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*At Museum on 9/11, Talking Through an Identity Crisis*

By PATRICIA COHEN

It seemed self-evident at the time: A museum devoted to documenting the events of Sept. 11, 2001, would have to include photographs of the hijackers who turned four passenger jets into missiles. Then two and a half years ago, plans to use the pictures were made public.

New York City’s fire chief protested that such a display would “honor” the terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center. A New York Post editorial called the idea “appalling.” Groups representing rescuers, survivors and victims’ families asked how anyone could even think of showing the faces of the men who killed their relatives, colleagues and friends.

The anger took some museum officials by surprise.

“You don’t create a museum about the Holocaust and not say that it was the Nazis who did it,” said Joseph Daniels, chief executive of the memorial and museum foundation.

Alice Greenwald, the director of the new museum, and her team must simultaneously honor the dead and the survivors; preserve an archaeological site and its artifacts; and try to offer a comprehensible explanation of a once inconceivable occurrence. They must speak to vastly different audiences that include witnesses at the scene and around the globe, as well as children born long after the wreckage had been cleared. And many of those listening have long-simmering, deeply felt opinions about how the museum should take shape.

“Whose truth is going to be in that museum?” asked Sally Regenhard, whose son, Christian, a firefighter, died in the north tower.

 “Museums are about understanding, about making meaning of the past,” said James Gardner, who oversees the nation’s legislative archives, presidential libraries and museums. “A memorial fulfills a different need; it’s about remembering and evoking feelings in the viewer, and that function is antithetical to what museums do.”

Reconciling the clashing obligations to recount the history with pinpoint accuracy, to memorialize heroism and to promote healing inevitably required compromise.

**Sifting Through Pain**

Helping Ms. Greenwald was a kitchen cabinet of nine advisers, including Kate D. Levin, the city’s cultural commissioner; Jane Rosenthal, a founder of the Tribeca Film Festival; and a handful of scholars like James E. Young, Edward T. Linenthal, and the Civil War historian David Blight. They met two or three times a year and served as both sounding board and touchstone.

Mr. Blight, who at one point considered writing a book about the museum’s creation, said the overriding question for him was what message visitors would take away: “Are they going to leave with any sense of why this happened and its consequences? Or will they be moved solely by the sheer power of the catastrophe? If it’s only the latter, then the museum is a failure.”

**Difficult Decisions**

The museum has more than 4,000 artifacts, from a wedding band to a 15-ton composite of several tower floors that collapsed into a stack, like pancakes, and then fused together. There are photographs of men and women jumping out of windows, burned and mutilated bodies, scattered and blood-soaked limbs, images so awful they tested the bounds of taste and appropriateness.

There are thousands of harrowing first-person recollections, and photographs and videos from survivors and witnesses, many of them raw. Many victims’ final phone calls were preserved. Flight 93’s cockpit recorder captured the hijackers’ last words and a flight attendant’s begging for her life.

Which of it should be on display?

“We have to transmit the truth without being absolutely crushed by it,” Mr. Daniels, the chief executive, said. “We don’t want to retraumatize people.”

Grady P. Bray, a disaster psychologist who consulted with the Fire Department after Sept. 11, explained that hearing a recording could be more disturbing than seeing an image because it requires more imagination. “The mind is left to create the illusion of what was taking place,” Mr. Bray said. “We personalize things that we don’t see so well.”

With those concerns in mind, curators reviewed hundreds of recordings. The family of Betty Ong, the flight attendant on American Airlines Flight 11, which hit the north tower, for example, gave the museum a tape of her calmly informing ground control of the terror transpiring around her.

“It’s the most remarkable demonstration of professionalism under duress that I think anyone will ever hear, and they wanted us to include it because they felt it said so much about who she was,” Ms. Greenwald said.

The family of Mary Fetchet, a member of the foundation’s advisory board, donated the recording of her 24-year-old son Brad’s last phone call from the south tower, telling her not to worry.

A third recording was of a 911 operator tenderly trying to comfort a woman during her terrifying final moments.

As she listened, Ms. Greenwald kept thinking of a comment made by the museum consultant Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. “I’ll never forget it because it just ripped me apart when she said it, that we need to look at this kind of material as another form of human remains,” Ms. Greenwald said. “We need to use it judiciously.”

In the end, they decided to make Brad Fetchet’s and Betty Ong’s voices available, and to archive the other. “This was not meant to be a public moment,” Ms. Greenwald said of the 911 call. “We have to be careful not to be exploitative, to be sensitive to what’s appropriate in the setting of a public museum.”

Ms. Greenwald explained that there were other ways to convey horror, as when it is reflected in the faces of witnesses. “The historical reality is that there were body parts littering Lower Manhattan,” she said. “We do not feel the need to display that.”

 “I didn’t think it was respectful to show people jumping out of windows,” he said, adding that the Fire Department’s memorial book excluded such pictures. “I thought it was too graphic.”

After repeated discussions, Ms. Greenwald and Mr. Daniels decided to use photographs, but not video, and only if the person jumping could not be identified.

Still, the material can be devastating.