

Like the Phoenix

by Nancy Chambers
New York City, New York

What an apt name, in these strange times, for a Severe Macaw that survived the World Trade Center disaster on September 11th. Phoenix was hatched in May of 1999, in Tribeca, at Urban Bird (my original bird store), only four to five blocks from the World Trade Center. He is one of my incubator hatched, day-one handfed babies. He was adopted by my

enough food and water for her five cats, and literally ran to the kid's school, which is all the way across town in Chinatown.

By the time she got there Tower Two had fallen. Not knowing where to go, she took the two kids, my grandsons aged 13 and 12, and made tracks for the current Urban Bird, nearly a mile away from Chinatown, in Greenwich Village.

I was in Jersey City, just across the river, and in plain view of the towers. I may as well have been in Bora Bora. All public transportation was shut down, phone service was intermittent at best, and I felt as though I was in a sensory-deprived cocoon.

Communications were down for several hours after that, though the tv stations stayed pretty much on line, odd since the transmitters were located on the top of Tower One, the second one to collapse.

Everything seemed to be...slow...motion. It was *instant* tv coverage, but nobody seemed to know anything. The cameras were there, but it wasn't until a little later that the realization of the enormity of this fateful morning slowly dawned on us.

I was frantic. I had no idea what was happening, no way to contact my staff, didn't know who was caught in the subway, where JoAnne and the kids were, and what



A street front view of Urban Bird with police notices still in place. This photo was taken on Halloween eve just after a HazMat scare after some loose white power was found on the street.

grandsons, and has lived with them and my daughter Jo Anne since then. Right in Tribeca.

When the Trade Center was struck by the first plane my daughter, JoAnne was no more than five blocks from the north tower, out for her first-ever morning jog, just crossing West Street, going in the direction of Stuyvesant High School.

She heard this huge crash, stopped, turned around, and like everyone else in the area, was stunned to see the entire top of Tower One engulfed in flames. Her first thought, which I've discovered was pretty universal, was "Oh my God, some small plane had an accident."

She watched in horror as the second plane stuck Tower Two, and ran home and called me. Tremblingly reporting that she was okay and that her first jog was her last, she grabbed Phoenix, put out

Three young macaws that were transported to New Jersey on September 11. They all survived.





The Soutos parrots were still in their dust and debris-filled cages on September 16 with no food or water when rescuers came for them.

was really driving me crazy was that there were about a dozen unweaned baby parrots at the store which nobody was going to be able to handfeed.

Their last handfeeding had been at 10:00 P.M. Monday night. One of our handfeeders, Suzanne, was in the "danger zone" not more than a few blocks from the WTC, just a block to the East, and when I finally reached her she said that she couldn't get out of her building. (I learned later that her mom, Joyce, who works for the Port Authority, was at work on the 63rd floor of Tower One when the first plane struck—this was below the impact—and that she made it out safely)

The other handfeeder, Orlando, lives all the way uptown, and no subways were running. And, I was stuck in Jersey City, with no way to get in to feed the young birds.

The babies included a *very* young Scarlet Macaw, a slightly older Scarlet, a Military and a Blue and Gold, as well as two caiques, two Hahn's Macaws, several baby Amazons and pionus, plus two just-weaned mynah birds, who have special diets, of course.

From this perspective, seven weeks later, it all seems almost like ancient history, since most of us have really found ways to go about our lives, in a more or less normal way.

Believe me, there was nothing even remotely normal about that first day nor about the weeks that followed.

While we were all watching CNN and holding our breaths, my baby birds were starving.

I didn't know that two of my staffers had been caught in the subway, but their trains were able to get into Manhattan, one from Brooklyn and one from Queens. I frantically called every 15 minutes for hours. The phone signals went from dead space, to busy signals, to funny beeps and squawks.

My internet server, AOL, was fully operational, also odd, since it is hooked to a phone line.

Eventually my phone rang, at about 2:00 P.M. I grabbed it, and to my relief it was the store, one of the guys was able to get through on his cell phone! Eventually we were able to come up with a plan for the baby birds.

With JoAnne and my grandsons organizing it, they loaded them into carriers, put the carriers on a handtruck, and loaded up a large soft-sided carrier with equipment and formula. Then they walked up



Inside the Urban Bird store two weeks after 9/11. Charlie Carraher, on the right, got out of the 84th floor of Tower Two and lived to tell about it. He's a regular customer who lives uptown and keeps two Caiques. He often comes in for a friendly visit

to the Chelsea Piers, about a mile northwest of Urban Bird, and handed them over to my husband.

Jim, a retired NYC Police Officer, is a part-time captain for a company called Spirit Cruises, which has a fleet of 600 passenger dinner/excursion boats. These boats

had been pressed into service as floating ambulances and waterborne transportation to people fleeing the disaster. The boats are beautiful, but more importantly, they are *huge*.

The Chelsea Piers are at West 23rd Street. These boats were all making round-trips to Hoboken New Jersey. I was eventually able to get to Hoboken, met Jim, and took the babies home.

One baby Hahn's Macaw is now named "Lazarus" because when I opened his hutch he was cold and stiff. But breathing. Barely. I'd brought some warm formula with me, and the first thing I did was give him a squirt (he was 95% unresponsive, I really thought I'd lost him) and do the old "warm the baby in the bra" trick.

I handed the rest of the babies right there in the car – boy were they happy to see me – and rushed home to get little Lazarus onto a heating pad, shaking all the way.

The next few days were a blur. The two fellows who had managed to make it in stayed over at the store, and we kept the door locked, but put a sign in the window letting people know that if they needed any animal help we were there and available.

Jo Anne walked all the way to the upper reaches of Manhattan with the boys, and stayed with a friend for a little over a week. And there are thousands of similar stories.

After a week, the transportation situation eased a bit and I was able to escape from New Jersey back to Manhattan.

And, then I started to hear the bird rescue stories.

The little canary found sitting on a mound of dust, by a woman passerby shortly after the buildings collapsed.

The flock of pigeons who resided at the park adjacent to the WTC, confused, with no idea where the nice people were who came by every day to feed them – just hanging around a vacant place, probably destined to starve. They are now gone, so we assume they figured it out.

Jyll and Marcel Souto, friends and clients, with six birds – living on the 8th floor of the closest residential building to the WTC.

Jyll was at home with their little girl, Katie, and heard this enormous crash, grabbed a camera and started taking pictures. A minute later she said to herself, "What'm I nuts?" Grabbed Katie and simply *ran*. Realizing only later that all the animals, six birds and a little dog, were still in the apartment, and no way to get back to them.

Five days later rescuers went into the apartment to get the animals. The smaller birds, a Goffin's, a Congo, and a male and female Eclectus were in their cages, but the macaws were out – on top of their cage – with the entire *wall* blown away and the window side of the apartment open and gone.

When they broke the door down one of the macaws jumped and flew out the open space. But when he saw what was going on out there, he flew right back in and landed on the rescuers shoulder! That is one of my baby hatchlings. I ask you folks, are Urban Birds smart, or what?

Eventually the Souto family was

reunited with their animals, and were even able to retrieve their little dog, but with nowhere to live, brought the whole little bird flock to Urban Bird, and they are with us still.

Then there is the story of Jan Hartley. A local Greenwich Village artist, she has two Urban Birds, a greater Vasa Parrot and a female S.I. Eclectus named Sydney. A few days after the attack Jan was in the local firehouse, bending over and writing a donation check when she dropped Sydney's leash. Jan watched Sydney, fully flighted, as she blissfully disappeared over the rooftops.

Jan searched and searched, and then started putting up flyers, but had little hope of anyone seeing her flyers, since there were literally *thousands* of flyers up, with pictures of missing people!

Despairing of ever seeing Sydney again, Jan tried one last desperate gambit. She called the pet rescue center. The folks there said no birds were there at that time, and then she heard a voice in the background saying, "One just came in..." The voice on the phone said "What color is your bird?" And, Sydney was found.

I must say, the birds I sell are *smart*! One flies back in a window, another flies to the rescue center!

One of my favorite customers, Charlie Carraher, who along with wife Catherine, owns two caiques, was at work on the 82nd floor of Tower Two. They had heard the first crash, and upon turning on the news learned that Tower One had been hit. They didn't know then that time was ticking away. They listened in horror, and then just 18 minutes later *their* building was hit.

The blow to the second building was below where Charlie was working. The news over the P.A. system at that time (after the first plane hit the other building) was, "don't panic, stay at your desks."

People had gotten ready to evacuate. When Charlie heard the crash into his own building, he said, "No way I'm staying at my desk" and left via the stairs for an 83-floor



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decent into hell. He was below the explosion area, and made it out before the building fell. He tried calling home, but got no answer.

Catherine, seeing the plane hit Tower One, and knowing Charlie was in the other building, had grabbed a cab to head downtown. As Tower Two collapsed, she was bucking traffic southbound on 7th Avenue thinking Charlie was still inside!

Can you *imagine* this? Somehow these nice folks finally *found* each other somewhere on the streets of Lower Manhattan.

Things are *not* back to normal, and maybe we will have to redefine that term. It was a major comfort to me that most everyone I personally know, including several other customers/friends who worked in the WTC all made it out and are safe – traumatized, but alive.

But, seven of the firemen from the firehouse around the corner from the store are still among the “missing presumed dead,” and this number includes one of our dear friends, Timothy Haskell, a sweet guy and brave fireman.

I am happy to report Little Lazarus survived, and is happily “helloing” to us all. Very soon he will be going home with his new parents, who picked him out a week before the disaster. They know what happened.

I’ve been a working resident of Tribeca (a section of New York) since 1975. I’ve lived and worked in the shadow of the Towers all that time. Brought my kids up there.

John Kennedy Jr. was a sometime customer and a much-loved neighbor. When he died the neighborhood was crushed. The sidewalk in front of his home, a mere three blocks north of our original location, was festooned with flowers, candles, tokens of affection, teddy bears, and streams of people in the streets, coming to Tribeca to pay homage. For a whole month.

Now, Tribeca is on the map once again. This is not the way we want to be remembered or thought

of. Nor will it be over in a month.

In the years that I’ve lived and worked in the shadow of the towers, they had become a beacon.

Now, the universal Tribeca feeling is disorientation. I’ve heard the same sentiment from many, many people. There is a New York City Yiddish word for the feeling, “ferblungett” literally meaning “on the wrong block.” You turn around and don’t quite know where you are.

Its *terribly* sad and grotesque that all those people lost their lives, their homes. It hits us right in the heart. That loss is indescribable.

Those of us who remain here are deeply feeling their loss. But, additionally, we are also quite lost ourselves. The Towers are gone.

A sad little note: When I came into the store today, Tuesday, November 6th, there was a letter waiting for me:

Dear Nancy,

I’m sure you remember me – or us – the firefighter from Squad 18 next door, Timmy (Haskell) and myself, Gabriele, who bought the white cockatoo from you two years ago, and we also got the Rose-breasted Cockatoo and I have the pigeon that you boarded for me before.


The sad news, as you probably know, is Timmy got killed on 9/11 at WTC.

I am now alone with 13 some pets, and cannot give them the love and care that they deserve. Even though this is a tough decision for me to make I have to put the two birds up for sale. Can you help me with that?

Be so kind and call me. Thank you very much for your understanding.

Gabriele Saunders

This is another of those “Oh My Gods!”

But one thing about all of us: Americans, New Yorkers, all of us – we, like the Phoenix, are rising from the dust. 

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