“Our America: A Lesson to End Stereotypes about the United States”

By Marina Gulak

"September 11th changed everything." That is a phrase I have heard time and time again, but didn't truly evaluate until I got involved in this project. Of course I understood what the phrase meant, but I didn't look at it from all the possible angles just from the position of "we didn't have terrorist problems, now we do." But the truth is that this event changed more than our political and economic problems, it changed our feelings and emotions, it changed the perspective that we all had about our lives and our country, and most of all it changed the people, the civilians who went about their everyday business as usual, thinking about war and turmoil in other countries, but never there's. I didn't even realize how much this event changed me until I could really reflect on it and see what my inner unexposing self had to say. I now realize that "9-11" changed our country in countless ways, affecting everyone from the downtown deli storeowner to the Wall Street stockbroker differently. I see that only because my assignment focused on how a generation younger than mine sees their country after such a major event and how it has changed them, without this experience I wouldn't think about this event's affects on others as apposed to its affects on me. That's the bigger picture in this sometimes overused and under understood phrase, seeing how these events changed everyone individually... and sometimes that the hardest part of all.

Truth to be told, the occurrence of this incident, if it can be referred to this way, didn't have as big an impact on me as it did for others. I can't imagine being the daughter of a firefighter who lost his life in the attack or the wife of the company manager who worked on the top floor of the North Tower; I can't even comprehend what it felt like to watch this event unfold before my eyes from my apartment building. I'm not claiming that September 11th didn't posses a blow to me, quite the opposite, but I didn't fully receive the impact of the day like others did. That, I believe, is important to understand, everyone had a different experience, possess different feelings, and see things in a dissimilar way toward all aspects of life, and this event as well. The children involved in our "experiment" proved just that, they see our country and the
world differently, uniquely; glimpses of their work show just that. All of them have a common goal (to show the people of the world what our country's about) but the way they try to achieve it is different because the way that they see the issue is. Our project's focus wasn't to show only the world about our country, but to show the kids themselves and bring to their attention to the wonderful ideas they came up with.

America is a country that in the last year has experienced much hardship, fear, and change. Some say that we needed that change to see and evaluate the lives we were leading, the issues that we were dealing with, and our personal connections to each other, the people of our country. They have turned this event into an experience of life about life, liberty, and people. Nevertheless, they did not have the experience of the widowed wife of a firefighter or grieving daughter…they see things differently, just as everyone else.
By Frances Jin

After our project with the 3rd graders of Ms. Finder's class had been completed, our next step was to find a way to present it to the community. Where could the 3rd graders we'd worked with see their work? Where could adults see and comment on our project? Where would we be proud to see our project displayed? The answer was our town's public library. We posted our project in the children's section of the library, along with a poster of pictures of the children we had worked with, our essay, and, of course, a comments sheet.

When we posted up that comments sheet, we didn't quite know what we should expect. Would people even write anything? What would they say? All this worrying was in vain, for we received comments, and quite a lot, I should say. There were comments ranging from, "Cute," to, "It makes me proud to be American," to, "...uplifting..." to simply, "Beautiful." These comments filled up our entire sheet. Needless to say, we were ecstatic that our project had actually provoked such reactions out of our town's people.

Reading these comments, especially, "It makes me proud to be American," really made me feel like the project was worth it. For wasn't the entire purpose of this project to show that we were proud to be American, despite, or maybe even because of, the September 11'x' attacks? Wasn't the entire purpose of this project to show how we would continue to be proud to be American, despite anything that came our way? Just to know that our community got the same thing out of our project that we had intended them to, really made us feel like our project was a success. Our community felt the same way we did. Our community supported our project. This, in itself, made me proud of our project.

Especially now, looking back on it, I realize what I really got out of our project. At the time of it, I was nervous just about how the children would react to doing this activity with us, whether they would cooperate or not, whether they would take this seriously. However, now, I realize that that wasn't the important part. The important part is that we, as three 8’h graders, could somehow
help out our country which had been battered after September 11th, and I truly believe that we did. I feel like by doing this project with the 3rd graders, we helped to rekindle the American spirit. At least, I know that I feel much more proud to be American after having completed the project. I understand even more what true American pride is, and I understand that through anything, this country can survive.
By Sarah Moore

When you think of September 11, 2001, you think of destruction, death, and decay. You think of the great, strong World Trade Center crashing down, and along with it, great, strong America falling to the ground. You think of pain and agony. However, amidst this devastation the seed of American unity arose. In our project we watered this seed, and helped it grow into a flower: a flower with the sweet scent of America.

September 11th definitely unearthed the many negative feelings towards the United States of America. As a result of the disheartened feeling we felt engulfing us, my friends and I decided that we needed to do something to illuminate the many good things that there are about American society. In going to Mrs. Finder's third grade class we helped community and ourselves rediscover what it truly means to be American.

This wasn't just a learning experience for the students that we chose to work with. I personally learned a lot from this project. When I sat down to think about my favorite thing about America, my mind began turning. At first the obvious - freedom, popped into my mind. But then, as I went over every little aspect of my life I realized that any would be worthy of being placed on the poster. I had trouble finding the one best thing about America. Be it food, friends, or letters, I realized even the smallest things are tremendously important to me. I never had actually sat down and thought about all the opportunities there are for me, as an American, or imagined my life without these possibilities. Looking at the collection of American societies assets that I came up with the students, illuminated how much I take for granted, made me more appreciative of this country, as well as gave me a stronger sense of pride as an American.

The last step of the project was sharing it with the community, to see what they would derive from this project. We set up the children's poster, pictures from the classroom, as well as our essay explaining the project in the public library. Along side of the display we left up a paper for the community members to write their reactions on. When I returned to there was an array of
comments ranging from "cute" to "beautiful" to "uplifting". However, one comment captured the true essence of the entire project in only a few words. "It made me proud to be American." This whole project was about discovering the many wonderful things about American society; to remind the students, the community, and ourselves what a wonderful country we live in. Our project not only helped us, but others in the community look into their lives and realizes how lucky we all are to be American.

This project may be over, but it has changed me as well as many others, permanently. Now I view everything I do with a sense of preciousness and luck that I have so many wonderful opportunities. This project uncovered a new sense of patriotism in my heart and formed a stronger love for our country: The United States of America.