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# 'ROUND HERE C

VERMONT LIVES



It's painful for Rich Conte of Stowe to talk about what he experienced on September 11, 2001 as a New York City firefighter. Conte is the only one who survived from Engine 33's responding crew. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

## A 9/11 survivor's long journey from **GROUND ZERO**

Saved only by acts of fate, Rich Conte of Stowe still carries the legacy of his firefighter brothers



DAVID GOODMAN  
Free Press Correspondent

### HOT PROPERTIES



STOWE — 8:47 a.m., September 11, 2001. American Airlines flight 11 crashes into the North Tower, One World Trade Center between the 90<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> floors.

One minute later, an alarm goes off in the firehouse of Engine Company 33 and Ladder Company 9 in the East Village in Manhattan. Firefighters from Engine 33 scramble to board the red fire truck. Ladder 9's firefighters roll out moments later.

Engine 33's night shift driver — the "chauffeur," in firefighter's parlance — had just asked Rich Conte to cover for him so that he could leave early to drop off his kid at day care. Firefighters routinely cover for one another, and Rich took over with little thought. Conte normally rode "the back step" of the rig as a regular firefighter at Engine 33, but he had been a chauffeur in another FDNY engine company for eight years so he knew

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Rich Conte of Stowe saved dozens of photos and other items from his days with Engine 33 including an image of Lt. Kevin Pfeiffer who rode along with Conte to the World Trade Center to morning of September 11. Pfeiffer was later killed during the collapse along with the rest of the crew. Conte credits his life to Pfeiffer's orders to park the engine outside of the towers' collapse zone. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

“The amount of guys lost, the talent and the quality of people that are gone is mind boggling.”

RICH CONTE, about the 50 firefighter friends he lost on 9/11.

Survivor

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the job well. It was the first act of fate for Rich Conte that morning. Conte jumped behind the wheel and began rolling the rig. He paused to ask Bobby King, one of Engine 33's regular chauffeurs, if he wanted to take over driving, but Bobby waved him off and told Conte to keep going - King would ride the back step on this call. Another fateful turn. Conte gripped the wheel and skillfully maneuvered his large truck through the growing crush of traffic around the World Trade Center. He reached the site within minutes. As he was about to turn the corner to drop his men at the entrance to the North Tower, Lt. Kevin Pfeiffer, Engine 33's officer, ordered him to stop and let the men out. Conte was surprised - he assumed he would deliver his crew to the front doors of the North Tower a half block away. But Lt. Pfeiffer was one of the best officers in the department - "he was definitely going to be a captain one day" - and Conte did as he was told. He set up his rig a half block from the building and started hooking up hoses. It was a third act of fate in a span of just a few minutes. A mere 48 minutes after it was hit, the 110-story South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed. Thirty eight minutes after that, the North Tower vanished in a vortex of white dust. Three firefighters from Ladder 9 and seven from Engine 33 died in the Twin Towers that day. Rich Conte was the lone survivor of the Engine 33 firefighters who responded. Conte greets me in front of his rambling 1850 farmhouse in Stowe. He is a lean, muscular 57 year old man with salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a short pony tail. He is dressed in jeans, a black t-shirt about global warming, and an open button down shirt emblazoned with the logo of Stowe Elementary School, where he has volunteered. He moves gracefully over the well-worn pine floor of his house. Conte's soft-spoken voice is tinged with anxiety. He

Advertisement for '20th South End Art Hop' featuring the text 'GET READY! THE HOP IS COMING... FRIDAY, SEPT 7 5-10PM\* SATURDAY, SEPT. 8 10AM-10PM\*' and a QR code. The logo for the event is a stylized '20' with an arrow pointing up and to the right.

- Logos for Ben & Jerry's, Lake Champlain Chocolates, Merchants Bank, Dealer.com, and Magic Hat.

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A Brooklyn firefighter amid piles of debris and burnt-out fire trucks at the northwest corner of the World Trade Center site on September 11, 2001. Current Burlington Free Press Photo Editor Ryan Mercer took this image when he worked for the Herald-News of Passaic County, N.J. PHOTO BY RYAN MERCER/HERALD NEWS

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tells me that he has never recounted his 9/11 experience in any detail. He has reluctantly agreed to talk to me, or try to. I sense that he is dreading our conversation.

"When I mention 9/11, it brings back all that emotion that we felt," he says, his jaw clenched. "People are just amazed when I say I was there — like, 'Wow.' It brings a deep response. So I don't mention it. It works. It helps me to live a normal life."

Conte pauses to compose himself, something he does often as we speak. "See the effect it has on me?"

The New York fire department lost 343 firefighters on 9/11, by far the deadliest day in the department's history. Fifty of the dead were Conte's friends and co-workers.

"I'm sitting here with 50 guys. Spirits," he says somberly, motioning in the air around him.

Conte ushers me into his kitchen. Programs from different memorial services are spread across the kitchen counter. The faces of men in their 20s and 30s beam from the decade-old pages. Some are holding babies. Others are pictured with young wives.

"These are his colleagues. Buddies. Brothers. 'I wanna do this to honor these guys,'" he begins tentatively. "It's about them, not me. I just got lucky."

**A firefighter's tale**

Rich Conte grew up in Brooklyn. His father was a wedding photographer and his mother worked as a manager for Avon, the beauty products company. After graduating Brooklyn Tech high school, he worked as a disc jockey in nightclubs while attending Manhattan College and Brooklyn College part-time. He considered moving to Colorado to be a DJ and teach skiing, which he enjoyed. But in 1978, he decided to take the test to be a firefighter, thinking it might be an interesting job. In 1983, he was informed that he had passed the test.

"I liked to climb trees — I was a tree hugger since I was a little kid. Where could you go and get paid to climb?" he says.

At age 29, Rich Conte became a New York City firefighter. He and his wife moved to a town near Newburgh, New York, where they had two kids. Conte would commute about 90 minutes to the city, where he would pull

Congratulations!  
WEDDINGS & ANNIVERSARIES



**Ashley & Adam**  
VERMONT

**Marriage**

Ashley Clark and Adam Fitzgerald were married in an afternoon ceremony at the Sassy Hollow Inn in Huntington, on July 7, 2012. The bride is the daughter of Rick and Sherry Lashman of Ira, VT and Mory and Pamela Clark of Rutland, VT. The groom is the son of David and Lori Fitzgerald of Westford, VT.

The ceremony was officiated by Pamela Fitzgerald, aunt of the groom. The bride's sister, Lindsay Clark, was maid of honor and friend Kate Donaleski was bridesmaid. The groom's brother-in-law, Benjamin Piper, and friend Wade Matot were bestmen and Nathan Donaleski was groomsman. Flower girls were Caitlin Piper, niece of the groom, and Helen Koester, friend of the bride and groom. Camden Piper, nephew of the groom was ring bearer.

The couple honeymooned in Luray, VA. Mrs. Fitzgerald is a speech pathologist at Milton Elementary School. Mr. Fitzgerald is manager of Walkers Farm, Home and Tack in St. Albans. They currently reside in St. Albans.



**Laurel & Joshua**  
VERMONT

**Engagement**

Keith and Cathy Pepper of Essex Town are pleased to announce the engagement of their son, Joshua Pepper, to Laurel Lazenby. Laurel is the daughter of Dave Lazenby of Mitchell, South Dakota and Linda Smith of Springville, Utah. Josh and Laurel live in Salt Lake City, Utah. They became engaged in April, on the beach of St. Lucia. A date for the wedding hasn't been set yet.



**Superneau & Wood**  
VERMONT

**Engagement**

Roddy & Holly (Stepmom) Superneau of Colchester, VT and Kelly & Mike Jasinsk(Stepdad) of Hahira, GA wish to announce and celebrate the engagement of their daughter, Sheena Superneau to Barry Wood, son of Susan and Todd(Stepdad) Houghten of Lowell, VT. Also son of Dennis Wood, who passed away a few years ago, but we all know would be (is) proud of his son. Sheena and Barry reside in Richmond where Sheena works at a doggie daycare, giving her the opportunity to work with the animals she loves so much and Barry works as a driver as well as volunteering on the Richmond Fire Department a calling that is near and dear to his heart. A June 2013 wedding is planned at the Round Church in Richmond Vermont.



**Lyle & Dorothy**  
VERMONT

**60th Anniversary**

Lyle & Dorothy Peterson celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary on August 25th at a luncheon given by their children at Tracer Duke's in South Burlington. In attendance was their son & daughter-in-law Dan & Diane Peterson; their son & daughter-in-law David & Cindy Peterson; their daughter & son-in-law Shawn & Dale Thayer and their grandchildren David & wife Lindsay Peterson, Lee Thayer and Robby Thayer. Unable to attend were grandson Drew Peterson and granddaughter Sarah Peterson. Lyle & Dot were married on August 23rd, 1952 in St. Andrew's Church in Waterbury, VT. The couple wishes to thank everyone for making the occasion a special one.

To place your announcement call 802-860-5329 or visit [burlingtonfreepress.com](http://burlingtonfreepress.com)

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*“People are just amazed when I say I was there — like, ‘Wow.’ It brings a deep response. So I don’t mention it. It works. It helps me to live a normal life.”*

**RICH CONTE**, firefighter who responded to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks.

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several 24-hour shifts per week. For 15 years, he worked in Engine 18, eight of them working as a chauffeur driving fire trucks and running the pumps. His interest in nutrition — he is a vegetarian, “the smallest club in the fire department,” he jokes — led him to work for two years in the health and fitness unit at FDNY headquarters, where he helped other firefighters improve their diet and exercise. In 2000, he decided to return to working on the back step and joined Engine 33, which occupies a beautiful Beaux Arts firehouse on Great Jones Street in the East Village that it shares with Ladder 9.

Firefighters have an unusually close bond. It starts with the fact that they live together. “A firehouse is like a house,” says Conte. “You live in a house, and they are your brothers and your sisters. You argue. You fight. You bicker. You get along, you don’t get along. It’s all that. Plus your life depends on each other every so often.”

So when the call came in that there had been a plane crash at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the men of Engine 33 faced disaster the way they did everything else: together.

**A surreal scene**

Engine 33 arrived within minutes after the first airplane crashed into the North Tower. The streets were filling with emergency vehicles and people were fleeing the buildings. Amid the unfolding chaos, Rich Conte worked methodically, every move informed by his two decades of firefighting experience. He positioned his fire truck across the street to avoid falling debris. He connected to a hydrant away from the buildings, knowing that the hydrants closest to the scene would likely run dry.

“We got there so fast it appeared that the jet fuel didn’t all ignite. There was a little hole where the plane went in and there were flames licking out of the hole.”

For a moment, it looked manageable. “But within the next few minutes, there were 10 or more floors pushing black smoke.”

“These guys,” he said of his six colleagues who charged from his truck into the burning building, “never hesitated for a minute.”

What may appear to bystanders at a fire to be a mad dash of rescuers is actually highly scripted. “It’s like an orchestra,” says Conte, becoming animated. The job of the firefighters on the ladder truck is “searching interi-



Firefighters sift through the rubble of what was left of the World Trade Center towers in New York, Sept. 12, 2001. Current Burlington Free Press Photo Editor Ryan Mercer took this image when he worked for the Herald-News of Passaic County, N.J. PHOTO BY RYAN MERCER/HERALD NEWS

ors and venting. The chief is the conductor and he tells the ladder truck when to vent the roof and when to vent the windows. They have to wait ‘til the water lines are charged and the truck is in position. It’s a coordinated attack.

“The engine company’s job is to put the fire out,” he continues. “The engine company carries the hoses, carries 500 gallons of water for quick attack and then hooks up to hydrants and stretches the hose to the fire.”

Conte’s job as the chauffeur was to stay with the truck and manage the hoses, “providing the right pressure, and that’s determined by how many lengths of hose and how many floors they are going up.”

This ensemble of rescuers performed their hearts out that morning. But the stage was unlike any they had played on before.

Conte’s voice grows quiet. “The fire and the amount of floors it affected was beyond what the fire department has ever seen. It just overwhelmed the situation at that point.”

At 9:50 a.m., the South Tower fell in an enormous white cloud.

“It sounded like an earthquake,” says Conte. He was so focused on working his equipment that he couldn’t actually see the towers, just the reaction. “Everybody was running on West Street. There was a stampede. My rig was blocking my view of the building. [I thought] everybody’s running, so I guess I should run too.”

“I felt like a crazy man. We were running for our lives. The cloud was a half block from me and I ducked around a corner. It was like a tornado. Then there was just this dusty fog in the air. Every once in while there was a sheet of paper floating... I was thinking maybe this was a nuke. It was so eerie. There was no one there for a bit.”

Conte then did what he was trained to do. “I walked back to check on the rig. It was still standing. That was just a stroke of luck.” He resumed pumping water, looking like a ghost plastered in white dust.

Inside the North Tower, the firefighters from Engine 33 and Ladder 9 had just met above the 31st floor. Moments after the South Tower fell, they were ordered to descend to the lobby. Terrifying minutes passed. Conte could not tell from the chaotic radio chatter if his colleagues made it out. He focused on keeping water pump-

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ing into the maelstrom so that his buddies could keep going.

At 10:28 a.m., the North Tower fell in an orgy of smoke and flames.

I ask him how close he was to the building. Conte looks a little puzzled, as if snapped out of a reverie. I point out his kitchen window to a row of pine trees about 100 yards away.

"Yes," he says after a moment to consider it. "That's about how far I was from the North Tower when it fell."

"I ran," he continues, "and dove around a building to the same spot. I just made it before that cloud caught up with me. I got lucky," he shrugs.

Conte was doubled over, choking on the sidewalk. "It just totally got in your throat and burned it dry," he recalls. A store owner handed him a bottle of water that he gulped down.

No one could comprehend the magnitude of what had just happened. "I was just in shock. I think the body has defense mechanisms in response to something like that," he says.

Conte acted on raw instinct. He still had a job to do. He staggered back to his fire truck. Miraculously, it was still there, covered in dust, idling roughly. The fire hydrants had all gone dead, and the truck was running erratically. A fire boat eventually snaked hoses to supply Conte's rig, and he battled to keep constant pressure in the hoses.

"I didn't take my hand off that throttle



Rich Conte's patch from the East Village/Bowery station where he was a member of Engine 33, working along with firefighters from Ladder 9. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

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all day until I was ordered to." At 5 p.m., with the threat of World Trade Center building 7 collapsing, Conte was ordered to evacuate. "That's when I got to see the destruction. Until then it was so cloudy I couldn't see anything. When I stepped around the rig to leave, that's when I was able to see everything. It was just mind blowing. It was just indescribable destruction."

Conte made his way to nearby Stuyvesant High School, where a triage unit had been set up and he got initial treatment for his seared lungs and eyes.

"Then we started walking back to the firehouse. ...I was pretty disoriented. ...I buddied up with some fireman [from uptown Manhattan] and we started walking back to our firehouses. When we got somewhat uptown, some out-of-town fire company picked us up and took us to our firehouses."

"There were just a few people there. Nobody knew who was alive and who wasn't. It was really emotional when people saw me and that I was alive."

**A son's recollection**

Conte's 18-year-old son Dylan walks into the kitchen as we talk. He is an athletic young man with his father's chiseled features and an easy smile. A recent graduate of Stowe High School, he is already a professional mountain biker.

Conte motions to the photos of the firefighters on the table. "Do you remember any of these guys?" he asks.

Dylan shrugs. "Kind of," he replies apologetically. "I remember going fishing with some of them."

I ask Dylan what he remembers of 9/11. "I was in music class in third grade," he says. "They asked us to sit against the wall with our head down, like for a bomb drill. ...My mom came and picked me up. I remember her watching TV and being really worried. I didn't know for a day or two that my dad was OK."

Conte listens attentively to his son's recollection. It seems new to him. After Dylan leaves, I ask Conte if he ever talked with Dylan and his 14-year-old daughter Juliana about 9/11. He has not.

"I wanted to keep their lives normal. What good was it gonna do to talk about it?"

Conte recalls his struggles in the months after 9/11. "I wasn't functioning for quite a while. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see — my eyes were scratched. And emotionally I was spent. I was a walking zombie."

In spite of this, Conte tried to return to work. A few months later, he went in to do a night shift. "I couldn't breathe. My lungs were still so full of debris. ...I got tested, and they said you can't fight fires anymore. Your lungs react. You're done."

He was not alone. "A lotta guys got sick after 9/11."

The police and firefighters who responded to 9/11 continue to experience significant health impacts. One study released last year says that firefighters who worked in the wreckage of the World Trade Center are 19 percent more likely to develop cancer. Over 13 percent of firefighters who were present at the World Trade Center on the morning of 9/11 continue to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) a decade after the attacks.

In late October 2001, the funerals began. He attended dozens. He points to the memorial programs. "I would like it if you would name everybody on my rig," he says.

I leaf slowly through the programs of the 10 men who died from his firehouse: Lt. Kevin Pfeifer, Michael Boyle, David Arce, Bobby Evans, Keithroy Maynard, Bobby King, Brian Bilcher, Jeffrey Walz, Gerard Baptiste, John Tierney.

"These are all just great guys. Some are dads. Some do amazing work in their community. The amount of guys lost, the talent and the quality of people that are gone," he says, shaking his head slowly, "is mind boggling."

**Moving to the mountains**

Rich Conte retired from the New York Fire Department in 2003. A year later, he, his wife, and his two kids moved to Stowe.

"I wanted to be near Lake Champlain, and I wanted to raise my kids in a ski town." He brought his wife to Stowe for a winter vacation, and they were smitten. "I was struck by the beauty and the friendliness and authenticity of the people." He always dreamed of having a big garden. He points outside to the extensive farm plot where he raises myriad varieties of vegetables.

Conte continues to struggle with respiratory problems and post-traumatic stress disorder from 9/11. Healing, he says, "is a slow process."

Conte is active on issues he cares about. He had a radio show on WMRW that featured environmental issues and music. He has enrolled at Johnson State College to get a degree in nutrition. He works to promote labeling for genetically modified food. At a hearing in the Vermont



The firefighters of Engine 33 who were killed in the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11. Former firefighter Rich Conte, now of Stowe, drove the engine that day and was the only one to survive. RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS

State House in April, the audience was rapt when Conte rose to address the committee considering food labeling.

In one of the few times he has spoken publicly about 9/11, he told the committee, "Good food and natural medicine is what has helped me to regain my health."

The attacks spawned multiple tragedies. The loss of some 2,750 innocent lives in lower Manhattan led to the deaths of 4,486 U.S. soldiers in Iraq and more than 2,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. In addition, there have been more than 138,000 civilian deaths stemming from conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, a 2011 Brown University study found.

What Rich Conte saw on 9/11 leaves him with a visceral response to war.

"That view I had of standing in front of all that destruction and knowing the loss of life literally under my feet ...It's so unbelievably clear that war is not the answer. The only way out in my opinion is diplomacy, however long it takes."

**'They're always with me'**

On September 11, just as he has done each year since 2001, Rich Conte will travel back to the Engine 33-Ladder 9 firehouse in Manhattan for a gathering with other firefighters and their families. For the first time, he is bringing his son along. It is a poignant journey.

"It was extremely difficult in the beginning to return to the firehouse to face the families, being the survivor," he says. "I just put myself in the families' position, and I'm thinking, how happy would they be to see me? But as the years have gone by, it seems like it does them a lot of good to see me. It seems it's healing. Now it feels healthy to go down [to the firehouse]."

Conte walks me outside to show me his garden. It stretches on for over an acre. Mt. Mansfield stands quiet watch in the distance.

Conte's step lightens. It seems a weight has lifted from his shoulders. After walking in silence for a few moments, the retired firefighter says quietly, "It feels good to tell this story."

As we stroll among his chard, zucchini, and watermelon, I ask, "The friends you lost on 9/11 — do they talk to you?"

Conte looks at me quizzically, then flashes a soft smile. "Quite often," he replies. "They're still the same cast of characters. Not much has changed. We just hang out — 'What's happenin'? What's goin' on?' They're always with me."

David Goodman writes the bi-weekly Vermont Lives column. He can be reached at [davgoodvt@gmail.com](mailto:davgoodvt@gmail.com), or follow him on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/davidgoodmanvt](http://www.twitter.com/davidgoodmanvt).