.

“What I’ve learned since 9/11 is that hatred thrives when there is fear,” he says. “Groups like al-Qaeda or white supremacists like the Proud Boys need fear to survive. We need to take that away from them.”
The most frightening rabbit hole any soldier can tumble down is to look back on their years of service and try to analyze, from a distance, whether it was worth it. It’s a question most vets hate being asked: look too deep and there is the worst kind of doubt and self-hate; not deep enough and there is avoidance and denial. After 34 years in the Canadian Armed Forces, Maj. Chris Nobrega has a great deal to reflect on, but the question of whether or not it was worth it rarely comes up. The most important lesson he has learned, he says, is that his job is to complete the mission he is assigned. Everything else is better left to the historians.

Still, the problem with the post-9/11 war on terror, Nobrega, 52, admits, is that its logic is so serpentine that it can be used to justify almost any mission. “It’s not just a problem with the way the war has been executed,” he says. “We’re also talking about an adversary that has the ability to move quickly and endlessly refocus its attention.”

Nobrega has experienced the rapid evolution of post-9/11 wars up close. In 2001, he was one of the first soldiers deployed to Afghanistan as part of the NATO mission after the fall of the Taliban regime and was deployed again to Kandahar in 2007. In 2014, he was deployed to the Sinai as part of Canada’s contribution to the international force overseeing the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, at a time when Islamic State militants were stepping up attacks on the volatile peninsula.

Over the past two decades, Nobrega has had a unique, occasionally jarring, view of a world in flux. Afghanistan was merely the first stage. As that war dragged on, and new theatres in the war on terror opened up, he witnessed the evolution of a new kind of warfare, against an agile and adaptive enemy that paid little heed to the rules of war and was constantly developing novel ways of killing. The “war on terror” was being lost, though he is loath to use that term, in part because the very notion of winning and losing are meaningless in this new era of counterinsurgency warfare. “From my perspective, defeating the Taliban was never the primary mission in Afghanistan,” Nobrega says. “We were there to help the people of Afghanistan come out of some dark times.”

That mission remains incomplete, and that incompleteness bothers him. From an “end-state” perspective, he says, the Afghan mission should have been considered generational. But as the post-9/11 world spiralled into uncertainty, the political will to stay the course waned. Canada left Afghanistan in 2014; the U.S. and remaining NATO forces will be out by the 20th anniversary of the attacks that triggered the invasion. But life in Afghanistan will continue and, Nobrega fears, revert to what it was before Canadians arrived, fought and died. Was it worth it? That awful question may be best left unanswered.
Two decades ago, as a five-year-old in Mazar-e-Sharif, the future was a universe of possibilities for Hadia Essazada. There were no Taliban, apart from the stories she heard from her family. For a child, she recalls, the shadowy group of bearded religious extremists didn’t seem real; they were like monsters in a nightmare world that existed in her parents’ imagination.

For her, the world was very different: there was school to go to and friends to play with, though the landscape around her was still pockmarked with the remnants of war. But that was changing, too. The constant rumbling of construction equipment in her city hinted at the smooth roads to come, like glistening rivers cutting through the shiny new buildings that seemed to appear every day, almost out of nowhere.

“Childhood was kind of magical,” Essazada, 25, recalls. “I grew up after 9/11; I went to school after 9/11; I graduated from university after 9/11. I got a job and started being active in my society.”

Essazada belongs to Afghanistan’s post-9/11 generation, a cohort of educated young people who have come of age since the fall of the Taliban regime. It was a period of hope, when tens of thousands of young people went back to school, when money poured into the country and new universities opened; people like Essazada—bright and determined—were finally given the opportunity to shine. Today, those same people are fleeing Afghanistan.

Essazada is particularly vulnerable. After graduating from a private university in 2018 with a degree in business management and accounting, she developed a love for debating and in March 2019 was nominated secretary-general of the Pamir International Model United Nations (PIMUN) at a ceremony at the Canadian Embassy in Kabul. With the help of foreign embassies, including Canada’s, she was elevated as a prominent activist for women’s rights in Afghanistan, travelling throughout Europe with PIMUN and speaking out against the Taliban on social media.

In November 2020, Essazada began receiving threatening phone calls from a man claiming to be a representative of the Taliban. He told her to put on a headscarf and stop speaking against the group. The pattern was familiar. Essazada had already lost two friends to a rash of targeted killings sweeping through the activist community. On Christmas Eve last year, she arrived in Washington, travelling on a visa she had received through her work for PIMUN. She travelled to a Canada-U.S. border crossing to meet up with two Afghan friends who had said they would help her claim asylum in Canada.

Her attempt failed due to the Safe Third Country Agreement. Now at an undisclosed location in the U.S., with an ankle bracelet and 24-hour surveillance through her cellphone, Essazada finds herself in the same situation millions of Afghans were in during the 1980s and 1990s—in exile and uncertain of what the future holds. History has come full circle. Afghan women tasted independence in the 1960s and 1970s before the Soviet invasion pushed them to the margins and the Taliban’s victory in the 1990s pushed them deep into the shadows.

They struggled their way back after the fall of the Taliban regime, but now it feels as if the Taliban have won again.

“The war in Afghanistan was always about us,” Essazada says, “about the next generation that would rebuild our country. The U.S., and Europe and Canada went there to fight for us. Now, the U.S. and European countries and Canada are all gone. The Taliban are still there and they are killing us. They’re silencing us and forcing us to leave the country. So who do you think won this war?”