

WORLD & NATION

Widowed mother teaches kids an unplanned lesson

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

MANALAPAN, N.J. — Two weeks after the World Trade Center attacks, a religious education teacher went on with her scheduled lesson plan — teaching third-graders that God is good.

Linda Dickinson told the students at St. Thomas More in Manalapan that they couldn't blame the terrorist attacks on God.

"I wanted to help their faith grow and let them know God is protecting them," she said.

The lesson wasn't from a textbook, but from the personal experience of this 35-year-old parishioner whose life was changed forever by the events of Sept. 11.

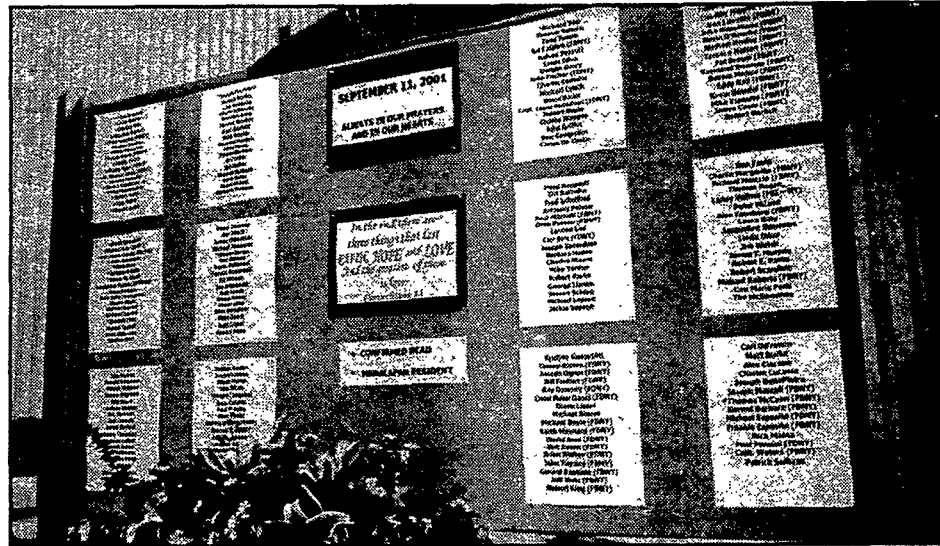
That morning, her husband, Patrick, who worked at the American Stock Exchange, was attending a breakfast meeting at Windows on the World restaurant, on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Since then he has been among the 4,500 people missing from the trade towers collapse.

Dickinson, who is expecting a baby in December, felt she had to talk to the students just as she had spoken to her own 7-year-old daughter.

"I didn't know what they had been hearing. If I didn't go, they might say, 'Our own CCD teacher is abandoning us,'" she told Catholic News Service this month in an interview at St. Thomas More, a parish located near sprawling new neighborhoods, farmlands and dozens of farm markets.

It is a parish that seems to add new members each week and also has kept a steady supply of votive candles burning over the past month to mourn the deaths of seven parishioners from the terrorist attacks.

"I believe with all my heart, and I have taught my daughter, that this (life) is not all



Mary Knight/CNS

St. Thomas More Parish in Manalapan, N.J., lost seven parishioners in the World Trade Center attack Sept. 11. Father John Bambrick, pastor, has set up a memorial board with those victims' names and invited members of the church to add other names as they became known.

there is," she said.

In fact, on the morning of Sept. 12 she told her daughter Erin, who had been wondering why so many people had gathered at the house the night before, that "if Daddy died, God protected him and he's in a better place."

But in the days and weeks after the tragedy, both she and her daughter held out hope that maybe, miraculously, the man they loved was safe in an air pocket under the collapsed structure.

Erin continually prayed that God would keep her dad safe and bring him food and water.

Dickinson tried to tell her that their prayers were being answered, even if they weren't the way either of them would want. "I've gotten stronger through all this,"



Linda Dickinson's husband, Patrick, is among thousands missing.

said the woman who has had to spend her days filling out forms and making phone calls about her husband of 11 years instead of getting things ready for her new baby.

"Without my faith, I don't know where I'd be, except in a corner somewhere," she said one month after the tragedy.

Dickinson met her husband 18 years ago when they both worked at a five-and-dime store. In all the time they've known each other, she said, they've never argued.

"I'm hyper. He's laid back," she said, still referring to him in the present tense.

"He is very easy going, laid back, devoted to his family, a hard worker and strong," she said, noting that was all she would say. But as her eyes welled with tears, she added, "In so many ways, he's my strength. He's the love of my life. The only love. I thank God every day for giving him to me."

She noted that the hardest part will be raising children on her own, even if she has hardly been alone in the 30 days since the attack. Each day, family members, friends and parishioners have stopped by with bags of groceries and meals, wanting to do something, anything, to help.

Dickinson didn't even know her husband had the meeting that fateful morning at the World Trade Center. She didn't realize the impact of the collapsing buildings as she, like nearly everyone else in the country, was glued to her television set that morning when she came back from a walk.

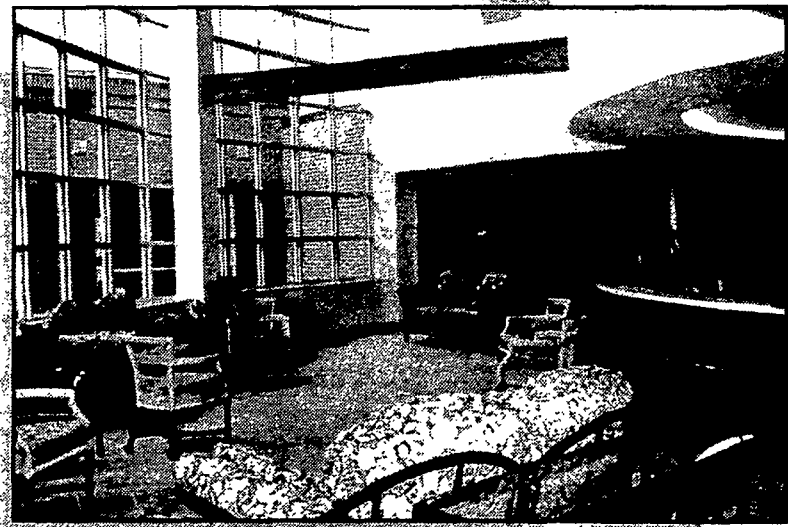
Only later did it sink in that he and his sister's husband had been together on the top floor of the tower and both were lost.

"I put my head in my hands and started crying, thinking 'Did I just see my husband die?'"

A memorial service was held Oct. 20. Dickinson debated over what to call the service, and settled on a "Mass for the Celebration of Life."

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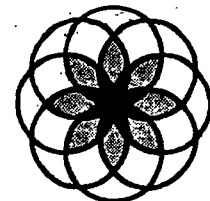
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