

“I SAW MY HEADSTONE”

NARRATOR Stacey Salimah-Bell**FOR LESSON***After 9/11:
The Political
is Personal*

SALIMAH-BELL I remember September 11. I was in a unit. It was only one block south of the World Trade Center. So as it was happening, the first plane hits, and we went outside of our building. I was standing literally under the first tower that was going to go down, and I looked up, and it was the shadow that came over my head, and it was the second plane, going into the building in front of me. And it was this huge — it was so close that I could look up and see, like, the numbers written on the bottom of the plane. So of course it cast a dark shadow over my head. And then it goes into the building and it tilts sideways, so it can get more of the building.

And I remember thinking, oh my God. And then my second thought was, please don't let them be Muslim. Please don't let them be Muslim. And I didn't scream. I was just in shock. So I literally just ran back down Washington Street into the building that I was assigned to and started telling people, "Get out of the building. We don't know if there are more planes coming. Get out of the building." And as I'm saying that, I realize now people are staring at me. And I'm like, "Why are they staring at me like that?" And then I realize, like, oh my God, it's my **hijab**. I'm like — I'm wondering if they're thinking that I know something about something else coming, or whether I had something to do with it. Yeah. And they were listening to me because they were like, "Nope, if she's saying get out, we're getting out."

So we're all standing down, and now the fire trucks are starting to come. So a police captain comes and says, "Oh, we need as much help as we can." You know, "Clear these streets. The fire trucks have got to get through." So that's what we started doing, just standing in the streets, clearing the streets, telling people,

RUN TIME **8:51****HIJAB**a headscarf
worn by Muslim
women.

"Go back," because — I don't know what it is about human nature, but when there's a disaster, people want to go look and gawk. And, like, this is not that day. And we had no clue that the buildings were going to come down, but we just needed to keep the area clear. And we're telling people, "Get back, get back, get back." And they were.

And I'll never forget it. This one fire truck goes through, and I can see the man's face, and he just looked down at me, and he gave me, like, the thumbs-up sign. And then, the next time I saw his face, it was one of those 343 faces of the firefighters who died. His face just kept haunting me. I didn't sleep, when I finally did make it home, for literally a week. I had to go to the doctor to get something because I was just so on edge.

So, that day, we kept the streets clear. The buildings come down. I had my hijab on and I had to take it to cover my nose because it was, like, a cement dust. It wasn't smoke. People say all this — it wasn't smoke. It was as though someone opened a bag of fine cement powder. And I just thought I was going to die that day. And I actually, like, saw my headstone: "October 3, 1963, to September 11, 2001."

And then, the funny thing — and I won't say "funny," but ironic, is when I drove in to work that morning — because we had parking there — it was such a beautiful Tuesday morning. It was a gorgeous day. And I looked ahead and I was, like, just, wow. Like, I can appreciate nature. I love driving upstate New York, seeing the Catskills, the Adirondacks, even going up to Niagara Falls. But then I saw the city skyline out before me. The sun was shining. And I'm like, that's God's wonder, too, that we were able to build that, that we were able to make this, that God gave us the skills, the knowledge, the creativity. So I can appreciate kind of both.

And that was the last time that I saw those towers standing.

BIO Stacey Salimah-Bell was born in 1963 in Brooklyn, where she was raised in Bensonhurst. She spent more than 20 years working for the New York City Department of Correction, eventually rising to the rank of captain. Salimah-Bell was involved in a successful class-action lawsuit against the New York City Department of Correction for sexual harassment. She was a founding member of the American Muslim Law Enforcement Officers Association and of Muslims Employed in City Corrections Association. She also served as vice president for the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society Jean Sampson Scott Greater New York Chapter.

CITATION Salimah-Bell, Stacey, Excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, October 09, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.48; Brooklyn Historical Society.