**‘You and Me Both’ Podcast**
**9/11: Looking Back, and Looking Forward**
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**Transcript**

**OPENING:** You and Me Both is a production of iHeartRadio.

**HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON:** Hi, I'm Hillary Clinton, and this is a special episode of *You and Me Both*. September 11th has come to be about a lot of things over the years: counterterrorism, war, economic and physical recovery, and of course, remembering. But for me, the anniversary is always first and foremost about the victims, survivors, first responders and their families. It's about the people who lived through this devastating tragedy, the pain, loss, health challenges and emotional trauma they've experienced, but also the remarkable strength and resilience they've displayed. As a senator for New York on that day and in the aftermath, I joined in witnessing the devastation at the World Trade Center in New York, at the Pentagon in our nation's capital, and at Shanksville, Pennsylvania. And I was deeply involved in the response and recovery efforts that followed.

Today, I want again to focus on those impacted directly by September 11th, to listen to their stories 20 years later and to talk with them about how they've rebuilt their own lives. So I'm speaking with Regina Wilson, a twenty-two year veteran with the Fire Department of the City of New York. She's one of the few Black female firefighters among the ranks, and was on the scene that day and at Ground Zero in the aftermath alongside her fellow first responders. I'll also be talking with Jay Winuk, who lost his brother Glenn in the World Trade Center and then went on to create the 9/11 Day of Service in Glenn's memory.

But first, I am delighted to be reconnecting with Debbie St. John. Debbie is one of the most heroic women I know. On her way to work that beautiful September Tuesday morning, Debbie was struck by falling debris from the second airplane when it hit the World Trade Center. Her legs were crushed. She lost consciousness and she was admitted to New York University Downtown Hospital as Jane Doe #1. Nobody even knew who she was. I visited with Debbie in the hospital days after 9/11, and then we kept in touch over the years as her recovery from countless successive surgeries and rigorous physical therapy turned into a years-long battle with opioid dependency. Through it all, Debbie remains one of the most

determined and optimistic people I've ever met, and I was so happy that she could join me for this episode.

I cannot tell you how happy I am to talk with you. I have to start by asking, how are you feeling as the 20th anniversary of September 11th approaches? I think about you so often, and I would bet this is a particularly challenging time for you.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** You know, it's interesting because as much as I'm so related to 9/11, I'm not really emotionally attached to it, because the only bit of 9/11 that's really real in a sense to me is the visual of the second plane hitting the building that I saw and then thinking to run. That's my largest memory of all 9/11, including the hospital. So, I didn't think the 20th anniversary mattered, but I'm finding I'm a bit more attached and it's affected me emotionally more than I thought, probably because I'm talking about it more than I've ever talked about.

**HRC:** I bet that's right. You have shared with me and others, I know, what happened to you on September 11th. You were on your way to work at the World Financial Center when that second plane hit.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Yes.

**HRC:** And then you were hit by falling debris that left you severely injured. I wanted to ask you, you know, to just reflect about what you do remember and about your recovery from that day.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Well, for me, most of my story is from what people told me. I'd just turned 30 years old on June 1st. I truly believed, without a shadow of a doubt, it was going to be the best year of my life. I had worked my butt off to be professionally where I wanted to be, educationally where I wanted to be, and the last probably five years before 9/11, really worked on myself emotionally. You know, to be the happiest and most hopeful, positive person I could be. And I woke up that morning and I woke up Greg, my fiance, and I showed him I was wearing the shirt that he bought me for my birthday. And I went to the subway, the 1 and the 9, to go to World Trade. The plane must have hit while we were probably still in the subway car, because by the time we got up to the stairs, the doors opened and there were the big guys with big--I remember the shirts, I think they were navy with yellow writing with WTC on them--but they said, we're going to take you to

safety. We walk out, and then I remember looking up, seeing the second, well I didn't know it was the second, but seeing a plane hit the World Trade Center. Someone yelled, “run for cover.” I saw a construction awning, which is probably not the best thing to run for cover under, but it was the only thing I could find. And my last thought was: I have the worst shoes on for running. I thought it was like my fault for wearing those shoes. And Greg has said to me, if you had run a second slower or a second faster, you might not be alive. That's all I remember.

**HRC:** And Greg was then your fiance, now your husband?

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** My husband, yes.

**HRC:** And the rescuers literally picked you up off the sidewalk, and I guess, rushed you, carried you to the hospital as far as you remember, is that right?

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** So there's four men who helped save me, Paul, Stefan, Orlando, and Frank. Orlando and Frank were the EMTs. Stefan saw the first plane hit. He was, I think, a medic, or helped out in that capacity. So he decided to go head down to the World Trade Center and see if he could help. So he said he noticed me as soon as I hit the street. He saw when the second plane hit, and he saw me look scared, he saw me run, and we were running together, I believe he said I was on the left side of him and he kept track of me, someone he never met before or knew anything about. And, um, he saw a huge, it looked like a propeller. I'm assuming this was part of the landing gear coming towards us and he thought we were going to die. And the next thing he knows I'm thrown back, the propeller goes two hundred feet into like a cement wall and he's feet away from me.

I never thought about what it must have been like after the plane hit. You know, it's like a war zone, it's like the apocalypse happening, burning pieces. I never thought of any of that, I never really knew that. He saw all this. And he chose... to go run into death pretty much for a stranger. It's nice to know that there's kindness in really bad times and that, you know, people really try to be there for each other even though it doesn't really look like it right now.

**HRC:** I mean, that is one of the lasting lessons for me is, at that time, people did come together. They did help each other. They tried to do whatever they could in

the moment of such crisis and tragedy. Your journey is so incredible because you were severely injured.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** My butt was literally on the road next to me.

**HRC:** Sliced off! I mean, when I visited you in the hospital, the doctors--and this was just a day or two after 9/11--were just amazed that you were still going, given the devastation of the injuries that you suffered. And I remember going to see you, I heard that, you know, there were people who'd been injured, and I remember walking into your hospital room, Debbie, and you had these beautiful braids. You had, your hair was in braids.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** The nurse ran up 10 minutes before you got there to put those braids in, "Hillary's in the building!"

**HRC:** I'll tell you, you looked angelic, even though you were devastatingly injured. You were so brave, Debbie, I remember when I first saw your determination in action when you told me you were going to dance at your wedding.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Yep.

**HRC:** This, this young woman lying in this hospital bed, who many, many people thought would never walk again, let alone dance again.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Or survive.

**HRC:** Or survive, let's be honest, telling me “I am going to dance at my wedding.” And you know what-

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** I did.

**HRC:** And I can attest to that because I came to your wedding!

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Yes, you did.

**HRC:** I watched you walk down the aisle-

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** By myself. (laughs)

**HRC: -**By yourself! And have that first dance. That determination, your absolute tenacity in the face of the worst kind of trauma just was so inspiring. Can you talk about that moment and what made it such a milestone?

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Well, first of all, you have to think about what I'd been going through. I was 18 months in the hospital, and then the next three years, every three months, I had a surgery.

**HRC:** Yeah.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** So the year of the wedding, I took the year off to get healthy. And it was like, kind of being an athlete for it. I trained for it. I was working out, I was doing physical therapy. I was doing everything I could, thank God at that point, I wasn't sick on the opioids, although I was sick. I did throw up for two hours in the middle of my wedding and no one knew.

**HRC:** I did not know that. I did not know that, no.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** But I feel like in many ways I was born this way and I had a very difficult childhood. I had to be a warrior to get through my childhood. I also believe my gift to the world is that I model healing.

**HRC:** Yes, you do. I'm wondering whether, as you think about the last 20 years, is there some lesson that you would like other people to take from not just 9/11 but from what you've gone through?

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Oh, well. You know, since I've figured out about opioids and less opioids mean less pain and everyone in the country talks about opioid addiction, but no one talks about opioid dependency, which is millions of people-

**HRC:** That's true.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN: -**And that's me. I'm the face of opioid dependency.

**HRC:** Well, you were in agony and you were in pain for so many years.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** And then I also had something called opioid induced hyperalgesia, which is very common and every pain management doctor knows about it but they don't talk about it, and that's anyone who's on opioids for an

extended period of time, and that could be a week, the opioids mess your nervous system and your brain up so much that your body goes on the defense and it causes all the pain. I was living on one hundred twenty milligrams of methadone a day. My level of pain from 1 to 10 was an 8 to 11. Seriously.

**HRC:** Wow.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** And I'm completely off of methadone. I'd say I'm a 4 on 1 to 10. I don't really have chronic pain.

**HRC:** When you think about your own journey, and all of the challenges, what do you want people to know about recovering from trauma? And, in the case of so many recovering from opioid dependence, what words of hope, encouragement that helped you that you can share?

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Well, I'll be honest, over the years when anyone we know has gone through a major tragedy, I usually get a phone call. And, um, the last one, which was a long time ago, was my husband's best friend's wife, [who] lost the baby at eight and a half months.

**HRC:** Oh, God.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** And she called me up and she said, ‘What do I do when I feel like my world is ending and I'm in all this pain? How do I go on?’ And I've been asked that a lot. And it's... when life is so bad and all you're doing is suffering, you have to find the moments to hold on to, and you have to give yourself goals. I mean, for me, a lot of times my only goal is to get out of bed.

**HRC:** Mm hmm.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** You have to make really, really small goals. But you must have goals. And once you achieve your goal, you must celebrate your successes.

**HRC:** So what is next for you? I mean, now you're focused on your recovery from opioid dependence. What else is motivating you?

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** My twin girls turned 10 this past April. And it was the first time we went on a family vacation because I was well enough. I was at Universal

Studios, me, who can't even do three hours of work sometimes, from 10:30 in the morning till 6 p.m. at night! It was so much fun. You forget, like, I was always a big ride fan before, but like, I got no butt and like you think, can I do these things? And truly just feeling that elation and excitement and fear and all that that comes with the ride, it made me remember the joy of things like that. So for me, like the girls were already talking about it, what our next trip is. And I think, believe it or not, I think it's going to be to Washington, D.C. in the spring.

**HRC:** Excellent!

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** I've never been to the White House. I think it'd be really cool for them to see that.

**HRC:** I would love for *you* to see that.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Me too. And, you know, the other thing that I really want to do is: our country is in, you want to talk a *pan*demic. We are in an opioid epidemic, and the world as well. But no one talks about the millions of us behind closed doors suffering with our families, watching us on opioid dependency. So for me, the biggest thing that I want to do, in any way possible, is to save people from 20 years of opioid dependency that I had to live through. Because 9/11 might have changed my life drastically in a moment. But opioids is what stopped it for 20 years. And I really feel like if the message gets out, that people really understand that the opioids is what's causing your pain and making you feel worse, I really feel that that can change the trajectory of this epidemic and of addiction and dependency.

**HRC:** Your courage is inspiring and will get people to pay attention, Debbie.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** I hope so.

**HRC:** And I can't wait to see what the next 10 and 20 years means to you and your family. God bless you.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** I'm excited.

**HRC:** Take care.

**DEBBIE ST. JOHN:** Thank you so much.

**HRC:** After 20 years spent rebuilding her life, Debbie is now starting to publicly share her story. She's currently writing a book about surviving 9/11, and then overcoming opioid dependency. Knowing Debbie, I know it's going to be a terrific read.

Regina Wilson was only a few years into her career as a New York City firefighter when the attacks of September 11th took place. She was also then and now one of the very few women, let alone women of color, in the department. But that morning, she was just starting the second of two back-to-back shifts at her station in Brooklyn when the news broke and the firehouse alarm sounded. And so she, like so many other first responders, ran toward danger. She got on the truck. She made her way to lower Manhattan with her fellow firefighters. She assisted in the immediate rescue efforts that day and then the arduous search and recovery mission in the months that followed. I was so honored that Regina shared her story with me, and I am so pleased to share that story with you. Welcome to the show, Regina.

**REGINA WILSON:** Thank you.

**HRC:** I am thrilled to see you. We won't be able to convey to everyone listening to this podcast everything special about you, particularly your extraordinary singing voice (Regina laughs), which I've had the privilege of hearing several times, but it's great to be with you. And I just want to start by checking in--how are you doing? How did you get through the pandemic? How are you facing all of the weather and related challenges that we now confront?

**REGINA WILSON:** Well, first, I want to start off by saying it's such an honor to be on your podcast. I mean, I've loved you since, hopefully you remember, the time that we got stuck in California, it was a group of women and you were able to get us back home. The airline we flew on went out of business and I was like, how does that happen! (Hillary laughs) And so you came and saved the day and got us home, and just to see how much compassion and care you have for all of us and wanted to make sure we got home safely from then, I've I've always been a champion of yours and I will continue to be. But on this side, it's been a difficult

two years, especially adjusting to so much death going on in the city and how we had to shift a lot of gears and be creative with how we were going to help the citizens of New York. And then just the looming thought of this disease that may ravage us and our family, it was a very difficult time. I'm grateful to God that I definitely made it through and my family did. But it's just a hard toll to bear to see that your neighbors and you know, the person that you always greeted at the store or, you know, at the car wash or the gas station is no longer there. And to see how just hard it hurt this city. But I'm doing well right now, it's just, it's just a really busy time. And this week is tolling enough, but it's a really hard time.

**HRC:** I totally understand that because you have been on the front lines for more than 20 years now, so much that has happened in the city. And before we jump right into your experiences on 9/11, I wanted to ask you a little bit about your history and your life before that day. What made you decide to become a firefighter? Had you ever known any firefighters or have any role models?

**REGINA WILSON:** Oh, absolutely not. It was nowhere in my radar, nothing I've ever thought about doing. When I went to school, I wanted to come out and be in corporate America, right, that's when you come out of college, most of the times, you know, you want to get into different fields, but it's never, think about blue collar, how to really get in touch with the neighborhood. You want to try and move *outside* of it. So, I actually was at an expo at Jacob Javits Center because I went there to look for clothes and the latest styles and what was going on in Black culture. So, when I was stopped by these firefighters, you know, I didn't really pay them any mind, I'm like, I'm like here to get bags, like (Regina and Hillary laugh).

So when they came up to me, I mean, their elevator speech was great, right? In the beginning it wasn't, and I was walking as they were talking to me because they were like, ‘oh, you could make a million dollars in 20 years,’ I'm like, I want to make a million dollars now. I don't want to wait 20 years, you know. ‘Oh, this is a great pension.’ I'm like, I'm in my 20s, I'm not really thinking about pension, even though people in your 20s, you *should* think about pensions! In your 20s! (Hillary laughs) And, so, it wasn't really appealing to me, and and the money that they were making, I was making more money working at a real estate company. But what piqued my interest was that, well, you know, it's not a lot of women and it's not a lot of African Americans on the job, so-to-speak, so this would be a great

opportunity for you to be a part of it. That's what kind of left me intrigued because I was like, everybody loves firefighters, right? Everybody thinks that's the greatest profession in the world, but why is it that women aren't there? And why is it that Blacks aren't there? So that's what made me like, fill out the papers, say, OK, well, let me see what this is about. Then I was groomed by the United Women Firefighters Association and the Vulcan Society. And if it was not for them mentoring me and, I mean because I've never had a job where people will call your house to make sure that you took the tests, that you studied, they trained you physically, they kept telling you how much they wanted you. They were like, what are you doing? Come to the firehouse, come see what it's like. So they were trying to bring me into this family. And it was just an amazing thing for me to experience.

**HRC:** And the Vulcan Society is a very esteemed organization for Black and brown firefighters, right?

**REGINA WILSON:** Yes. The society is 82 years old and it was started by 41 firefighters. But the main person who tried to get everybody organized was Chief Wesley Williams. When he came on the job, they had Black beds where only the Black firefighters could sleep in this bed and it was mainly near the bathrooms. They had Black forks, knives, plates and spoons. And it was such a separation that he felt that this was unjust for all other Blacks coming on the job so him and 41 other firefighters later on in the years formulated the Vulcan Society, which is the reason why I'm here today.

**HRC:** I know that representation has continued to slowly increase, but still, I think it's fair to say, Regina, that women firefighters are still small in number. So what was it like for you joining the department as a woman of color?

**REGINA WILSON:** So coming into the academy I was the only woman there. It was over 300 candidates coming on and it was seven Black people. So to come from a culture of being surrounded by like-minded people that look like you and then to come to a culture where I can't even find estrogen in the room like it was, (they both laugh) it was difficult! I remember crying a lot. I remember going into my bathroom and putting prayer scriptures on the on a glass that I could be able to see every day how God would be inspiring me to keep going forward. But I'm glad

that I was brought through that journey because I was the first African American woman hired in 15 years since the Brenda Berkman days.

**HRC:** Oh yes.

**REGINA WILSON:** My idol. So since the lawsuit, I was the first Black woman hired for 15 years. So the weight of that was already on my shoulders, but I knew that it needed to be done.

**HRC:** And you reference Brenda Berkman, whom I also know, who had the guts to sue the fire department-

**REGINA WILSON:** Yes.

**HRC: -**Because of the way women and people of color were discriminated against. You know, you did stick it out. And I think about all that you and your fellow firefighters and so many others gave and displayed on September 11th, 2001. Can you talk me through what that day was like for you? And how did you even learn something had happened of such a terrible magnitude?

**REGINA WILSON:** I actually was working the night before and I got hired for the day tour. So I went into the house watch, and that's the area where you come and like, check in, but I actually got assigned to work in the truck, so I was working across the floor in Ladder 105. So when I was checking the sheet, one of my coworkers, John Cipora, he saw me and was like 'Hey Regina, I see that you're working in a truck today. Do you mind if I work in the truck?' And I was like, 'no, like I'm working overtime. Like, I'm getting extra money. I don't care where I work!' But I knew that he had his paper in for the truck. And so I was like, 'no, go ahead.' You know, not a problem. You know, I know you want to transfer over to go to the truck, so get some truck experience. I don't mind. So then as I was starting to check the rig, I was hearing the guys in the kitchen yelling, like, 'oh, my God', and I was like, what are they watching? Like, this is crazy. And I thought it was like a television show. But then I knew that it wasn't because I started to hear the news broadcaster speaking. And then I saw, like, the signature line that a plane crashed into the building. And so, we were just trying to wrap our minds around

this tragedy, and then you were kind of like talking to each other and then the tone alarms go off and they call for the truck to respond to the Trade Center. So we tried to help them, you know, get extra tools to put on the truck and then 105 left. So we just waited. We just watched the TV and was seeing everything that was going on. And then I think it was probably about an hour, we got a call for a suspicious package after that. And as we were going to the suspicious package run, they took us off that call and then we went into the Battery Tunnel and started to proceed to go into the chaos, which was 9/11.

**HRC:** So as you're on the truck, on the rig heading toward the World Trade Center, what did you see? What was your impression initially as you responded?

**REGINA WILSON:** As we were going through the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, this large gush of wind came and it shook the engine. It shook the engines so violently we had to stop. I knew something was wrong because the engine holds 500 gallons of water.

**HRC:** Wow.

**REGINA WILSON:** How are you shaking 500 gallons of water? But as we went forward, we saw this smoke, this white smoke that look like a blizzard. But then all of these people started walking towards us that like look like zombies and they had all this white dust on them. And that was because the building fell. They were coming and walking towards our way and I remember there was a woman that was asthmatic and I had to try and take water and put it all over face but there was nothing I could do for her. So we, we pulled the rig up down Water Street and then we started to walk towards the buildings, but as we were walking towards the buildings, I remember on my radio hearing, ‘we're under attack, we're under attack!’ and then I heard like this swooping sound. My boss said, 'run, run, run!' So we ran back towards the engine. And when I turned around to look at what was happening, there was this big black smoke that was following us.

**HRC:** Wow.

**REGINA WILSON:** From that point, I put on my mask real quick and then I remember the smoke just covered all of us. And I was just sitting there thinking like, ‘oh, my God, what is going to happen? What's going to happen to me?’ I

didn't know what was going on. And then I saw that the smoke was starting to pass. And so I said, ‘OK, I made it out of that.’ And so our officer grabbed us up again and we started to proceed forward with the with the vehicle. But we couldn't move anymore because a lot of the vehicles were abandoned. As we were walking, we just seen all of these cars on fire. We saw buildings on fire. The hydrants weren't working. So we had to collect hose from all of the abandoned engines and draft the water from the river.

**HRC:** Wow.

**REGINA WILSON:** It was a crazy day to think out of the box and figure out how to deal with the situation

**HRC:** And, what happened to that first truck and with the firefighter who said, ‘hey, will you switch with me so I can get on that truck?’

**REGINA WILSON:** Yeah, everyone in Ladder 105 died that day and John's body was never found. They have a picture of 105 going across the Brooklyn Bridge as the Trade Center was on fire. So, knowing and seeing the sacrifices of people going to that building, not knowing how or what they were getting themselves into, they still went, you know, and watching some of these specials and you're seeing the firefighters walk in the lobby of the building knowing what fate they were going to meet. It's just devastating. I remember making a phone call when I got on the scene. I called my nephew's grandmother because her number was the only one I can remember to tell them to let my family know that I'm OK right now. And if anything happened to me, just tell them I died loving what I'm doing and for them not to worry about me. And then I remember when I hung up the phone, I was resolved, and like a peace and a calmness came over me. And then after that point, I just got to work. And I just needed to work until I couldn't work anymore.

**HRC:** And that's what you did.

**REGINA WILSON:** Absolutely.

**HRC:** Do you remember when you finally left the scene?

**REGINA WILSON:** Yes, I left and we got back about eleven thirty, midnight, to the firehouse. And this is why I love... people. And why I love doing my job, because when we got back to the firehouse, all of the neighbors were in the firehouse, they brought us food, they gave us hugs, change of clothes if we needed it. You know, they were giving me bobby pins and brushing my hair and they just wanted to take care of us, you know. And to know that people love you as much as you love them, like, it made all the difference in the world to me and it made me really want to keep going back and keep serving the public. And like, I get emotional just thinking about it, because when people don't feel loved, I don't understand it, when you have EMTs and police officers and firefighters who don't know you, right, and they want to risk their life to save you. And it's weird because some of these people hold these weird views of religion and people's races and color and it's crazy on the fire side that they would have such disagreements about women and people of color, but they would go in and sacrifice their lives to save one. So I just wish, like, the craziness of the thought of hate would just leave people's minds and just everybody just love each other because it is so much more fulfilling to love people than to hate them.

**HRC:** It is, and it's empowering, and it's energizing, and it makes for a better life.

**REGINA WILSON:** Absolutely.

**HRC:** You know, I will never forget going to Ground Zero the day after and the air was so thick, and acrid, and you literally could see everything from the collapsed buildings-

**REGINA WILSON:** Yes.

**HRC:** -filling the air and by extension, filling your lungs. And, you know, I I was told to wear a face mask, and it was immediately clear to me that despite what was being claimed, the air was not safe to breathe. And part of my work then going forward for years as a senator was to try to focus on the health impact for survivors and first responders, workers, and residents. Did you suffer any health complications following your work at Ground Zero?

**REGINA WILSON:** The only thing that I've experienced is like nasal drip, you know, but what I'm concerned about is even though it's the 20th anniversary, like, I

still don't know what could possibly go on with my body. And the fact that there's so few studies on women in the fire service and the effect that cancers or fires have to our bodies, you know, figuring out what happens with us giving birth or our uteruses or anything like that, like they're so afraid to touch that. That is definitely a big concern of mine, especially being in a ceremonial unit and having to attend the deaths of people with World Trade Center related illnesses, and how we're probably going to meet and surpass the number of firefighters that died, on the day of September 11th, with the number of people that died from World Trade Center related illnesses.

**HRC:** You said earlier that this is a week of lots of reminders because we are approaching the 20th anniversary of 9/11. Does this year's anniversary feel different compared to the previous years that we've all gone through?

**REGINA WILSON:** Yeah, it definitely does, because there's a lot more going on and happening, ceremonies across the city. But I just think it's good and bad, right? It's good because, you know, I'm starting to see some of the families coming out, some of the firefighter's sons are now firefighters on the job. And getting together every year is always a blessing for me to be able to see the people that I used to work with that may no longer be on the job or their families or the kids of the members. That is always something that I hold dear, but it's always a time that brings you back and sobers you up. And it, to me, it's just a gloomy day. But as a city, we gather together and deal with it. That's why I'm so proud of my city.

**HRC:** Right. You know, we're remembering a very terrible time 20 years ago. But, the best way to be a living rebuke to what happened on 9/11 is to serve others, to love others, to reach out and lift up others. And that's what you've done. You've done that over those 22 years. You will continue to do that. Thank you so very much for everything you are doing and will continue to do. I'm very grateful.

**REGINA WILSON:** Well, thank you, too, it's been an honor and a blessing to talk to you. And I'm so excited to be able to be here and have this conversation. It's a dream for me. So I thank you so much.

**HRC:** Regina tells me that along with all the other things on her plate, she is thinking of running for office sometime in the future.

I mentioned at the beginning of my conversation with Regina that she has a beautiful singing voice, but don't take my word for it. Here she is, three years ago, on the anniversary of 9/11, performing “God Bless America” at a Mets game.

**REGINA WILSON:** (Singing “God Bless America”) From the prairies to the oceans, white with foam, God bless America, my home sweet home, God bless America, my home sweet home.

**HRC:** My final guest today is Jay Winuk. Jay was also my guest at the State of the Union address in 2008 when I was still the senator from New York. Jay lost his brother Glenn on 9/11. And when Jay and some friends came up with the idea of a 9/11 Day of Service, I supported their effort, both as a senator but, really, as a fellow American. Jay is a public relations professional, but he's dedicated the past 20 years to trying to make something good and positive come out of all the pain and loss and grief that his family and so many other families experienced after 9/11.

You know, Jay, it's been a great gift for me to be able to follow and support the work that you've done over the last two decades. You took the tragedy of the loss of your brother and turned it into an opportunity for people to give back and to be of service. Could you, first of all, talk a little bit about your brother and describe his heroic efforts on that day?

**JAY WINUK:** Yes, thank you. As you well know, Glenn was a partner at the law firm Holland & Knight. Their offices were located at the 195 Broadway building, which was situated just a couple of blocks from the Trade Center. Glenn, for 20 years, was a volunteer firefighter in our hometown of Long Island, and he had for a time served as the fire commissioner in that fire district. He was specially certified in building collapse rescue training. That morning, Glenn was in his apartment when the first plane hit. He raced downtown. He helped evacuate the Holland & Knight law offices and then borrowed a first responder medic bag from responders on the scene in his building. And he raced into the South Tower on foot to save lives and perished when the South Tower collapsed. His partial remains were recovered March 20th, 2002, surgical gloves on his hands, stethoscope on his person, medic bag by his side, in likely what had been the lobby area of the South Tower. That's as best we know about his actions that morning.

**HRC:** I know what a tremendous loss that was to you and your family, and I also know many family members were so devastated by their loss and their grief that it took a long time for them to gain their footing again at all. But it wasn't too long after you found Glenn, and you began to think about how do you make something good, something positive, out of this terrible catastrophe. How did that thinking evolve for you, Jay?

**JAY WINUK:** Well, a good friend and colleague named David Payne, who lived three thousand miles away in California but was a New Yorker originally, called me soon after the attacks. Here he was this New York in California witnessing what was happening in New York, but really witnessing what was happening all over the country: people stepping forward with acts of kindness to do whatever they could in the aftermath of the attacks. And David called me and he said, 'look, you're the only 9/11 family member I know. I feel terrible about your brother but I have this idea about trying to create a ritual in this country where each 9/11 people do good deeds.' And I thought, you know, that really makes sense to me. Glenn was somebody who lived his life in service and died in service. When David first called me, my family was still reeling, as so many families, as you well know, were. I said to David, 'let me think about your idea. I have a lot on my plate right now, I'll get back with you.' And I did, some weeks later, and I said, 'you know, I'm ready. Let's do this. Let's see what we can get going here.' We had no staff. We had no budget. We had no plan. But, you know, we were a couple of public relations professionals, we knew how to get the word out. And it was important to both of us to try and make something good happen from this day. We felt like if in the future people only learned about the attacks and they did not have a good understanding about the way the world came together, focusing on our common humanity, embracing our differences, then we will have lost that opportunity.

And, so, one of the first things we did was we arranged to meet with the leaders of all the different 9/11 organizations and try to get a sense from them. Did they feel like this was a good idea to create a day of service in honor of those who perished or who were injured? And universally, everybody we spoke with within the 9/11 community was receptive to it and they thought, yes, as difficult as things are right now, this is a good path forward for the future as it relates to 9/11, and so we were off and running. And here we are 20 years later still at it. And so this initiative,

with the help of so many people, including yourself, has grown into the nation's largest annual day of charitable engagement. Between 20 and 30 million people a year mark the day by doing good deeds for others.

**HRC:** And that is such a great tribute to your leadership and really to the mission. Have you found that by talking about Glenn and the loss that represented to you and your family, and linking that to service, that you're able to help people who also have suffered loss and are looking for some kind of positive path forward?

**JAY WINUK:** Yes. You know, on one hand I have a front row seat because of the work I do in this initiative to see the most amazing outpouring of generosity by people who participate. On the other hand, I also hear from a lot of people and meet with a lot of people and speak with a lot of people who have also suffered loss. And they express great appreciation that something like this observance exists. We have a board member who was a 9/11 family member who lost her husband, and she says this observance now gives her a safe and positive place to be on 9/11. But it's not just about people who are affected by 9/11. You know, as we all know, people suffer great tragedy in their life. But if if this observance also gives them hope than we have accomplished something, and I know that we have because I hear from them all the time.

**HRC:** As we approach the 20th anniversary, I don't know about you, but it seems a little surreal. It felt like it happened yesterday, but I meet young adults all the time who weren't born then, don't fully grasp the impact that it had on those of us who experienced it. So, what are your specific plans for this year and how do you intend to try to reach out, educate and involve young people as well?

**JAY WINUK:** Well, we have a number of plans in place, as you might imagine, I mean, the 20th is a major milestone. We are again staging large scale meal packs in cities all over the country, where thousands and thousands of volunteers come together and they pack nonperishable dry good meals that are then donated through Feeding America food banks, in those cities. We're partnering with World Central Kitchen, again, as we did last year-

**HRC:** Oh, I love them.

**JAY WINUK: -**Raising the money to purchase meals from independently owned restaurants and cities around the country, restaurants that have really been hit hard by the pandemic. So it helps them and then those ready-to-go meals are donated to health care workers and first responders as a way to say thank you for doing what you do to be on the front line to keep us safe. We have an education program in the schools and we provide free lesson plans, downloadable lesson plans on our website for teachers to use so they can engage students, 911day.org, and there they will find opportunities to volunteer in so many different ways. We're launching a national PSA campaign that is very unusual in that we've brought together more than 20 people from a cross-section of the 9/11 community to together deliver a message that we are stronger together than we are divided.

**HRC:** Yes.

**JAY WINUK:** And as you know well, Secretary Clinton, 9/11 didn't affect just Republicans, just Democrats, just people in the East Coast. It affected everybody.

**HRC:** That's right.

**JAY WINUK:** We were all Americans. And we were a global community, too. You know, of course, people from more than 90 countries perished on 9/11 and the world responded together. So when we think about the things that typically divide us, you know, all of that pales in comparison to what happens when we come together to tackle challenges. And, as you referenced earlier, we need that so much.

**HRC:** Jay! I feel like saying amen. Thank you for that. No, seriously, it *is* the message. We *are* stronger together. We *have to* start taking care of each other. We *do* need to learn more empathy, practice more kindness and service. And some people I know might hear us talking and go, Oh, wow. You know, so pollyannish. They have no idea how life changing it is to actually serve somebody else. I mean, that's the great lesson. You can lift yourself out of grief and loss and even anger and confusion by going out and helping somebody else. That's the beauty. That's the real message of everything you've been doing for 20 years.

**JAY WINUK:** You articulated it very well.

**HRC:** I can't thank you enough, Jay. You know, losing your brother Glenn as he ran toward helping people and then was lost in the collapse of the South Tower was such a devastating experience for your entire family. And the way that you have summoned the best of us, called us to service, called us to kindness, is one of the lasting legacies of 9/11. And I am incredibly grateful for your leadership and your example. Thank you, my friend.

**JAY WINUK:** Well, I thank you.

**HRC:** As Jay mentioned, you can find out more about the September 11th National Day of Service and Remembrance and how you can get involved at 911day.org. As we mark this milestone 20th anniversary, I'll be thinking about Debbie, Regina, Jay and the countless other people I've met who were directly impacted by 9/11. I'll also be thinking about our country and the challenges we've overcome, as well as the ones that still lie ahead. And I'll be thinking about how this terrible tragedy inspired incredible acts of heroism and service, giving rise to a remarkable moment of national unity. Oh, I so hope that as we mark 20 years since 9/11, we will be reminded to carry some of that same spirit of unity with us as we move together into the future.

You and Me Both is brought to you by iHeartRadio. We're produced by Julie Subrin, Kathleen Russo and Rob Russo. No relation, but they're both terrific. And with help from Huma Abedin, Oscar Florez, Lindsay Hoffman, Bree Henshaw, Brianna Johnson, Nick Merrill and Lona Valmoro. Our engineer is Zach McNees and the original music is by Forrest Gray. Thank you for joining me for this special episode. I wish you and your loved ones all the best, and I can't wait to come back to our weekly schedule starting in 2022.