



Healing after September 11

Patti Torchia Helped Heal Both Her Community and Her Family

Patti Torchia, M.A., was talking with receptionists outside her office at SIU School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, when a medical resident told her that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center.

"Like everyone else, I assumed it was a terrible accident," says Torchia, director of SIU's Department of Psychiatry Outpatient Clinic Services. "But as events continued, I was in shock, disbelieving it could happen here."

That day changed the world forever and affected every resident of the United States, no matter how near or far one was from the tragedy. "Even though we in central Illinois were thousands of miles away from the attacks in New York and Washington, having our safety and freedom shaken for the first time most of us can remember was still a stressful situation," explains Torchia.

As she recalls the national tragedy, the view of the Illinois State Capitol from her office window is a reminder of the strength of the community and the nation. Family members smile in photographs on the windowsill, a reflection of how impor-

tant family is to Patti Torchia.

In fact, the events of September 11 helped her connect with her family even more, especially her late mother.



"My mother's birthday was on Pearl Harbor day [December 7]. She was 8 years old at the time of the attack in 1941, and I never really thought about how that

would have affected her as an 8-year-old, hearing about that tragedy," she says. "It wasn't until I saw how the attack on September 11 affected my daughter, Linsey, who is 8, that I realized how Pearl Harbor must have affected my mother."

To help the Springfield community cope with the September 11 attacks, Torchia co-coordinated SIU faculty members to form a group, "Coping in Times of Tragedy," which organized two evening sessions last October to help the community cope with the national crisis.

"At that time, nobody in our area was providing support services," she says. The sessions were free and open to the public.

In open discussions, a panel of SIU

faculty addressed the idea of war and related fears, discussed how to talk to children about the crisis and how to manage trauma-related stress. "The participants said their anxious feelings felt foreign to them; they felt silly to have such strong emotions so far removed from the tragedy," she says. "We helped them see that the stress and anxiety they felt were normal."

Torchia and other faculty shared tips for handling strain, both physical and emotional, during the presentations. "We encouraged people to make lists of ways to comfort themselves, whether it be crawling into bed with your favorite blanket or taking a candlelit bath — anything to help you relax." They also offered practical information such as having a family emergency plan and collecting basic survival supplies. "Security plans as simple as coordinating a phone tree will let family know you're safe in the event of an emergency."

Torchia addressed children's needs during the trauma counseling sessions by distributing reading resources to help parents teach their youngsters how to deal with war. Talking to children about bioterrorism and the September 11 tragedy was very important to Torchia. She and Mike, her husband of 11 years, also have a son, Chance, 5, and a picture of the children is tucked into

Torchia's SIU identification badge that she wears around her neck.

To help Linsey and Chance cope, Torchia says, "We prayed at the fire engine in downtown Springfield that was decorated with remembrances of September 11, and I assured them that our law enforcement officials were doing their best to keep them safe."

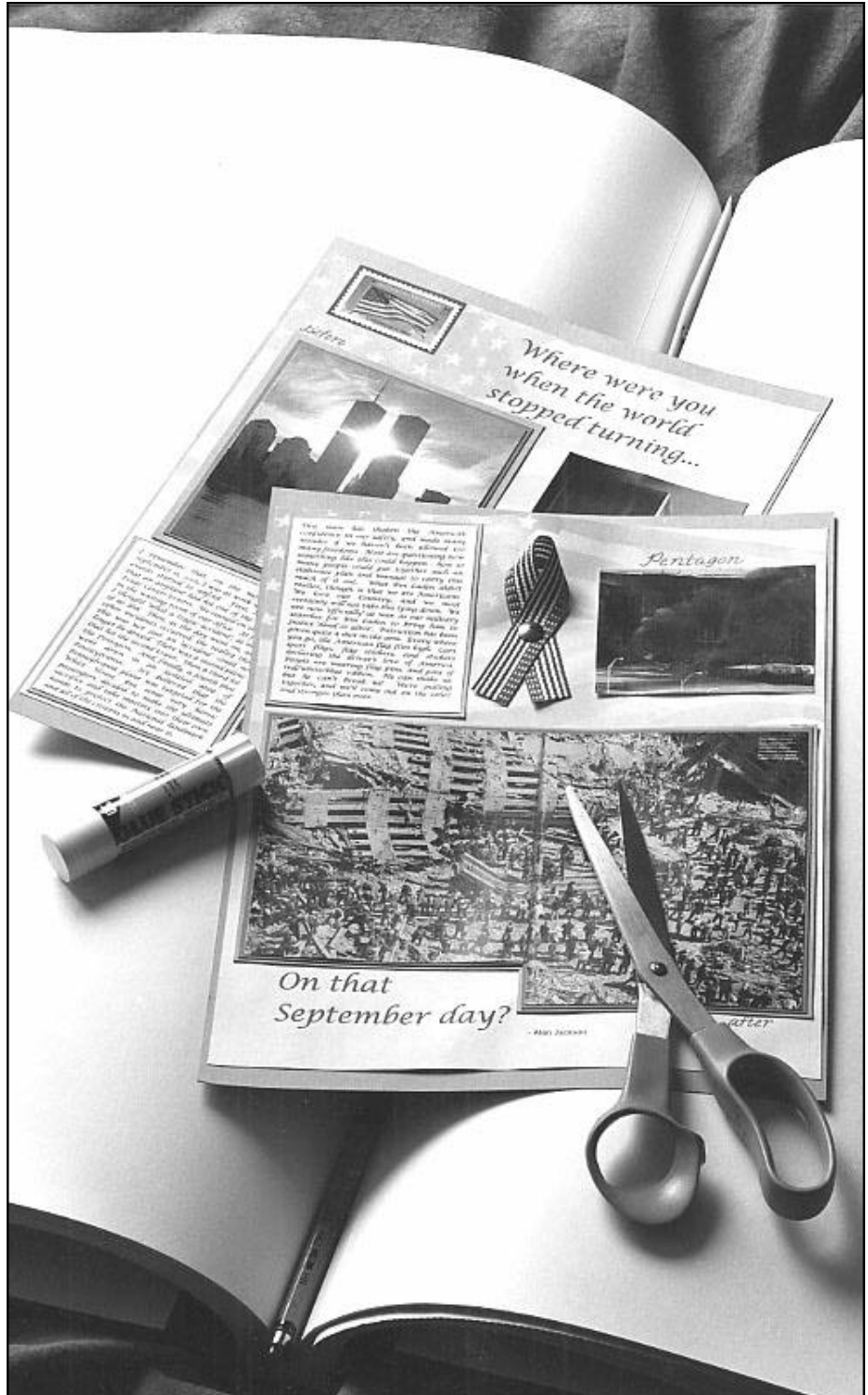
Those law enforcement officials have a greater burden now than ever before in the wake of the national tragedy, and Torchia has used her expertise in psychology to help them cope with their personal and professional repercussions. She has spoken during several bioterrorism presentations around the state for hundreds of local, county and state police.

"Personally these people may experience difficulties in their marital and family life, and in their physical and mental states," she says, citing weight loss and prolonged illness as results of the stress. "I want to show people ways to recognize their emotions and deal with them in a positive way."

In a time of chaos, Torchia used her skills and training to help heal her community and strengthen her family bond.

"My family is very important to me," says Torchia, who has three sisters, one brother, numerous aunts, uncles and cousins. "We're more than family — we're friends." She enjoys spending time with her family and securing their memories into artistic scrapbooks.

"Our family has experienced a lot of losses, and that has drawn us closer. Family — they are the ties that bind. If there's one thing I've learned from the September 11 attacks, it's that there's no guarantee that we're going to have each other forever, so I appreciate the times that my family has together." ■



Patti Torchia uses the popular hobby scrapbooking to relax and as a creative outlet to preserve memories. Here, she expressed her thoughts about the September 11 tragedy.