

Starting Over: How Do I Reach for Another's Hand?



Richard Perry/The New York Times

HEARTS TO REBUILD Gretchen Zurn is in a subset of World Trade Center survivors.

GRETCHEN ZURN, a 30-year-old marketing executive as petite as a teenage gymnast, sipped from a glass of Coke, then inhaled deeply before uttering the words. "Yes," she said, almost defiantly. "I've been dating."

Under ordinary circumstances, such a disclosure from an attractive single woman would hardly be freighted with meaning. But Ms. Zurn's fiancé, Gregory Spagnoletti, was killed last Sept. 11. He worked on the 89th floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center.

In the year since the attacks, Ms. Zurn has experienced the complex emotions of a special subset of the grieving: the girlfriends, boyfriends, fiancées and fiancés of those who died. A group of those survivors — who probably total close to 1,000 — said that, lacking the legal status of spouses, they often feel overlooked by traditional support groups and families of the deceased. At the same time, many feel misunderstood by their own families and friends, who want them to stop grieving and get on with their lives.

Some, driven by loneliness or an urgent need to find someone new to start a family with, have begun to date — hesitantly, and with hearts full of unresolved feelings. Their tangled emotions presage what many others may eventually go through.

Ms. Zurn said she initially rebuffed her friends' entreaties to date, but finally resumed in March. "I knew that Greg would want me to go out," she said late last month at a restaurant in Chatham, N.J. "He would want me to be happy, and sitting at home alone was not making me happy." But when a man she was seeing for two months began to ask her for more of a commitment, she ended the relationship. "I don't have any room to be emotionally involved," she said.

There is no official tally of how many people like Ms. Zurn were left behind by those who died in the Manhattan attacks, although some statistics provide context. According to the latest count by the New York City Medical Examiner, of the 2,801 people killed in the trade center and on the two airplanes that hit the towers, 1,400 to 1,500 were under 40 — a prime time for the unwed to be dating. A rough estimate derived from the Portraits of Grief series in The New York Times suggests that about half those who died were unmarried. Cantor Fitzgerald, a brokerage firm in the north tower, lost 658 of its 1,050 employees. Asked how many left companions behind, a spokeswoman could only speculate. "There would be hundreds," she said.

In some ways, the issues surrounding such survivors are different from those of widows and widowers. Of 18 survivors interviewed for this article, all said the fact that their relationships were not officially sanctioned has complicated their attempts to resume their lives.

"The 'moving on' thing is tough," said Ms. Zurn, who had originally planned to marry Mr. Spagnoletti, a bond salesman for Keefe, Bruyette & Woods, on Sept. 11, 1999, though, she said, that plan was delayed because of scheduling difficulties and wedding jitters. "Our grief, our position hasn't been validated," she said at the restaurant. "No one has said: 'You lost your life companion. You lost your future.'"

Others in her position are stymied by the fear that dating will be perceived as a betrayal of their late partners. Daniel Roorda, whose girlfriend, Heather Ho, was the pastry chef at Windows on the World, is under pressure from well-intentioned friends to "get back out there." But he is concerned that doing so might send a signal that his loss was minor. "If I were to date," said

Mr. Roorda, 36, "and if people were to see me with someone, they would say, 'See — he got over that quick.'"

Most of those who have sought romantic companionship have done so only furtively. A health care administrator, 28, who lost her boyfriend of over four years has had one date but has told no one, fearing that people will think that she has overcome her grief — or worse, that she didn't really love her boyfriend. She, like a majority of the others interviewed, spoke only when promised anonymity. "I'm not ready to move on," she said. "I'm not ready to be regarded as having moved on."

For would-be suitors of women who lost partners, confronting their grief is a staggering challenge. One such man, a lawyer, sees himself in a relationship of three — himself, the woman he is dating and her late fiancé. Her fiancé "was the great love of her life," he said, adding, "I don't think she'll love anyone that way again."

Another man who is dating a bereaved fiancée said he worries, "Am I a security blanket?" For surviving fiancées and fiancés, mourning a future that will always be a fantasy makes the grieving process especially difficult, grief counselors say.

"When people fantasize about marriage before they are married, they are imagining a dream," said Virginia Stern, a clinical social worker and mental health volunteer for the American Red Cross.

"The future they've been robbed of is a fantasy future, and there aren't many bad things in a fantasy." At the same time, she said, they are driven to prove the intensity of their lost relationships to a society that draws strict delineations between "married" and "not married."



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Daniel Roorda's girlfriend died in the World Trade Center. Not being next of kin, he faces special problems as he resumes his life.

"There is an impetus to prove that the relationship was wonderful," she said. "They can't say: 'Here's a piece of paper. See? We were married.' So they are grieving more, holding on tighter."

"We are widows, but never wives," said one surviving girlfriend, underscoring the concern of many that their grief has not been taken seriously by government and relief organizations. In most cases, unmarried survivors can receive money from the federal Victims Compensation Fund only if the family of the dead person approves. This creates difficulties for those who are estranged from their partners' families but do not want to go to court against their might-have-been-in-laws.

The Red Cross is paying for family members of some surviving partners to travel to New York for the Sept. 11 observances this week, but like most organizations it is limited in what it can allocate to people who cannot demonstrate that they were financially dependent on the deceased.

But money is not the only issue. Many surviving partners say their lives are filled with reminders of their ambiguous status. "You have to fight the assumptions of 'You're young — you'll find someone else,'" said Tanya Villanueva, 34, whose late fiancé, Sergio Villanueva, was a firefighter who died on Sept. 11. "With a widow, no one would ever say that, because it's denigrating to the relationship," said Ms. Villanueva, who legally changed her last name from Bejasa after Mr. Villanueva's death. Betty Capasso, a clinical social worker who works with Access, AirCraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, an organization that matches survivors of air disasters with grief counselors, said that although widows and widowers do not escape pressure to move on, "society gives spouses more leverage."

"They can grieve much longer," she said. "With a boyfriend or a fiancé, people say: 'Six months has gone by. Why aren't you dating?'"

Ms. Zurn walks a fine line between moving forward and looking back. Unlike most of her peers in grief, she has stopped wearing her engagement ring outside her home, though she sometimes sleeps with it on. To try to escape the constant reminders of her former life, she recently moved out of the apartment she and Mr. Spagnoletti shared in Madison, N.J., and has refused to turn her new apartment, in nearby Florham Park, into a shrine to him.

When she goes out, Ms. Zurn said, she tends to avoid places she went with her fiancé. "I won't say I cannot go there, but usually my friends ask me where I want to go, and I just don't suggest the restaurants we used to go to." She is dressing somewhat more stylishly, however, because shopping has been an escape. "I've gotten way more into clothes," she said. "I do a lot of shopping, which is sort of a fun diversion. I have been more into learning about designers." Dating, she said, serves the same purpose: "For me, it's about getting out of the house. It's having someone to pal around with, another person to do things with." She said that last summer she and Mr. Spagnoletti were looking for a house to buy, and that they were trying to agree on a new wedding date. "The night before," she said — she often refers to Sept. 11, but always obliquely — "we talked all about houses and babies."

For women in their 30's, the fear of not having children adds to their sadness. "Girls have a double hit," explained a 34-year-old man whose fiancée died. "They lost their loved one, and now they have to face the fact that they may not have children." Ms. Zurn doubts that she will find the kind of love she and Mr. Spagnoletti shared, but says she will try. "I'm 30 years old," she said. "I've got a lifetime ahead of me, and I'm not going to stop living because this was taken away from me. I have been reborn — reborn with grief, but it is still a life."

Experience shows that people do recover and move on. "I suspect a lot of these people think that they will never get married," said Ms. Capasso, whose 21-year-old son was killed on Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, almost 14 years ago. "I think, in fact, that the majority of them will. Very positive things come out of tragedy. I know that that isn't something people want to hear right now, but it is, in fact, true."

Until that time, the partners of those who died will stumble along, testing out new relationships. Rachel Uchitel, whose fiancé, James Andrew O'Grady, a managing director of fixed-income sales for Sandler O'Neill & Partners, was killed, has become involved with a man who she said lets her grieve. Still, she doesn't know whether she will ever risk another broken heart. "I worry that it's going to start to hurt him," she said.

The physical and emotional comforts, however, can be hard to turn away. "Sometimes you feel like you died, too," said one survivor who is in a physical relationship with a man who, she suspects, is falling for her. "So if, for an hour, you can have a sensation of feeling again, a sensation of any kind, you grab it." Yet these young mourners do find some comic relief in the awkward re-entry into the dating world. "What about the added insult that most of us are in our sexual prime now?" asked one woman in her early 30's. Another grieving fiancée, hearing that question, joked, "Well, she must not be on antidepressants!"

And another woman broke into near-hysterical laughter as she recounted her first (and, she said, her last) bar pickup. She spent the evening flirting with a handsome man and invited him back to her apartment after telling him that her fiancé had died on Sept. 11. At the apartment, she said, he instantly focused on "the shrine" — dozens of framed pictures of her fiancé. "Then," she said, still laughing, "he looked over at my bedside table and saw all my antidepressant prescription bottles. He was turning his head back and forth — pictures, prescriptions, pictures, prescriptions. Let's just say I haven't heard from him again."