



Caitlyn McIntyre and Olivia Perez-Johntry

Anniversary Digital Learning Experience

Transcript

CAITLYN MCINTYRE: America's Camp gave us countless memories in a place where we could truly be kids.

OLIVIA PEREZ-JOHNTRY: Everybody knew we were there for that reason, and it was never "That's the girl from 9/11." We were all the girls from 9/11, and so we were able to be girls. We were able to laugh and to play, and

CAITLYN: We were unapologetically ourselves.

OLIVIA: Yes.

CAITLYN: My dad, Donald James McIntyre, was a Port Authority police officer on September 11, 2001. I don't have as many memories as I'd like, because I was five on September 11. What I do remember was incredible. First and foremost, my dad was a family man. He was excited to come home from work. He was a cook. He was playing with the kids.

OLIVIA: I don't know much about my dad, my father, Anthony Perez. What I do remember of my dad was his smile. How often he smiled, and if he wasn't smiling, he was trying to make someone smile. He just was goofy. Always so goofy and making jokes and tried to stay very lighthearted about stuff.

CAITLYN: He just was-- had so much joy. Everything he did was for his family. My dad actually named all three of us, so it was like his pride and joy being a dad. There's nothing he wouldn't have done for his kids. His coworkers and his best friends talked that he was the guy that you wanted to have with you. He just made everybody feel at home. So on September 11, 2001, I was five. I had just started kindergarten.

OLIVIA: And I was just your everyday ten-year-old girl. I went to school. I was on a school bus. Fourth period comes and children are starting to get pulled out of school and kids are getting called out. We asked the teacher, "Why is everyone leaving?" The World Trade Center has been attacked, and my dad had just gotten a job there. I remember my skin was crawling, and I remember I'm shaking, and I didn't know what to do.

CAITLYN: I do remember coming home and seeing the TV screen with the towers on it. My dad had been working a lot of overtime, so that day he was actually in Jersey City, and when he heard that the first plane hit the towers, he locked up, and he went immediately to the scene. He did call my mom on his way over just to tell her that he loved her.

OLIVIA: And I remember my mom and my stepdad picked me up, and that was not normal. And she sat me down on my bed. And that was the first time I'd ever seen my mom cry. And she said, "I don't think you're going to see your dad again."

CAITLYN: I don't remember having any formal conversation about what happened that day. There was a lot of unknown in the aftermath of 2001. My mom was incredibly resilient. We did a lot of family time. My mom's mom and dad stepped in a lot to help us, and it was incredible to see how many people truly loved and cared about my dad.

OLIVIA: I went to school the very next day. My mom wanted normalcy. She wanted me to continue a routine, and I'm so thankful that she did that. I just remember everything was always handled with care. Everybody handled me with care, and I didn't want that. I wanted to be a normal kid.

CAITLYN: I had met a few young girls who've become my best friends. They said that they were going to this place called America's Camp, and it was truly the best thing that could have ever happened to me at the time.

OLIVIA: My mom said, Olivia, you got to try America's Camp. The idea of leaving my mother was something I couldn't stomach, and the second you get to where the busses were, it was home.

CAITLYN: It gave me such a place to feel like myself and to be understood by other people.

OLIVIA: These were kids who got me, and that was when I felt seen. And that stuck with me. And that's why I wound up going into education. The first day I stepped into a classroom, I said, "Yep, this is where I need to be."

CAITLYN: So I grew up in a family of first responders, my dad obviously being a police officer, and my mom was a nurse, so it felt very natural for me to follow in their footsteps. I became a nurse. Before every shift, I would put my dad's badge number on my wrist.

OLIVIA: I remember I shared my story, and I had a young girl come up to me and she goes, "Ms. Perez, does it ever get any easier?" And she goes, "My mom just died recently. Does it get any easier?" And I said, "Eventually. And then there are times where it's impossible and you need to feel what you're feeling. But know that your mother, my father, wouldn't want you to wallow, would want you to rise above and continue going."

CAITLYN: Children are so resilient. It was such a beautiful, I mean, incredible experience as a nurse to be able to be with these children and parents at their darkest times and be able to give them the empathy, the time, the understanding. Although I didn't say it, I knew what they were going through. 25 years later, I think for me, the biggest thing to take home is how much of a hero my dad was. He walked in when everybody else was walking out. I hope that my daughter can learn and take forward to, and go the extra mile for people, because it's what people really need, and it's how we come together.

OLIVIA: But that's why I went into teaching, to be that science teacher that sees a student for more than what they're going through, to be that ear, to provide that guidance. And I think that that's not only in service of the loss of 9/11, but I think that's in service to my dad. 25 years is a lifetime. I have a family. I'm a mom, and he's not here for that. But I'm going to keep his memory alive. I'm going to keep sharing my story. I'm going to be Olivia Perez, daughter of Anthony Perez. Loud, proud, and silly.