



Interview with Megan McDowell, LPC, MSW, Heartworks Foundation Founder

Interviewed by Peggy DeLong, PsyD

2016 marks the 15th anniversary of the attacks that occurred on our country on September 11, 2001. Often after tragedy, people are moved to make sense out of the suffering, and to do something meaningful. Megan McDowell of Bernardsville has done just that. Through Heartworks and its thoughtful, purposeful, and personal acts of kindness, she has turned tragedy and suffering from the terror attacks of September 11th into healing. Heartworks has three basic concepts: Give with grace, receive with an open heart, and be grateful. As the anniversary of September 11th approaches, I wanted to highlight resilience, strength, and community. Heartworks is the perfect example, and I am grateful for the opportunity to interview Megan McDowell. For more information about Heartworks, visit <http://www.njheartworks.org/>

Peggy: Tell me How Heartworks got started?

Megan: There came a time after September 11th when I noticed that people were starting to get back to “regular” life. I understood this idea to some degree, but there was a huge part of me that thought “Why are people so anxious to get back to the way we were living pre- attacks?” Meaning that post September 11th, people seemed bonded in a way we weren’t before. We were kinder to each other and more in tune with the things that really matter, and less preoccupied with status and the nonsense. Don’t get me wrong, I certainly understood wanting to have distance from the trauma and sorrow, but it felt like in the attempt to “feel better” we, as a nation were also distancing ourselves from the clarity and insight that the attacks brought into our cultural awareness. I, for one, wanted to keep the mindset of perspective, giving, and gratitude that we all seemed to be in touch with post September 11th. So I started Heartworks by inviting my playgroup and some friends to a meeting at my house in September of 2004. I wanted to start a kindness movement that replicated the gestures I had witnessed from living at my sister’s home for six weeks following the attacks. My sister’s husband John was killed while working in the South Tower for Sandler O’Neill, Inc. They had dated each other since sophomore year in high school and were married with four young children. John’s death was devastating to our close knit families and we truly believe that my sister and the rest of us survived that first year because of the outreach and love that was shown to us. Every day, each individual act of dinner being delivered or a play date scheduled or a gift left on my sister’s doorstep felt like God showing up in the darkness. I wanted to start a group that not only focused on awareness of keeping things in perspective, but also replicated the kindness shown to my sister’s family for other people who are experiencing grief and trauma.

September 11th was a very public loss, and I wanted to offer the same level of attention and grace to families living with more private struggles. Heartworks was also, and continues to be, a daily “thank you” to the world for loving my sister and the other 9/11 families 15 years ago.

Peggy: Tell me about John.

Megan: Oh I like that question...John was fun, hard working, and in love with my sister and their four children.

Peggy: Did you have any idea how huge Heartworks would become?

Megan: Not at all!! I really started it for selfish reasons...I didn't want to lose the loving mentality I had experienced following 9/11. I wanted to be able to say “thank you” everyday for the rest of my life for all that had been done for us, and I wanted to surround myself with people who were committed to keeping life in perspective and not getting swallowed back up in things that aren't important or real. It started out with 8 women, and then each monthly meeting started drawing more and more women in.... within the first year 40-50 women were showing up each month, and we currently average anywhere from 70-90 women every single monthly meeting. We have given away well over a million dollars in the past 11 years and done countless acts of kindness for families during their darkest hours. It's astonishing and humbling how so many people have embraced our concepts and support us financially and/or by taking part in helping us give.

Peggy: How is 9/11 related to Heartworks?

Megan: The question we always ask people who are interested in joining our group is “Do you remember the level of compassion, perspective, and love you felt in the weeks following that Tuesday morning?” If you are interested in maintaining those feelings, come to a meeting!! It is related to 9/11 because everything we do is based on the kindness that was shown to my sister's family during that first year. We commit to living as gratefully as we can and to use any extra moments in our lives to step outside our own selves and give. We practice receiving as a way to honor how gracious families were with receiving back then as well as honoring current families that allow us into their most vulnerable times. So basically Heartworks allows us to continue living how we were all living in the Fall of 2001- connected, vulnerable, and together in a sense of something bigger than ourselves.

Peggy: How is Heartworks related to resilience and strength?

Megan: Heartworks relates to resilience and strength by being an active, fluid stream of struggle, vulnerability, action, contemplation, and compassion. The meetings and participating in the acts of kindness seem to offer people strength and resilience to get through their most challenging times. Our meetings are filled with women who have perhaps not yet felt trauma, to women who have buried children and everything in between. The meetings and concepts seems to cultivate resilience and strength in ways I can't really explain but that completely change the course of how we experience life.

Peggy: How do you think HWs has helped people to heal after 9/11?

Megan: Heartworks offers people a way to give and extend that feeling of direct connection we all felt after the attacks. I have found that by receiving and giving we can walk more closely with God and nothing is more healing than this.

Peggy: How has HWs helped the recipients?

Megan: I mostly notice that Heartworks helps people to feel less alone. Suffering can come with such a sense of isolation and numbness, and sometimes, most times, all we can do is sit beside someone (preferably with a lasagna) and say “I see you and I witness your pain. I care about you and you are not alone.” On a more practical note, we seem to be able to take out some of the overwhelming feeling of the situation and make parts of daily life more manageable during crisis. Gestures like cleaning services, financial support, weekends away, and meal delivery seem small, but can be game changers for families.

Peggy: What do you think John would have to say about what you and all the women of Heartworks have done?

Megan: Hmmmmm.....John had a saying when he would be having a good time and it was, “It doesn’t get much better than this.” I think in terms of honoring his life and the thousands of lives lost that day, he would say, “It doesn’t get much better than what Heartworks is doing.” I also think he would say “thank you” for creating something that my sister can be a part of that brings her so much satisfaction and friendship.

Peggy: What are your hopes for HWs for the future?

Megan: To stay true to our mission and concepts, to broaden the exposure of our message, and to be collectively meditating more. We recently took over the second floor of our building to offer a permanent meditation space, as well as a room to have parties for kids experiencing illness or loss. This has been a huge gift, and we want to have as many parties there as needed, as well as promote more quiet and contemplation for Heartworkers so that we are all giving and receiving from a place of clarity rather than a place of ego.