

Mid-October, 2001: Survivor Tree Rescued

“It was in the middle of this debris field, and it sprouted out leaves.”

Ron Vega, New York City Department of Design and Construction Quadrant Leader and past Director of Design & Construction at the 9/11 Memorial, recalls bringing the Survivor Tree back to health and planting it on the 9/11 Memorial Plaza.

“[The] Survivor Tree was a survivor of the impact of the attacks and the debris field that fell upon it. It was part of the debris field that was smoldering, on fire, and much like everything else on the Plaza, was unrecognizable. So about a month after the recovery efforts started, in October—and it’s odd because it’s Halloween, October 31st—Becky Clough, who’s one of our DDC, Department of Design and Construction—she was a project manager, I think she’s Assistant Commissioner now, but at the time she was a project manager—was during the morning shift excavating that area by the entrance to the Plaza, which was the northeast corner. And she came upon this massive debris field, but sticking out of it was maybe a four-foot piece of a branch. But this was different, this was actually in the middle of this debris field, and it sprouted out leaves. So, that indicates that something is alive, something still has roots connected to it, and the tree still wants to live. It’s making a last-ditch effort to survive.

Becky saw this, and she had already known that we had already excavated and removed pretty much healthy trees, sidewalk trees. But this one, because it was in such bad shape and quite frankly they didn’t expect it to survive, they sent it up to the nursery in the Bronx, and they put it in the Arthur Ross Nursery, which is part of the Van Cortlandt Park System. And they put it up against a fence, sort of act as pseudo-support, and they just watched it and tried to nurse it back to health. And the first time I saw it, I couldn’t believe it. This tree has, without a doubt, its own visual marker for time. It actually talks about time in a real way. It talks about time by displaying the damage on its bark. So when you look at the tree, you can actually delineate the 9/11-and-before moments in its life, and you can delineate the 9/11-and-after moments in its life. Because the bark is dark and knurled on 9/11 before, and it’s very clean and smooth, its growth after 9/11.”

— TRANSCRIPT ENDS —

Collection 9/11 Memorial Museum, Gift of Ronaldo Vega