Times Newsweekly.com
Established in 1908 as Ridgewood Times
Serving Queens And Brooklyn

When Memories Set Value Of Things

Filmmaker Explores Feelings For Objects From 9/11

by Bill Mitchell

May 21, 2009

James E. Young (at left), professor of English and Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, introduces documentary filmmaker Jonathan Fein. Young appears in Fein's documentary, *Objects and Memory*.

For all the reasons that people may possess for gathering the objects they collect, none figures to have as strong a pull as ties to a memory.

It's just one of the ideas that run through Objects and Memory, the documentary film by Jonathan Fein and Brian Danitz, with narration by actor Frank Langella and music by Philip Glass.

This isn't a film about the collectors who plan their weekends around a schedule of yard sales and spend the rest of their free time searching eBay for old baseball cards, comic books or Depression glass.

But it might help to explain, in part, why they do, while suggesting the reasons why a death on the highway often results in a roadside memorial with flowers, pictures and teddy bears.

Using 9/11, the Oklahoma City Bombing and the Vietnam Memorial, the filmmakers present the concept of creating memory through the collection of objects.

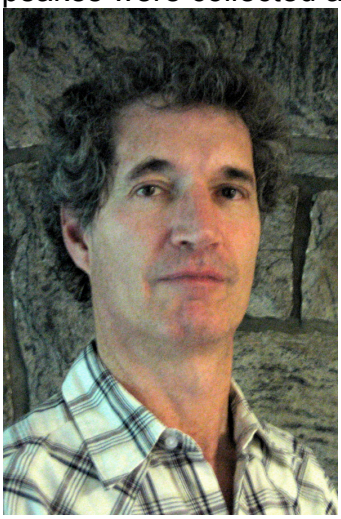
As Langella states in his narration, "There are events that transform ordinary things into irreplaceable carriers of identity, emotion and memory. These objects help us find our way forward."

James E. Young, an author and professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, is regarded as an expert on memorials. In the film, he talks about objects as "seeds of our memory," an expression also favored by Fein.

The public as curators

In each of the three examples of historic events used in Objects and Memory—with the

Vietnam Memorial being the first—items viewed as keepsakes were collected and displayed in ways that differed from the traditional method of exhibiting artifacts. As observed by Pam West, director of the National Parks Service's Museum Resource Center, the public became the curators.



Jonathan Fein, producer/director of the documentary film, *Objects and Memory*.

Clearly, it was something that fascinated Fein.

Among those who speak to him in the 62-minute film is Howard Corr, a carpenter at Ground Zero. The hardhatted Corr describes how people began leaving various items along the fencing—just as others had done at the 1995 bombing site in Oklahoma City and he saw the need to organize them in some way. Joined by his wife, Corr proceeded to do so and even performed some waterproofing as a protective measure.

"You can't just let it rot on the fence," he says.

Tells Woodhaven group why

Recently, Fein appeared as the guest speaker at a meeting of the Woodhaven Cultural and Historical Society, where members enjoyed a discussion with thought-provoking questions posed by Fein.

In speaking of his work as a documentary filmmaker, Fein also offered the label of "an inadvertent altruist," given by a friend.

From a practical standpoint, one has to be "a bit crazy," he observed, "to spend years pursuing a subject in order to help people better understand their world."

But Fein also noted that he has tried to teach his son to make decisions based on keeping future regrets to a minimum.

"So when you're faced with a situation where perhaps you can shed light on something and help people live their lives better, you either do it or spend the rest of your life regretting that you didn't," Fein explained. "I didn't want to live with regret, so here we are."

That kind of thinking led to the seven-year project that would become Objects and Memory, which represents Fein's first feature as a director after having served as an editor and producer for other film projects.

Last September, the finished film was presented as a production of EVER—the filmmaking partnership of Fein and Danitz—on the PBS network.

Currently, copies are available on DVD.

Different challenge for historians

As Fein explained to his Woodhaven audience at the Emanuel United Church of Christ, Objects and Memory had its origin in the aftermath of 9/11, when he learned that historians and curators, recognizing the historical significance, knew that they needed to save things from the event.

In striving to do so, however, they were presented with an unfamiliar challenge.

At the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, where the remains of the World Trade Center were transported by barges, the history-minded did not have the benefit of "academic perspective," as Fein called it. With consideration to what was brought there for examination, he referred to the landfill as "the world's largest crime scene."

When it came to recognizing what to save, historians and curators "had to work with their gut," he said.

The thoughts that factored into those decisions account for much of Objects and Memory.

But the film also presents images and anecdotal information about the various items that had been deemed priceless by people with an attachment to them.

Firefighter's precious object

One such example, as related by Mike Telesca, a retired FDNY battalion chief, appears early in the film. He had been off-duty on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, but upon learning of the terrorist attacks, rushed to the World Trade Center in a car with three other firefighters.

They actually entered the North Tower, but as they were leaving, to make their way to the command post, the South Tower collapsed and they were trapped for about 20 minutes.

At one point, Telesca says, he was "laid out." After he regained his senses, he realized that he had lost his helmet. Later, the helmet was recovered and returned to him. Looking at the camera, Telesca gives an indication of its value.

"A helmet means a lot to a fireman and it took a couple of months to get this one back to me," he says. "It kind of sums up your whole career— a lot of pride goes into your helmet—and it's probably the only piece that I cared about getting back."

The film shows the helmet, with its evidence of having survived a terrible event. Even so, it is easily recognizable and would be so, without the benefit of an explanation—unlike many of the other items pictured during the course of the documentary.

A sculptor's vision
Before he became a filmmaker, Jonathan Fein was a sculptor and holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

Having a sculptor's eye undoubtedly contributed to the way he saw— and presents in the film—some of the objects, as the comments of the various speakers who appear on camera are interspersed with images of objects.

To a viewer, one seemed especially powerful.

It appears following author Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who was living just beyond the perimeter of what became a "frozen zone" in the wake of 9/11.

In speaking of objects, she describes them as "very powerful eyewitnesses to history."

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett talks of their power to draw attention "especially when there is some imprint or coating of the ordeal that they've been through—they're bruised, or they're discolored, or they're twisted in some way."

Calling such items ones "that have taken the hit," she speaks of their ability to bear witness. "These are objects which, by the dents and tears and rips and distortions and contortions, tell you that something terrible—and something violent— must have happened."

In the case of the World Trade Center, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett says, to see such objects "is to invoke those towers."

At the end of her comment, the image of a grotesque-looking piece of metal—possibly, someone's work of sculpture—appears and slowly rotates.

But no matter how long or from what side the viewer gazes upon the object, without the graphic of an explanation, it's unlikely one would recognize the thing as a file cabinet—as it had been at the World Trade Center.

Like roller coaster rails
Pieces of steel taken from Ground Zero were removed to Hanger 17 at Kennedy International Airport. Film footage from May 30, 2002 shows the removal, as Langella narrates, of "the last free-standing beam of what was the World Trade Center," which had been decorated with "names, thoughts and memories." It was transported in flag-draped fashion to join the other surviving pieces in Hanger 17.

Langella notes that the steel stored in the huge hanger amounted to "less than one-half of one percent of the steel that made up the World Trade Center."

Seeing images of various steel lengths that are twisted, bent and mangled, the viewer agrees with architect/ archivist Bart Voorsanger, who states that there is no man-made equipment to achieve such results.

Rather, it looked to be the work of some kind of “supernatural, primordial force,” he suggests.

At one point, the images of steel lengths call to mind segments of rails used to facilitate the climb and descent of a roller coaster.

Similarly, intense heat had fused some pieces of steel with other objects, producing things that looked like grounded meteorites.

Special meaning

For the people who lost a loved one at the World Trade Center, any recovered personal items they received were priceless treasures. As Fein discovered, each has a story.

Deborah Calandrillo, a 9/11 widow, cherishes the piece of paper, found and given to her by a reporter, that turned out to be her husband’s employee review.

Myrta Gschaar, also a 9/11 widow, is grateful that her husband’s wallet and its contents survived. Inside the wallet was his two-dollar bill, carried as a symbol of their marriage. Upon receiving it, she experienced a kind of closure that had been missing.

Patricia Reilly’s sister, Lorraine Lee, died at the World Trade Center. After she received her sister’s favorite handbag, Reilly decided to donate it to the Smithsonian Institute so that in a certain way, her sister would continue to endure.

Some objects may not have belonged to a loved one, but still hold a special meaning. Unlike the material things that managed to survive, in at least two cases, the objects came into existence after 9/11.

Touched her heart

Mary Maciejewski, whose husband perished while working at Windows on the World, the restaurant in the World Trade Center, recounts how she came to possess a large number of small ceramic hearts that had been crafted by schoolchildren in Arizona.

Since that time, she has given the items to people throughout the U.S. and from various parts of the world who, as she says, “have touched my heart.”

Speaking softly of the children who made such tokens possible— youngsters who never knew her or her husband—Maciejewski says, “I don’t think they realize how important that one day or one week [was], that they were making these little ceramic hearts; how it would affect someone—even if it was one person, who carried it on.”

Diana Stewart, a 9/11 widow, talks about the comfort she had received from a mysterious rabbi at one of the pier locations on the west side of Manhattan where victims' families went to apply for death benefits. He prayed for her and her son, then went off, leaving behind a ribbon with gold lettering from Leviticus: "How can I stand idle while my neighbor bleeds?"

The camera showed the ribbon, with its signs of wear, on Stewart's wrist.

Later, she said, attempts were made to learn the rabbi's name, so that she might be able to express her gratitude for the comfort that she had found.

But despite the fact that the names of clergy who had tended to victims' families were carefully documented, there was no record of this particular rabbi.

"It is almost as if he was an angel, sent to sit with me that day," Stewart said, as her voice broke.

It is a moment as unforgettable as the objects and memories that inspired the film.

Editor's note: Copies of Objects and Memory can be purchased directly from Jonathan Fein.

For more information regarding the film, contact him via e-mail at objectsandmemory@gmail.com.