

Jim Dwyer
 From the rubble,
 a picture and a friendship

OCTOBER 23, 2001 (New York Times)

Tim Sherman spotted the photograph near the end of his first day of digging, on the Friday after that Tuesday. The time of day, he recalls, was "after dark." He had been on the move since dawn. A gang from his job at the Middlesex Water Company had come to New York to help, with strong backs and water main know-how and willing spirits. In a way, there was nothing to do.

Around them, smoke heaved from shapes no human hand could form. However many tons of stuff were on the ground, the landscape fell heavier and longer on the eye. "There is no God," he remembers thinking.

The Middlesex crew grabbed hand tools and faced the wreckage at Liberty Plaza. "Digging. Bucketing. Whatever needed to be done," Mr. Sherman said.

Late that day, he raked a pile of ash, then saw the picture. Frozen in time and in 8 by 10 inches of vibrant colors, three cute kids stared at him from the ground: one boy just old enough for braces, another boy a few years younger, and a toddler sister.

The picture was sopping. He stuck it on a wall to dry, but it slid off. "If you put it back up there, it'll just fall again and get lost," a co-worker told Mr. Sherman, so he stashed it away. "This could be the last thing a mother or father saw before they died," Mr. Sherman would say.

Over the next two weeks or so, the fraternity of hard work, warm meals and caring people changed Mr. Sherman's opinion about God. Back in New Jersey, his hometown paper, the *Home News Tribune*, ran an article about the water company crews helping out. The paper also published the picture Tim Sherman had saved.

All day after Brian Conroy saw the salvaged picture in the newspaper, he had a hard time concentrating on his job, managing a sales territory for Arnold Bread and Thomas' English Muffins. He knew those faces—knew the kids. Those were George Tabeek's children, and George worked at the trade center for the Port Authority.

Years ago, a decade or more, Mr. Tabeek owned a piece of a restaurant in Edison. Mr. Conroy tended bar there once a week. The Tabeek boys would visit their dad while he was watching the register. At closing time, the two men would share a pizza and news about his children. They were good friends, but work friends, so when the restaurant closed, they went about their lives.

Mr. Conroy recalled that the Tabeeks lived in Brooklyn, and he found two listings for them. On one call, an answering machine picked up. Mr. Conroy put the phone down. At the second number, a woman said hello.

Yes, this was the Tabeek household.

Mr. Conroy explained who he was, but fumbled trying to state his business. He cannot say if his heart was pounding or had simply stopped.

The woman finally figured out whom Mr. Conroy was talking about.

"Oh," she said. "Oh. George. He's right here. Do you want to speak to him?"

Mr. Conroy fell silent. The little hairs rose along his arms.

About 10 years ago, George Tabeek took his children to the Sears where his sister worked in the photography department and had the children sit for a portrait. Dana would have been about 3; Steven, 11; and young Georgie, 14.

The picture of the children followed him as he moved through jobs at the Port Authority, as Georgie became a New York City police officer, as Steven went to Saint John's University, and as Dana started high school at Bishop Kearney.

Mounted in a gold frame, the portrait sat on the edge of his credenza, in his office on the 35th floor of 2 World Trade Center. Mr. Tabeek, an engineer, was one of the people with the keys to everything. When he looked out the window across the plaza to the great spread of New York, in the corner of his view was an 8-by-10 picture of his children.

That awful morning, he had the good luck to be stopping for a doughnut in the plaza when the first plane hit. He then tested that fortune, running up 22 floors with firefighters to rescue people. He was inches from a fire-

man, Lt. Andrew Desperito, when the second building fell and took Lieutenant Desperito.

He told all this to Brian Conroy, the old friend he had shared pizza with in the life before. Mr. Conroy then told him about Tim Sherman the water worker, and the wet picture he had found buried in the ash.

For the first time in weeks, Mr. Tabeck said yesterday, he thought about the picture that sat in the corner of his window view, the small piece of his remembered sky.

He wanted it.

"I'll get it," Mr. Conroy said, and he did.