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## A Year Too Real

It still doesn't seem quite real. On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Monica Watt was standing in a courtyard of the Gateway Plaza apartment complex in Battery Park City, just a block from the enormous towers of the World Trade Center. She was with two of her three children — Amanda, who was 5 and severely handicapped, and William, who was 2.

Her husband, Bill, had gone off to work and their 7-year-old daughter, Melissa, had already left for school.

William spotted the plane first. He pointed and said, "Look, Mommy."

The sight was immediately disorienting. The plane didn't belong where it was. It was too low. Too close. In an interview last week, Ms. Watt said she had the odd thought, "I've never seen a plane in that airspace before."

They watched as American Airlines Flight 11 plunged into the north tower. It was precisely 8:46 a.m.

"I'll never forget the feeling," said Ms. Watt. "There was an explosion, and you just saw the glass and everything else blow out of the side of the building."

William stared, and began to shiver.

Moments later a school bus arrived to pick up Amanda. William was still staring at the north tower, and by that time people were beginning to jump. "You'd see a woman in a business suit and a man holding hands," said Ms. Watt. "And you're almost saying, 'Don't! Don't!' And then you'd see them leap."

The second plane hit while she was talking to the bus driver. Now there was no doubt that it was a terrorist attack. Ms. Watt grabbed her children and went up to their 14th-floor apartment. She strapped Amanda into a wheelchair, picked up a few items and then joined the crush of residents evacuating the building.

She wanted to get to a promenade behind the building that runs along the Hudson River. As she looked back at the trade center, she said to the superintendent, who was unlocking a gate for her, "You don't think those buildings are going to fall, do you?"

Just as the superintendent was saying no, the south tower began to collapse.

"When that tower went down," said Ms. Watt, "I thought at the time that an atomic bomb had gone off. It was the loudest explosion I have ever heard."

She tried to push Amanda to a safe spot, she said. "People were screaming, 'The building's coming down!' I stuck William under my shirt and went up against the wall. I just put my

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## One family, downtown.

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face to the building. The worst part was when all this *stuff* started raining down on us. You didn't know if it was going to be a foot deep, or 30 feet or 50 feet. It was pitch black and you couldn't breathe. The air was just taken away from you.

"I thought, 'This is it — we are going to die.' And I really just knelt down and prayed."

Ms. Watt and her children were eventually rescued by a fireboat on the Hudson. They were taken, along with many others, to New Jersey, and the family was reunited that night.

The story of the Watt family since then is really the story of the city of New York since then. The family was stunned, frightened, traumatized. But recovery, however difficult, was the only option.

They lived in a hotel for several months, then moved back to the Gateway Plaza building. "William had a tough time," said Ms. Watt. "He would look out the windows and go, 'No towers. Towers gone.'"

He drew pictures, with his sister Melissa's help, of people leaping from the trade center, some of them in flames. When he was outside and the wind was blowing, he would scream that buildings were falling on him. And every time he saw the attack replayed on television, he thought it was happening again.

The healing process was long and hard and continues. A therapist from the Children's Health Fund visited the apartment regularly to counsel William, and that helped. He still draws pictures of the towers, but now there are ropes and ladders and rescue workers at the windows. And as his family has settled more or less comfortably into its new life beside ground zero, he has become more accepting of the idea that the worst is behind him. Sometimes he actually says, "It's over."

Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the Children's Health Fund, said youngsters across the city, like William, "and like all of us, really, are in a sense adjusting to the new reality of what we had to face then, and what we may have to face in the future."

It was a year unlike any other. Unreal, and all too real, all at the same time. □

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