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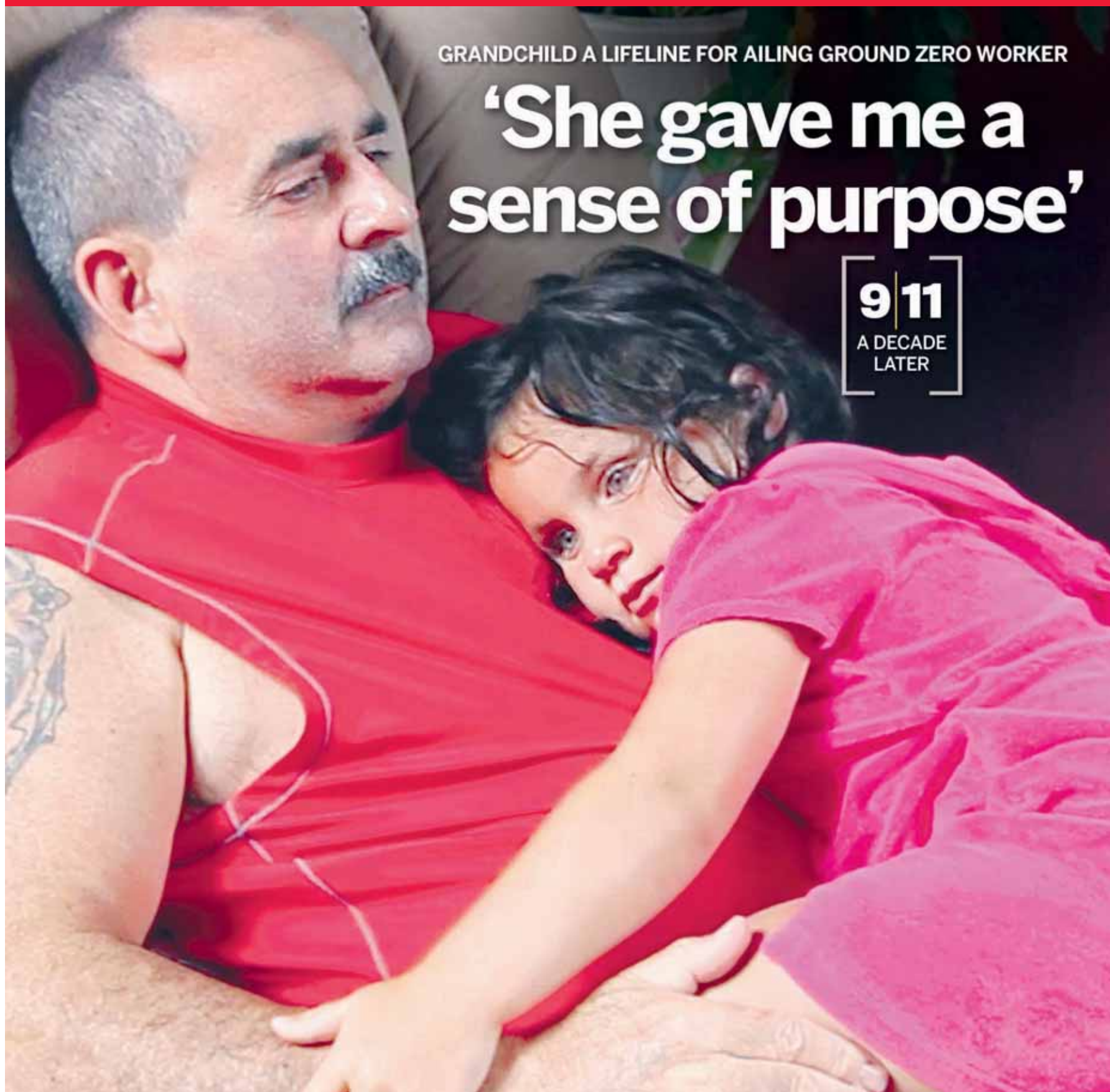


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GRANDCHILD A LIFELINE FOR AILING GROUND ZERO WORKER

'She gave me a sense of purpose'

9|11
A DECADE
LATER



STORY ON A2-5 | WATCH DENNIS FITZPATRICK TALK ABOUT HIS LIFE AT [NEWSDAY.COM/911](http://newsday.com/911)

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NEWSDAY PHOTO / JOHN PARASKEVAS

A lifeline named Gianna

How a little girl helped her grandfather battle emotional and physical scars of 9/11

BY JO NAPOLITANO
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Dennis Fitzpatrick spent seven months clearing debris from Ground Zero. He's spent a decade trying to erase the images from his mind.

Intense flashbacks bring him to the top of the smoking pile, where the heat from the fire beneath the rubble burned the soles of his shoes.

And there are the painful physical reminders of his time there. Every day he struggles to breathe and fears a cancer will erupt in his body.

By 2005, Fitzpatrick couldn't walk a block without stopping to catch his breath. His lungs would hold little oxygen; he became increasingly confined to his Levittown home.

Years of sickness have diminished his physical stature. His shoulders are hunched, his voice, at its weakest, is an indecipherable scratch. He can barely bend over or lift anything. At 58, he doesn't think he'll live to old age.

He keeps a series of doctors appointments and worries over each new diagnosis.

At very low moments he

thought of suicide. But he pulled back when a child came into his life.

Her name is Gianna.

Gianna's birth

Fitzpatrick started to get excited as soon as he learned his daughter was pregnant. He and his fiancée, Paula Stack, rushed to the baby section of every store they visited. He bought a crib and assembled it himself and filled his house on Daisy Lane with all the baby might need: a high chair, clothes, toys, a tiny bathtub.

Kelly Fitzpatrick, 31, moved in with her dad and Stack during her second trimester when her relationship with the baby's father ended. She settled into a room at the back of the house and filled the closets and dressers with her and her baby's belongings.

Her father took her to nearly all of her doctors appointments and encouraged her to go for walks each day, hoping that exercise would lead to a healthy delivery. It was the closest she and her dad had ever been.



Dennis Fitzpatrick of Levittown worked for 228 days at Ground Zero after the 9/11 attacks.

"He was probably more excited than I was," Kelly said.

Fitzpatrick drove his daughter to Good Samaritan Hospital in West Islip on May 5, 2008, for a routine exam. When doctors learned Kelly's blood pressure was high, they made her stay overnight.

Her water broke the next morning, kicking off 7½ hours of labor. Her father stood at her side throughout, rubbing her arm while Stack held her hand

and wiped her brow.

When the doctors detected the baby was in distress, they performed a Caesarean section. Fitzpatrick left the room, and Stack stayed for the surgery. Gianna was born May 6 at 7 pounds, 4 ounces.

Fitzpatrick saw his granddaughter for the first time in the nursery. He was the first man in the family to hold her.

"I loved her instantly," he said. "That was my little girl."

Kelly went back to work at a car dealership in Port Jefferson two months after her daughter was born. Stack worked, too, so Fitzpatrick, home with his illnesses, watched the baby, Monday through Friday.

Forced into an early retirement in 2006 because of his health problems, he missed his colleagues and the feeling of accomplishment that came with a day's labor. And he was starting to get too sick for the hobbies



9/11/01

Spent **228 days** working at Ground Zero

Jan. 2003
Diagnosed with obstructive airway disease

Feb. 2003
Diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

Feb. 2005
Diagnosed with gastroesophageal reflux disease

Jan. 2006
Retires

May 6, 2008
Granddaughter Gianna born

9/11/11





NEWSDAY PHOTO / JOHN PARASKEVAS



Dennis Fitzpatrick said his granddaughter Gianna, 3, helped him in the aftermath of 9/11. "She brought joy to my life. She gave me a sense of purpose," he said. See Fitzpatrick talk about his struggles and what gets him through the day at newsday.com/911

he loved most; his beloved Harley-Davidson motorcycles, which he spent hours polishing and riding, were largely idle in his garage.

"I was a bump on the couch, waiting for the days to go by," Fitzpatrick said. "She brought joy to my life. She gave me a sense of purpose, knowing that I had to take care of her."

Survivors can thrive when they focus their energy on something positive, said Thomas Demaria, psychologist and director of the C.W. Post 9/11 Families Center. Those who begin to heal find that thing in their lives that is so important, he said, that it helps dissipate the fear, anxiety or sadness with which they live.

"Trauma is a disconnection from other people," he said.

"For a lot of people who survive a tragedy, it's their faith, the birth of a child or a devotion to a cause — something larger than themselves — that gives them meaning or transcendence."

For her part, Stack has seen that transformation.

"That kid was never out of his arms or his sight for two years," she said. "He never listened to me. I would tell him, 'Put the bottle in her mouth and lay her in the crib.' 'No,' he'd say. There wasn't a feeding that he missed. He took care of her every little need."

She called him "Papa" from the start. He fed her, bathed her in the sink and pushed her on a swing in the backyard for hours. She cried whenever he left the house and seldom slept

in the crib he'd bought for her.

When she napped, it was at his side. "She got used to a queen-sized bed real fast," Fitzpatrick said with a laugh.

Sometimes, Kelly said, it's like Gianna is her father's daughter.

At Ground Zero

As he watched the news unfold on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Fitzpatrick phoned his bosses at the construction company where he worked as a driver to ask what he could do.

The company had been rebuilding a portion of the West Side Highway near the World Trade Center and was summoned to the pile to help clear debris. Fitzpatrick arrived at

the site on Sept. 15 and started hauling steel beams to Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island. He stayed for 228 days.

As the site became more organized, Fitzpatrick worked as an on-site shop steward. He managed about 50 trailers as they lined up each morning from Battery Park to the New York Stock Exchange to haul away the rubble.

Week after week, he walked the perimeter of the pile, signing in workers and making sure their trucks were covered and clean when they left the site.

"I thought it was going to take forever," he said. "There was just so much of it. And it was dangerous. Everybody had to be really careful."

Fitzpatrick recalls removing debris from the top of the pile —

about four stories from ground level — thinking the whole thing could collapse at any time.

"The girders were bright red from the flames," he said. "Standing on the steel melted the bottom of your boots. The smoke was so acrid, so acidic. You could smell death."

Construction crews had to work quickly before the heat warped their truck tires.

When he recalls the site today, he envisions it from where he first entered, on the corner of Church and Liberty streets.

It looked like London after the Blitz, he said.

"St. Paul's Church had a cemetery out back and all of the gravestones were covered with dust," he said. "The windows of

See GIANNA on A4

A LIFELINE NAMED GIANNA

GIANNA from A2

the Burger King on the corner were blown out. Same with the apartments above.”

The air left a chalky paste in his mouth. He rarely wore a mask; it wasn't required for weeks and made it difficult to talk or be heard on the bustling site. “I would say 75 percent of the time the mask was not on,” he said.

At night, when workers turned on massive lights to illuminate the site, he could see debris floating in the air: tiny glass shards, bits of paper, clouds of dust.

“Everyone was coughing,” he said. “There was no way you couldn't.”

Around him, day after day, dogs sniffed for victims and bucket brigades collected human remains, while emergency workers scrambled in vain to find anyone alive. He celebrated Thanksgiving with Mayor Rudy Giuliani and worked Christmas and New Year's, too.

Frank Daly, Fitzpatrick's former boss at Tully Construction, said his efforts were crucial to the cleanup.

“He was down there 12 hours a day, seven days a week,” he said. “His job was to make sure the trucks were sent there . . . and the guys were doing what they were supposed to do.”

Getting help

Fitzpatrick began seeing Minna Barrett, a professor of psychology at SUNY Old Westbury, about five years ago, after first discussing his flashbacks with the staff of Stony Brook University's World Trade Center Health Program in Islandia. Barrett is also a consulting psychologist for that program.

She has counseled hundreds of 9/11 workers, starting on the day after the attack. She said she was worried about Fitzpatrick at first, concerned that the hulking Teamster wouldn't accept her suggestions for keeping his post-traumatic stress disorder at bay. He surprised her

with his willingness to fight for his mental health.

“He really wanted to feel better,” she said. “And not just physically. He wanted to feel better emotionally.”

Barrett celebrated the brighter moments in his life, too, including Gianna's birth. Fitzpatrick even brought the baby to his therapy sessions. She'd sit in her stroller gumming Cheerios while her grandfather talked about the nightmares that disrupted his sleep. It was obvious to Barrett that Gianna had become Fitzpatrick's lifeline.

A second grandchild, Leah, who is now 2, has further boosted his spirits. She is the daughter of his son, Michael, and visits regularly.

On a recent afternoon in Barrett's office, Fitzpatrick shared his fears about the upcoming 10-year anniversary of the attacks.

“I've started having flashbacks of being down there — the smell, the smoke, the bodies,” he said. “And then there's my friend, Christie Todd Whitman.”

Fitzpatrick talks often of Whitman, the former head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, who said a week after the attacks that the air at Ground Zero was “safe to breathe.” She's the reason he and others working at the site abandoned their masks, he said.

Ground Zero workers and residents living near the site tried to sue Whitman for her statements, saying they were intentionally misleading. Whitman has said she and her agency acted responsibly; the Second U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New York City dismissed the suit in 2008.

Barrett tells Fitzpatrick to let go of his anger. She tells him he needs to stay strong to face his next hurdle: surgery at The Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan to clear his throat of scar tissue after numerous surgeries to improve his breathing. Poor mental health will leave him physically vulnerable, Barrett said.

“I know you're tired,” she said. “It's a long haul.”

He's still for a moment, be-

fore telling her he fears he might not survive.

“The risk is ever present with the amount of surgery you've had,” she said in a voice that soothes more than it stings. “But if you don't come out, you don't come out. But we take those risks to try and get better.”

And wouldn't it be preferable, she asked, to die in surgery rather than take his own life as he's considered before?

Fitzpatrick went silent, staring straight ahead for a moment.

“You're right,” he said.

Diagnosis

It started with a cough.

All the workers had it.

A year after he left Ground Zero, Fitzpatrick was diagnosed with the types of lung ailments that would eventually make it hard for him to walk to his mailbox or sleep through the night. He is one of an estimated 15,000 people treated for at least one 9/11-related ailment by the health-monitoring program.

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease makes it difficult for him to breathe, leaving his chest feeling tight. Gastroesophageal reflux disease makes his stomach acids flow back into his esophagus, burning his throat and giving him constant heartburn.

He uses a breathing device called a CPAP machine to keep from gasping for air at night because of sleep apnea. His lung capacity has been as low as 15 percent, tests have shown.

It's exhausting for him to move and impossible for him to chase after Gianna.

Ashok Karnik, a doctor with the World Trade Center Health Program, said Fitzpatrick's problems are common among Ground Zero workers, just not in combination.

“Dennis is one of those patients who has multiple problems all in one place,” Karnik said, sitting across from Fitzpatrick in his Islandia office.

And then there's the PTSD and depression.

Fitzpatrick had planned to work for several years. He



Fitzpatrick saved his identification tags from his Ground Zero work.



A nebulizer helps get medication deep into his lungs.



Fitzpatrick takes several pills a day to battle his ailments.

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Gianna returns home and gives her grandfather a hug.

NEWSDAY PHOTOS / JOHN PARASKEVAS

wasn't prepared for his body to fail him so quickly. It's hard for him to go outside during the winter or in extreme heat and humidity. His house is a prison when the weather is extreme.

Down time is tough for him. Gianna goes to day care now, and the loneliness, fatigue and boredom he feels in her absence can make him sleep hours during the day.

And his physical problems go beyond those recognized by the WTC health program. He's suffered cysts and vocal chord paralysis. Doctors had to rebuild his throat — he's endured numerous tracheotomies — and his voice is weak and raspy.

He can't make his doctor's appointments by phone anymore because the nurses can't hear him. And the friends who meet him at his favorite bar on Friday nights have to lean in close to pick up what he's saying. Fitzpatrick is inaudible in a crowd, a sharp shift for an extroverted prankster who held court at work and home. The man who once slipped a piece of Limburger cheese into a fellow driver's truck for kicks sits alone for hours each week, ingesting a fistful of pills each day, from Ambien to Zolof.

There was a bright spot in his medical journey in July. That throat surgery he worried about went well, and he went home from the hospital the next morning.

He's grateful for the outcome but worries about his next diagnosis. Many responders have developed cancer, and it's a concern he battles daily.

The will to live

Fitzpatrick lumbers toward his kitchen pantry and fumbles with a set of pots and pans to heat a premade dinner for his fiancée and granddaughter before they return from the little girl's swim meet.

Moments after they pull into the driveway, Gianna bursts into the kitchen and hugs her grandfather. "Hi, baby," he says gently. "Everything all right?"

Gianna nods and pulls a lollipop from her bag. She races through the kitchen to the living room. "Don't run with that lollipop!" her grandfather shouts.

The little girl dines with Fitzpatrick and Stack nearly every night. She's shuttled to her maternal grandmother's house each weekend and visits her father twice a month.

At 3 years old, Gianna is smart, stubborn and 51 pounds.

She has a hard time sitting still and only recently started playing by herself.

She gets up from the dinner table and spills half a cup of fruit juice on the floor in front of the refrigerator. Her grandfather can't bend over to clean the mess.

Stack sops up the liquid with paper towels. She uses her free hand to hold Gianna back as the little girl tries to plop a foot into the pink puddle.

Gianna giggles and squeals throughout the meal and yells when she doesn't have enough cheese on her seafood pasta. That's enough, her grandfather tells her.

When dinner is over, she retreats to the living room, climbs on the couch and pulls a blanket over herself. She's quiet for a few minutes until Fitzpatrick and Stack enter the room.

That's when she grabs a stack of jigsaw puzzles from a neat pile in the corner and sits on the floor.

Stack bends down to join her, and Fitzpatrick perches like an owl at the end of the couch, unable to crouch down to play with his granddaughter.

An unexpected gift

Back inside his psychologist's office, Barrett asks Fitzpatrick to define his legacy. He shrugs. It's unclear to him exactly what he'll leave behind, and the word legacy is just too big to get his mind around.

Barrett presses on and praises Fitzpatrick for his work at Ground Zero, for what she calls his "ordinary courage."

And then, there's all he's done for Gianna.

"What you have given her is something that few children get: the complete devotion of her grandfather," the doctor tells him. "No matter what happens to her later in life — whatever challenges she might face — she will always have that with her."

His failing health, she said, allowed him to spend time with his granddaughter when she needed him most.

"It's a remarkable aspect of this," she says. "You have her, and she has you. If she could feel, physically, what you gave her, she would know she is deeply loved by you."

If he were gone tomorrow, nothing could take away from the time he's spent with her.

"When I look at what you've gotten from 9/11, you got her," Barrett tells him. "She's the light. She's the life."