

Leap into Reading

Examining September 11 through a Multifaceted Literate Ecosystem

By Stacey Rattner



Last year, our fifth grade students participated in an experience of a lifetime. “Unforgettable,” “memorable,” and “wow!” were just some of the exclamations we heard from students, parent chaperones, teachers, and administrators on that beautiful June day.

2016 marked the 15th anniversary of September 11. With that in mind, author Jewell Parker Rhodes wrote *Towers Falling*, a middle grade novel about fifth-grader Déja, her friends and family, and their present-day lives. This necessary novel helped teach our ten-year-old students about that horrific day, a moment of history at a time before they were born. Previously, on September 11th, our fifth grade English/language arts (ELA) teacher would read Don Brown’s nonfiction picture book, *America Is under Attack* aloud in class. For homework, students were assigned to ask parents to reflect on that day and write about it in their “writer’s notebook.” This year the lessons on 9/11 moved beyond a single classroom to embrace a literate ecosystem.

We dove into the lessons of the day and *Towers Falling*, so much deeper, utilizing the entire school year and a web of collaborators that included the author, the publisher, the whole fifth grade team, the physical education department, veterans, family members, nonprofit charitable organizations, local police and fire departments, and the 9/11 Memorial Museum.

The Literacy Ecosystem of Our *Towers Falling* Project

Author Jewell Parker Rhodes

Jewell visited our school in late September and warmed all of our hearts with her love and kindness. She kept in touch over the months and we looked forward to meeting her again when she flew in from California to meet us at the Memorial.

Publisher Little, Brown and Company

Prior to the publication of *Towers Falling*, we received several galley copies to review with students. Our fifth grade ELA teacher and I fell for the book and knew we wanted to use it as a foundation for our curriculum throughout the school year. Thanks to Little, Brown and Company, we were given a few additional galleys and video chatted with Jewell before the book was released. This fostered such a positive relationship that the publishers invited our students and chaperones to visit their offices following our trip to the Memorial to learn about the early stages of the book and the publishing process.

The Physical Education (PE) Department

One World Trade Center, also known as the Freedom Tower, is the skyscraper that is now part of the new World Trade Center complex.

Our PE department received pedometers for each of our fifth graders to use as they walked up and down the stairs of our building, simulating the number of steps in the Freedom Tower’s 104 floors. They even did the math to figure out how many steps make up one floor. This activity took nearly three classes to complete but connected us with PE in a way we had never previously experienced.

Family and Veterans (and even the *Washington Post*!)

Prior to this assignment, *Washington Post* reporter Jacob Bogage taught us interviewing techniques. Students interviewed adults close to them about what it means to be an American. They recorded the conversations using their phones, audio devices, or podcasting website/apps AudioBoom (<https://audioboom.com>) or Clyp (<https://clyp.it>). The podcasts were powerful.

Additionally, around Veterans Day, local veterans spoke to our students in an informal assembly setting about how their experiences formed what it means to them to be an American. The men fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Many students asked questions and all were attentive. It was a great way to learn about history from those who were a part of it.

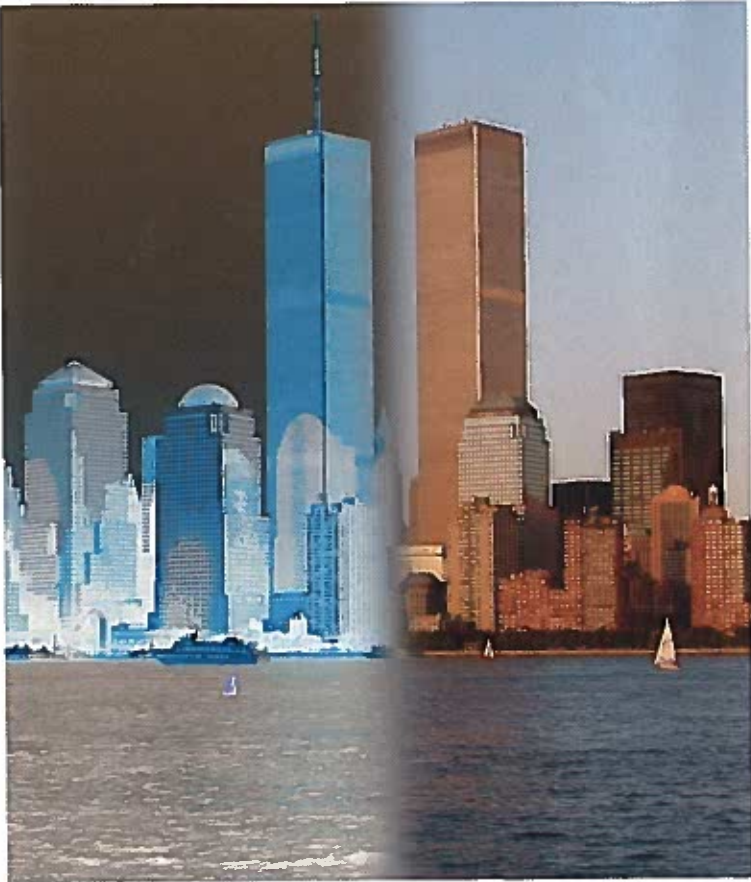
Our Local First Responders

Although we ran out of time for any formal presentation by our local first responders, we continued to remind our students and ourselves that they were our heroes on 9/11 and every day. Some fire and police departments also assisted us financially to help make the field trip possible.

Nonprofit Charitable Organizations

In *Towers Falling*, the protagonist, Déja, and her family live in a homeless shelter following September 11th. We built upon this theme of helping others and had our students participate in Pay it Forward Day (<http://payitforwardday.com>). Students researched nonprofit charitable organizations and presented what they learned to the class. Students were also asked to “earn” five dollars at home or in the community. They brought that money to school and were able to donate it to the organization(s) of their choice. Over \$200 was donated to over a dozen organizations.

We connected locally with the South End Cafe, which serves young people healthy meals and provides homework and other family assistance. The director presented to the students and each fifth grade class chose to do something different for the kids at the cafe. They collected gently used or new swim gear, games, and toys and brought in fresh fruit to make a communal fruit salad. Each class decorated and personalized picture frames for all the kids at the cafe.



9/11 Memorial Museum

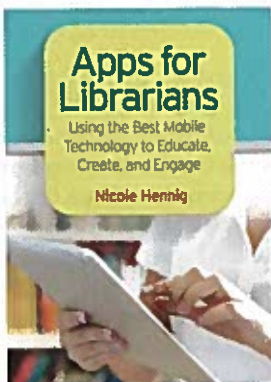
Our multifaceted ecosystem project culminated with a field trip to the 9/11 Memorial Museum on June 9. Jewell Parker Rhodes was there to greet us. Students learned about what happened on September 11 by examining images in a classroom setting as well as works of art on the museum floor. Upon our return, we concluded with a communal art project inspired by the Memorial.

Castleton Elementary School is about 150 miles north of New York City. We were lucky enough to be able to drive the three hours to Manhattan. Although an actual field trip may not be feasible for most with 21st-century learning tools like video conferencing, distance learning, virtual fieldtrips, and 3D mapping, your ecosystem can thrive as much as ours.



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