

Gary Marlon Suson Ground Zero Photo Collection Continues to Captivate

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If you pass through lower Manhattan on any given weekend, it's hard not to notice the throngs of people photographing and videotaping the reconstruction of the World Trade Center.

Americans hailing from around the country seem to take more than a bit of concern in watching the rebuilding of one of the nation's most recognizable centers of business, which became a symbol of national pride when terrorist attacks brought the towers down nearly nine years ago.

The sense of community that overcame that nation during that period is what brought Gary Marlon Suson, a theatre actor in New York City, to eventually become the *Official Photographer at Ground Zero*.

"Everyone came together from all the states and even abroad like a community to pitch in and help out in any way that they could, whether it was through donations, prayer, fundraisers, whatever, you name it," Suson said, recalling the experience. Suson, who grew up on a horse farm in Barrington Hills, Illinois, was asked by Rudy Sanfilippo of the Uniformed Firefighters Association to take up the job after they saw photographs on Suson's memorial website septembereleven.net. Mr. Suson's work at W.T.C. was overseen by Mr. Sanfilippo as well as by FDNY Chief of Department Daniel Nigro, a 5-star Chief.

Given the conditions to not photograph human remains, to share any "substantial" future proceeds with 9/11 charities, and to not release his collection until the recovery was over, Suson worked endless hours without pay to capture the human spirit of those involved in the nine-month effort that followed the attacks. The moments Suson documented while in "the hole" have been described as "moving," "intimate" and "spiritual" by those who have seen the images, which are on display just minutes from Ground Zero in the Manhattan's meatpacking district. In 2004, Suson was nominated by the FDNY to be given the rare title of "Honorary Battalion Chief" – an honor bestowed upon him in a special ceremony at headquarters by Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta.

Biggest Little Museum in NYC

The Ground Zero Museum Workshop was opened by Suson in 2005 under inspiration from the Anne Frank Museum in Holland, which he visited a year earlier. Like the Anne Frank House, the GZMW is a small, intimate museum, which Suson says he wanted in order to create an "emotionally safe" atmosphere for the 9/11 family members and survivor groups often hosted by the museum. Because of its condensed wealth of information, the attraction has been dubbed the "Biggest Little Museum in New York", and is now among the top 12 listed attractions on Trip Advisor and other travel websites. GZMW raises monthly donations for the FDNY Foundation, the Brotherhood Foundation and several cancer charities. "It feels great to be able to use the image collection to raise funds for many worthwhile charities," says Suson.

A healing place

The museum is also inside of the very building that Suson was in when the first plane crashed into the World Trade Center's South Tower. In one of the recorded tour narrations, Suson recalls a friend knocking on the door of his photo studio to alert him about the WTC attack. Suson explains that he ran to the roof with his camera only to find that he had a few shots left. The shot he took of the smoking North Tower happened just moments before it collapsed, and is one the few that you'll find in the museum of the events that occurred on the day of September 11. Images of the planes crashing into the towers and the towers collapsing were purposely omitted from the collection because they are not of the "healing nature" that Suson wishes to capture. Instead, pictures of firefighters and chaplains digging, praying, and honoring their fallen comrades adorn the room's walls. Several relics, including crosses and Jewish stars made from World Trade Center steel, are available to be picked up and held by visitors, hence the word "workshop" added to the GZMW's name. Boxes of tissues next to soft white couches communicate to visitors that it's ok for them to get emotional in the museum – a phenomenon that the tour guides say happens on a daily basis. "Nine years later, I see people come into this museum like it happened last week, just as passionate and empathetic about the people that passed away," Suson says.

Too much

But that same emotional power is what Suson cites as the reason why he only visits the museum a few times a week. "I used to come in every day, and it was just too much for me. Just to be around the energy," said Suson, who was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following his extensive time at Ground Zero.

Suson, like many other 9/11 workers, has had severe health difficulties following the recovery effort, and is now on a program that includes allergy shots, swimming and vitamin supplements. Every Wednesday since 2001, Suson has religiously traveled to Long Island, NY to get immune system treatments with an environmental medicine specialist. But despite his physical ailments, Suson refers to the 9/11 recovery experience as one that "strengthened his faith" and helped him mature as a person. He points to the famed picture of the charred Genesis 11: *Tower of Babylon* Bible passage as his favorite among his collection, and the finding that helped him push through when his photography job became difficult. "I was pretty much going to call it quits, but when I found that page, I was very inspired to stay," he says. Another photo of FDNY Firefighter Jack Tipping carrying his fallen firefighter son, John Tipping II of FDNY Ladder 4 out of Ground Zero "chokes up" Suson whenever he sees it. "It symbolizes courage for me," he said. Suson also points to an emotional image of retired firefighter Lee Ielpi, cradling his fallen son's fire helmet. Guests are always moved by this image as well as by Lee's quote, "*I know my son is better hands now, but I'd rather have him in mine.*" Mr. Ielpi helped found the *Tribute Center* at Ground Zero.

"American Brother" - the stage play

That inspiration continues to be passed on to the scores of visitors the GZMW sees every month, and will soon be brought to New York's theatre crowd as well. Suson is now working on translating his 9/11 experience to the off-Broadway stage in a production called *American Brother*, which chronicles the plight of a firefighter searching for his missing brother on Christmas Eve, 2001, in the Ground Zero rubble. "This play will help bring theatergoers into our private world of Ground Zero and see through the eyes of a firefighter who lost his brother and to share in his struggles."