The Washington Post

National

# 9/11 widow still trying to find her new normal since the Pentagon attack

By Eli Saslow
September 2, 2011

*First in a series.*

It was a Monday morning 10 years later, and they had regained control.

The home-brewed coffee was flavored with a touch of cinnamon; the tomatoes in the garden were turning red on the vine. Shari Tolbert, 42, finished a training run for her upcoming marathon, straightened her blond hair and polished her acrylic nails. She fried bacon and eggs for breakfast, and the smell drew the kids from their rooms. The daughter sang Beyonce. The son wore two shades of yellow. “Go change, because you look like a confused bumblebee,” Shari told him, and they both laughed.

It was a Monday morning 10 years later, and they were still falling apart.

Shari stirred in bed and reached instinctively for her husband, a daily act that could sometimes send her spiraling into depression. “It feels like he still resides with us,” she said, and there he was in the family photos displayed in the hallway, the old football jerseys hanging on the wall and the autopsy report kept on a shelf in the living room. Place of Death: Pentagon. Estimated Time of Death: Sept. 11, 1000 hours. Manner of Death: Homicide. Shari sat with the kids at the breakfast table and served the bacon she learned to cook for him on the plate she received for their wedding in the house paid for by his death in the city where they moved to be closer to his parents.

Ten years later, this is the dual reality the Tolberts refer to as their “new normal.” They are okay and they are a mess. They have moved on and they never will. Every day is ordinary; every day is *that* day.

They no longer expect to get better, or know if they want to, or understand what better even means. They are who they are: victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, survivors of Lt. Cmdr. Otis Vincent Tolbert, a wife missing her husband and children missing their father. That one event has defined everything since.

On this day, after they finished breakfast, the mother would go to work as a counselor and help other people grieve.

The daughter, 19, would study vocabulary words in Arabic and plan for a career in national security.

The son, 11, would go to his first day of flight camp, where he hoped to learn how to fly a plane.

“I’m proud of you guys and I love you,” Shari said, because her husband had taught her to say it often and with conviction. She cleared the breakfast plates and grabbed her keys. “Have a good day,” she said. Then she walked out the door and into another day shaped by his death.

■ ■ ■

Shari drove across town to the Fresno Family Counseling Center, her oversize purse filled with a notepad and two books about grieving, titled “Tear Soup” and “Help Me Say Goodbye.” She had decided to become a counselor in 2003, picking a career that perfectly reflected her dual reality. She had pulled herself out of depression, gone back to school for a master’s degree and turned her focus to other people’s problems. She wanted a new way to define herself other than the blunt introductions: “I am a housewife minus the wife part,” she had sometimes said in those first years. Or: “I am the woman whose husband got hit by a plane.”

And yet the coursework required to become a counselor had also involved deep self-analysis and therapy. Now she saw 10 or 12 patients each week as an intern at the counseling center, and those conversations revolved around coping skills, acceptance, love and grief. Each session made her think about her own life. Each session also made her think about him.

She walked into the center on this morning and continued into a small counseling room, where stuffed animals and toys covered the floor. She was scheduled to see a child enduring family turmoil, a woman short on money and a young couple grieving the death of a relative. The couple arrived first, and she invited them in.

Shari believed in the Rogerian method of psychology, meaning she mostly listened to her clients and followed their leads. But she often wondered how much of each session revolved around her memories, her emotions and her interpretations. At some point, Shari thought, empathy trumped coursework and experience outweighed theory.

So what, really, did she know about couples?

She knew what it felt like to take a leap of faith, fall madly in love at 19 and trust her instincts even when so many others told her that this relationship seemed wrong. He was black, and she was Dutch. He was a movie theater manager, and she was an employee. He was seven years older, a military man with orders to move to Guam in three weeks. “The misery of being without him makes the pressures I would face by being with him seem small,” Shari wrote then in a letter to her parents. So they drove through the night from California to Las Vegas and waited in line behind a cowboy and his pregnant girlfriend at the Chapel of White Lace and Promises. She wore a too-big denim jacket and combed her hair as they stepped to the altar. The officiant read their vows and handed over two coupons for free drinks at the adjacent casino. They stayed the night at a Motel 6. She awoke more certain than ever, and then moved with him to Guam.

She knew what it meant to rely on somebody, to follow a man and his job from city to city until the places blurred together and home came to mean wherever she was with him. They developed their own vocabulary — “Dutch-chocolate forever” and “only our four walls” — to define themselves as a team. They mourned a miscarriage. They cared for three babies. They sat together in hospital waiting rooms as their middle child, Brittany, a daughter born three months early with cerebral palsy, underwent 15 brain surgeries in her first two years of life, all the while explaining away their anger at God by reminding each other that they already were lucky. Fate had spoiled them. They had each other.

She knew about writing anniversary cards, fumbling for the right words to capture the promise of eternity. His: “So we only have 74 more anniversaries to go.” Hers: “I hope you know this is for life.”

She knew, just like this young couple sitting now in her office, what it felt like to grieve. After he died, she had tried to force down those well-meant lasagnas and chicken potpies, vomited in the bathroom, and lost 10 pounds that first week. She had ached from head to toe, gone sleepless for five days and then, later, stayed in bed for most of a month. She had confessed to friends that the first two years were a fog, and that, even now — after a decade and two cross-country moves and another brief marriage — she still fought each morning for the fog to lift.

But, during this therapy session at the counseling center, Shari revealed none of that. She sat in her chair, nodded and listened. Her experiences had made her a good counselor, she believed, but a good counselor also applied the theories. If she shared anything of herself during a session, it was calculated and non-specific. It was what her professors called selective self-disclosure.

It was this:

“You know,” she sometimes said, “I lost somebody close to me once, too.”

■ ■ ■

Shari came home at lunch and found her oldest daughter, Amanda, in the living room with her Arabic flashcards. Amanda had learned 400 words as an Arabic major during her freshman year at Georgetown University, and she continued to review them now during her summer break. Shari looked over her daughter’s shoulder, trying to decipher the foreign script with dots above and below each word. Amanda clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and tried to pronounce them.

“I don’t think I’m even genetically capable of making these sounds,” she said.

“So tell me why you are doing this again?” Shari joked.

Amanda had come up with half a dozen ways to deflect that question — her own form of selective self-disclosure. She would say she wanted to learn Arabic because she loved foreign languages. She had enrolled

across the country at Georgetown because she had strong memories of her childhood in Washington. She aspired to work in intelligence because a relative had been in the military once, and she wanted to serve, too.

Only if she trusted someone did Amanda reveal the full truth: that her father, a Navy intelligence officer, had been studying satellite images at the Pentagon when he was killed on Sept. 11, and now she wanted to live in the city where he died, study his profession and, one day, work in a Florida counterterrorism building that had been dedicated in his name. She had committed herself to this plan at age 15 and followed it ever since.

But telling people about her father involved so much drama and heartache. It became a marker in every relationship — the moment when people stopped seeing her as normal and started to glimpse the "new normal." Hers was a tragedy at once personal and national, so everyone she told about Sept. 11 related to the events of that day. They grieved again. She grieved again. There were always so many questions. During her second semester of college, after a team of Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden, Amanda was on her way to the mall with a friend when she decided to mention her father. Suddenly the friend was sobbing, gripping Amanda by the shoulder, offering tissues and asking, repeatedly, if she was okay. "Look, I've been dealing with this for 10 years," Amanda said. "I'm as okay as I'm going to be, so can we please just go shopping?"

How often could her family stand to dig back through the pain? How often could they stand to avoid it? They summoned the energy to attend some dedication ceremonies and skipped others. They kept a few pictures on display and took others down. Over the years on Sept. 11, they had tried commemorating the anniversary by sitting alongside presidents at big events in Washington, attending small church services and throwing a pool party at their house in Clovis, Calif., with caterers and dancing. "Where do you draw the line between remembering and trying to live our lives?" Shari wondered.

Their attempt at compromise sat in the formal living room of the house: a large wooden cabinet that told the story of Sept. 11 in photo albums, file folders and medallions. Amanda liked to look through it every once in a while, and now she set down her Arabic flashcards, walked over to the cabinet and started to read.

There was an architectural diagram of the Pentagon given to them by the military that showed the plane at impact and the building color-coded to indicate various kinds of damage: fire (red), structural (green), and smoke and water (blue). An "X" marked the section of the building where her father had worked, directly in the plane's path, and on the diagram was colored to resemble a rainbow, with everything destroyed.

There were copies of the e-mails Shari had sent to friends and family members throughout that day. At 10:38 a.m.: "Vince is not accounted for yet." At 1:01 p.m.: "I guess all I can do now is wait." At 3:42: "The kids have no clue as to what is going on. I am going to have to tell them something soon."

At 6:38: "It is all kind of surreal. I feel out of body."

At 9:16: "Vince's friends from the Pentagon are starting to call. They are all home now. I guess God thinks I am stronger than I thought."

There was the official certificate that a sunburned chaplain had delivered to their apartment in Lorton late that night. Shari read it while the three kids watched cartoons. “I am here to provide an update on the status of your (son/daughter/husband/wife). At this time, your (son/daughter/husband/wife) is still unaccounted for.”

There was the Ziploc bag mailed from the Pentagon a few weeks later, marked FBI #134, containing Vince’s pilot’s license, his Blockbuster card, $35 and a melted watch.

On the bottom shelf were reminders of the years since: a Defense of Freedom medal and a Purple Heart; photos of them posing next to concrete monuments inscribed “Still on Watch,” and “Fallen but Not Forgotten,” and “American Heroes” and “United in Memory;” programs for the naming dedications of the building in Florida, a Little League baseball field and a strip of California highway. There was a professional photo album from Vince’s funeral that showed all of them at the grave. Shari, widowed at 32, forced a tired smile. Brittany sat in her wheelchair. Amanda stared at the camera, her face expressionless. Anthony, just a toddler, dug his hands into the fresh dirt as if the grave were a sandbox.

Around the time of the funeral, Shari had begun to explain this new reality to her kids. Anthony was too young to understand; she put him in day care for the first time in his life so he wouldn’t suffer from her depression. Brittany, then a 7-year-old veteran of so many brain surgeries, had long worried about arriving in heaven alone, so Shari explained that now her father would be waiting there for her. “Cool!” Brittany had said.

Nine-year-old Amanda was the hardest one to tell because she knew the most. Shari decided to be clear and firm. She explained that Vince had died while serving the country and that he was never coming home. “I will take Daddy’s job,” she said. She told Amanda that it would still be okay to laugh, tell jokes, play and watch cartoons. “Your job is still to be 9,” she said. “That doesn’t change.”

But it did. Everything did. Amanda became her mother’s confidante and her brother’s self-described “little mom.” She went to therapy as a precaution, and the psychologist said she was exceptional only in her adultlike maturity. She earned good grades in high school and then a full scholarship to college through a Sept. 11 fund. She possessed her father’s sense of purpose, and she committed herself to a plan: Georgetown, counterintelligence, Arabic — so much of it foretold inside the living room display cabinet.

“None of this stuff is that sad to me anymore,” she said. “It’s just our reality.”

She closed the cabinet and went back to her flashcards.

■ ■ ■

A few hours later, Amanda drove her brother to the airport for flight camp. Anthony, 11, had become obsessed with planes a few years after his father’s death. He liked to study different models on the Internet and then stand outside to watch them approach the Fresno airport. He hoped that one day he would fly to that airport himself.

All of the Tolbert men had become pilots. Vince had completed his first solo flight on his 16th birthday, the earliest day allowed by law, and he had taken Shari into the air shortly after they met. His father, Butch, had flown in Vietnam and become a pilot for United. Butch was scheduled to fly a 747 out of San Francisco on Sept. 11, 2001, when his flight was canceled after a plane hit the Pentagon at 530 miles per hour.

Butch had gone back to work at United a few weeks after Vince's funeral. Even though each flight included so many reminders of the attacks – steel cockpit doors, air marshals, and nervous co-pilots who carried guns – he felt most at peace in the air. He had helped his grandson sign up for a one-week flight camp in Fresno, even though Anthony wouldn't be able to get his pilot's license for five more years.

Anthony arrived at the airport in the mid-afternoon heat and gathered on the tarmac with eight other preteen boys. The camp's flight instructor, a former motorcycle technician named Ryan, greeted them in an Army green flight suit and dark aviator sunglasses. "So," he said, gesturing over his shoulder at a Cessna on the runway, "tell me what makes you think you can fly one of these things."

"My dad flies in the military," one boy said.

"My dad's a pilot for FedEx," said another.

"My dad pulled 9Gs once in an F-18, and he takes me up all the time," said a third.

Anthony listened until the question circled around to him. "I just love planes," he said, simply. He hardly noticed anymore when other kids talked about their fathers. His mother had asked once if he felt his family was lacking. "A family is four people," he had said then. "You, me, Amanda and Brittany makes four."

At first, Shari had seen only a hole, and she tried desperately to fill it. If she remarried fast enough, she had thought, Anthony would still have a father for most of his life. She signed up for Internet dating a few years after Vince's death and tore through dozens of business-like first dates. When she eventually did remarry, seven years later, she sunk into depression after six months and broke it off. She laughed about what her profile on a dating Web site might say: "Come on in!" she joked. "I am widowed with three kids, including a wonderful daughter in a wheelchair. My deceased husband is a national hero, we all miss him terribly, and, a few times each year, we get dressed up and go to these big events where presidents honor him. You can come. Wear a tie. Stand in the back."

No, she finally decided. Better to fill this hole by herself. So she went to a gym and toned her arms until she could lift Brittany out of the wheelchair and bathe her alone. She moved back to Clovis, where the kids could live near Vince's two brothers and his parents. She stopped watching TV, ended friendships that she deemed frivolous and learned to care less about whether people liked her. Moms could afford to be occasionally passive; a head of household had to be direct, even pushy, especially when so much control had already been lost.

One evening in 2008, when she was learning about self-awareness in her master's program, Shari sat down with Anthony to find out what he understood about Sept. 11. She recorded the 50-minute conversation, which made her realize the hole would never close.

"What does being dead mean to you?" Shari asked.

"It's like someone that doesn't walk anymore or, like, doesn't breathe or anything like that anymore," Anthony said.

"So how would you describe 9/11 to another kid who doesn't know anything about it?"

"It was this time when an airplane flew into a building and a lot of people – like, a lot of people – were in that building, and they all died."

"What would you have changed about that day?"

"To, like, be at home, and be this age, so I could, like, understand what's going on, and that way I could know his cellphone number and call and tell him to, like, get out of there, a plane is going straight for that building. . . . I would have been able to, like, calculate where the plane would land, since I've learned so much about planes."

Now, a few years later, Anthony was at flight camp, eager to learn more. After three hours of basic lessons in a classroom, the flight instructor walked the campers back out to the tarmac for a tour of a $42 million private jet. "This is the kind of thing you might fly one day," the instructor said. The campers reclined in the leather seats, admired the mini-TVs and raided the snack drawers near the bathroom. Anthony walked alone toward the front of the plane, into the cockpit, and put his hands on the back of the pilot's seat.

In front of him were hundreds of buttons to predict weather, traffic and turbulence. There were gauges on the ceiling, controls on the walls and levers on the floor. The instructor noticed Anthony looking around and walked to the front of the plane to join him.

"Pretty amazing, huh?" he said. "You're in control of everything up here."

"Yeah," Anthony said. "It's so cool." He pointed to a thin windshield wedged between the buttons, so small that it revealed only a small strip of sunlight. "How does the pilot see through that?" he asked.

"He doesn't need to see," the instructor said. "Everything you need is right there in the controls: your altitude, weather, flight route, any other planes in the area. The pilot makes the plan. The plane does the rest."

Anthony nodded, retreated from the cockpit and walked to the airport exit where his sister was waiting to pick him up. But for the next few hours, he couldn't stop thinking about that tiny window.

He sat in the living room with his mom and sister, and they looked at old family photos until dusk turned to dark. They forgot to eat dinner until 9 p.m., because now Shari believed it was mostly foolhardy to plan ahead. Even though she usually tried to cook at home, they went out for a greasy dinner because she had learned to forgive herself for falling short of perfection. They sat at the restaurant and talked about their day.

“How did everything go?” Shari asked.

“Good,” Amanda said.

“Good,” Anthony said.

He told them about flight camp, the private jet and the cockpit. He described the precise levers and gadgets. He spoke about the window.

“I would want some more space to see out,” he said. “You know, just in case.”

Ten years had taught him that there was no such thing as perfect control, no foolproof cause and effect. Sometimes the controls failed, and the bumps came without warning, and the route changed mid-flight, and the entire landscape shifted in an instant.

Sometimes, the plane crashed.

*Second in the series*: A twin balances life without his other half

*Third in the series*: Brought together by catastrophe

*Fourth in the series*: After 9/11, security guard on high alert at golf course

*Fifth in the series*: Flight attendant still feels at home up in the sky



**Eli Saslow**

Eli Saslow is a reporter at The Washington Post. He won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for his year-long series about food stamps in America. He was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing in 2013, 2016 and 2017.

Follow