

IN THE NEWS

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AMERICA UNITES

Extraordinary Stories of Heroism, Heartbreak and Hope

With selfless passion,
America's newest war heroes
raced to save lives -
and raised a nation's spirit

America's Spirit

So prevalent is Hollywood's version of heroism - gargantuan special effects, preposterous luck, bulging muscles, flash-pot explosions - that the intimate scale, and infinitely greater impact, of the real thing comes as a breathtaking surprise. On Sept. 11 hundreds of police, firefighters and ordinary people made extraordinary split-second choices, putting themselves at risk to save people they often did not know. Battling fire, debris and fading hope, rescuers in New York City and Washington, D.C., came to work in suits, uniforms and blue jeans - and now wear badges of honor.

Tina Hansen, 41

Two men team up to carry a woman in a wheelchair to safety

Tina Hansen is quick and nimble in her wheelchair: diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis at age 3, she has been using one for most of her life. But when the first plane hit the World Trade Center, Hansen, a marketing supervisor at the Port Authority of NY and NJ, was immobilized by the impossible task of descending 68 flights of stairs. Although she had a special lightweight chair designed for just such a scenario (it had been given to her after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing) it would be of little use without a couple of strong-armed carriers. Says Hansen: "I didn't know how I was going to get out.

Enter Michael Benfante, 36, a communications company manager who spotted her seated helplessly behind a set of glass doors. Hansen nodded toward her emergency chair, which was tightly folded. Joined by his coworker John Cerqueira, 22 "I was frantic..." says Benfante, who lives in Verona, N.J. Meanwhile, Hansen pleaded with him to help

carry down her precious \$8,000 electric wheelchair. "It was heavy," says Benfante. "There was no way."

With Hansen safely strapped into her lightweight chair, Benfante and Cerqueira began making their way down. "We were a team," says Benfante. Along the way "we tried to keep it light," says Cerqueira, who returned to his home state of North Carolina after the attack. "I'd ask Tina, 'You all right, babe? You've got luxury service!'"

The mood darkened considerably when the group reached the fifth floor, which was pitch-black and flooded from the buildings sprinklers. "It was like being in The Poseidon Adventure," says Benfante. "It was slippery and I was moving stuff out of the way so we could push Tina. I wasn't going out unless she was with me." All the while Hansen remained "brave and calm," says Benfante. "She was something else."

When they reached the street, Hansen was placed into a waiting ambulance. Minutes later the tower began to collapse, and Benfante and Cerqueira - who narrowly escaped the crashing debris - feared that the ambulance carrying Hansen might not have made it out in time.

It did, and a few days later Hansen spoke by phone with Benfante and Cerqueira. "Mike was really happy and excited," says Hansen, who lives in Manhattan. "He said that hearing about me capped his day."

★ The Emergency Chair model 1400