



10
Year
Anniversary
Real Life
Read

“Mum Died In 9/11 But She’s Still With Me”

On September 11, 2001, Iranian-born Neda Bolourchi watched in horror as a plane carrying her mum ploughed into the World Trade Center in New York. Ten years on, she’s taken on her mother’s passion to fight for women’s empowerment



living room. “What’s going on?” I asked, my voice trailing off as I switched on the TV. I stood frozen to the spot as I watched images of an airplane being flown straight into the south tower of the World Trade Center. My knees buckled as I heard the news announcer say it was United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston to LA. “That’s mum’s flight,” I gasped, shaking, as I dashed for the phone.

My mum was in Boston visiting my older sister and her family. When my dad had flown back to our home in LA earlier that week for work, mum had decided to stay on for a few extra days, so changed her flight last minute. Mum hated flying, so I’d phoned her the night before and offered to fly out to Boston and bring her home, so she wouldn’t have to travel alone. “It’s okay honey, this is just a journey I have to make on my own,” she’d told me before hanging up. Now, as I frantically dialled my sister’s number, fingers trembling, I imagined how scared she must have been by herself.

Confirming The Worst

But mum had always been fiercely independent. It was what I admired most about her. Back in Iran where we lived until I was 12, she was something of a maverick in a male-dominated society. She was an incredibly brilliant and intelligent woman. A nurse, she had studied in England, and spoke six languages. She had very strong beliefs and she never allowed anybody to tell her how to live her life.

She was a firm believer in education – especially for women. She used to say to me, “Hon, understand one thing: you have to learn to be independent and earn your own money. That way, men can’t control you, and you can choose what you want to do in your own life.” Mum was more than just a mother – she was my best friend. I refused to believe she was gone.

“Did mum get on the flight?” I screamed down the phone to my sister. Desperate for any glimmer of hope, we prayed that maybe she’d changed her mind at the last minute, or that she’d forgotten something and had to turn back. But by the tenth call to the airline, my worst fears were confirmed when they found mum’s name on the passenger list.

Over the days that followed, the house filled up with friends and family,

and I walked around in a blur as people told me how sorry they were. I was in shock and kept thinking, “This isn’t real, I’m going to go and pick her up from the airport soon.” Then those horrible images would replay on the news and I’d remember: this wasn’t a movie, this was really happening. I felt an overwhelming emptiness; like I had a hole in my heart. I needed my mum more than ever.

Growing up, if ever I had a problem, I knew I could go to mum and she would help me find a solution. Even if it was just to give me a hug and tell me everything was going to be okay. When we first moved to the Unites States from the Middle East, it was such a huge culture shock for me. I remember my dad – who is a lot more conservative and old-fashioned than mum – freaking out when I wanted to shave my legs. “I look like an ape,” I sobbed to mum. “You’ve got to make him understand.” She always knew how to talk my dad around for me.

Desperate For Answers

When mum first died, I was desperate for details about her final moments. I attended an FBI briefing and they told me that my mum was sitting in row F seat 14. They didn’t have much more information, other than that the terrorists had knives and that they had ordered all the passengers to the back of the plane. I just prayed mum died



Neda and her dad Akbar set up a nursing scholarship to honour her mum’s passion for women’s health education

before the plane hit the building. I didn’t want her to have felt the burning.

The New York Coroner took DNA samples from us, as they wanted to match it to any remains they might find at Ground Zero. I hoped they’d find something, as I thought it might be a comfort. Then I spoke to another victim’s daughter who told me that her mum’s hand had been recovered. To me, that was horrific: I didn’t want them to find any piece of my mum after that. And to this day, they never have.

Gradually, I accepted that the details of how she died didn’t matter. The fact was she was gone.

Moving On

The next few years were the hardest. I’d be at the mall and hear someone call out “Mum!,” and I’d be hurt and angry and think, “Why do you get to have a mum and I don’t?” If I heard a song that reminded me of her, or if I smelled her perfume, I just wanted to crawl into a corner and cry. Dad dealt with his grief very differently. He wouldn’t cry in front of me; he felt like he had to be strong. But gradually he opened up and we began to talk about what we loved most about mum.

We created a memorial plaque in the city of Brentwood where we live; I wanted mum’s neighbourhood to remember her. We also set up a scholarship for young nursing students at UCLA to honour mum’s nursing career. She trained as a midwife in Tehran, where she also spent a lot of time visiting impoverished areas and educating women about birth control, preventative healthcare and neonatal care. My biggest dream is to build a women’s hospital in a disadvantaged area in Iran and dedicate it to my mum.

This month, I’m planning to return to Ground Zero to mark the ten year anniversary of the attacks. The 9/11 Memorial Museum asked all the family members to donate something. I gave mum’s favourite tea cup and a little angel statue that she loved. But mum’s in my heart all the time. I talk to her and I feel her everywhere. When I make a wise decision, I know it’s her strength living on through me. I’m a paralegal and I’m studying for my bar exams. I truly believe I got my wisdom from her. I’m so proud that I am very much like her. I still feel so close to her and I know that she’s there protecting, helping and guiding me.” ■

AS TOLD TO AOIFE STUART-MADEGE. PHOTOGRAPH GETTY IMAGES