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Every September we remember the events of 9/11. For those of us who did not lose loved ones on that awful day, time tends to dull the ache somewhat. But one thing time cannot dull is the inspiration we feel whenever we learn about the many acts of heroism and sacrifice performed by countless men and women who had to face the unthinkable before the towers fell.

Take, for example, the story of a young man who saved at least a dozen lives before giving his own. His name was Welles Crowther, a young trader who worked in the South Tower of the World Trade Center. But to those he saved, he will always be remembered as the man with the red bandana.

### **Out of the Darkness, a Voice of Calm**

At 9:02 a.m. on September 11, 2001, the skylobby on the 78<sup>th</sup> floor of the South Tower was filled with people, all debating whether to stay or go as the North Tower burned. At 9:03, the lobby was dark and filled with smoke. The second plane had struck.

Most of the people in the lobby probably died instantly, but a few survived, albeit with injuries. As these survivors tried to make sense of what was going on, a man appeared holding a red bandana over his nose and mouth. "Anyone who can walk, get up and walk now," he ordered. "Anyone who can help others, find someone who needs help and then head down."

His voice, survivors remembered, was calm and authoritative. Slowly but surely, he led groups of people down several flights of stairs, then went back the way he came to see if others needed help. He even carried one woman on his back, setting her down only when they had finally reached clean air. "This way to the stairs," he said, whenever he returned to the 78<sup>th</sup> floor. "This way to the stairs."

### **Only One Way Out**

It's hard to overstate the importance of this simple bit of instruction. The plane that struck the South Tower did so at an angle, severing every stairwell but one. This was the one Welles Crowther directed people to. It was the only escape, the only lifeline. But it was filled with smoke and debris. Many people thought it impassable, and decided to head up instead of down. Thankfully, Crowther kept a remarkably clear head and held his nerve. It's impossible to know how many lives were saved thanks to his calm demeanor, quick thinking, and bravery, but to save only one would be noteworthy. To save dozens, as Crowther likely did, was miraculous.

To have the courage to continue going *up* the stairs as others went down was heroic.

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# The Red Bandana

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“If he hadn’t come back,” one survivor later said, “I wouldn’t have made it. People can live 100 years and not have the compassion, the wherewithal to do what he did.”

But at the time, no one knew his name. His heroism lived on only in the stories swapped by survivors and recounted to journalists. In a famous piece by the New York Times published less than a year later, he was described only as a mysterious man with a red bandana.

## The Man with the Red Bandana

The story would have probably ended there had Crowther’s parents not read those accounts. They instantly recognized the nameless man as their son. Previously, all they knew was that their son’s body had been found alongside those of firefighters running a command center in the South Tower lobby. It was clear that he had probably been trying to help, but that was all they knew.

As a boy, Welles loved to emulate his father, who always kept a blue bandana with him. But instead of a blue bandana, Welles chose red. Like his father, Welles became a volunteer firefighter and dreamed of one day joining the FDNY so that he could devote his life to helping others.

When the planes struck, Welles fulfilled his dream.

Several months after the attacks, Welles’ mother, Allison, reached out to one of the survivors mentioned in the NYT article. She sent the survivor a picture of her son, who only needed an instant to confirm that it was indeed Welles. For his parents, it was probably a bittersweet confirmation.

Still, as Welles’ father once said: “If Welles’ story helps people to think of others, then God bless them, God bless him.”

For the survivors Welles saved, finally knowing who he was made all the difference. “It does help me put myself in a lot more peaceful mind than I used to be,” as one survivor put it. “It helped me heal a little bit more, at least mentally.”

“I (still) see this incredible hero, running back and forth and saving the day,” said another survivor. “In his mind, he had a duty to do—to save people.”

It’s been fifteen years since September 11. For many, time has dulled the ache of that awful day. But it can never dull the importance, the significance, the *magnitude* of what Welles Crowther did. Even now, after all this time, there is so much about September 11 that can move us and inspire us if we let it. There is so much we can learn, so much we can emulate. Hopefully none of us will ever have to experience that kind of situation ... but whatever life has in store for us, I hope we can meet it with the same resolve and strength that Welles Crowther did.

I hope that we, too, can be somebody’s calm voice out of the darkness.

NOTE: For more information on Welles Crowther, read “The Red Bandana: A Life, A Choice, A Legacy” by Tom Rinaldi. This book was just published this month. There is also a book for young people, “The Man in the Red Bandana” by Honor Crowther Fagan.

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