

Pass It On®...

Real-Life Blue Bloods.

The Vigiano family has served New York City for four generations: Grandfather, father, two sons, daughter-in-law and grandson. Two of them were lost on 9/11. This is their story, from the StoryCorps collection commemorating heroes from that day.

New York's finest maintain a tradition of service and sacrifice, often bridging generations of police officers and firefighters in a brotherhood you must be part of to truly understand. It's no wonder so many first-responder families are like the Vigianos, four generations deep and reaching into siblings and spouses.

Joseph Vigiano — among the latest generation of Vigianos to serve the city — is a member of the same unit his father was, wears the same uniform his mother did, and his grandfather, and his great-grandfather. What drew him to the force was more than a sense of duty; it was a sense of unfinished business. Both his father and uncle died on 9/11.

Joseph Vigiano first dreamed of becoming a paleontologist, but “after my father’s passing when I was 8 years old, that set me on the course where I am now.” He traded childhood dreams for adult responsibilities and the mission to serve and protect. In the long shadow of death from that day — nearly 3,000 died in the towers, and almost as many first responders have died because of illnesses related to their rescue efforts in the toxic environment — Joseph would stand and pledge his life the way his father had and become one of New York City’s 36,000 police officers.

At the swearing-in ceremony, new recruits are encouraged to let the experience of veteran police officers guide the way forward. It is emotional advice for Joseph Vigiano as he contemplates the service of family members who rushed into the choking clouds of dust and debris when so many were rushing out. Today, he wears his father’s police shield, and his brother, who works in the same precinct, wears their mother’s.

To be a police officer in the most visible city on earth is more than to protect its many citizens from harm. The responsibility is to protect them from the debilitation of fear. Everyone deserves to live with the promise of fairness in a system that is no

respector of individuals. It is a commission Joseph bears with honor. His paternal grandfather, John Senior, a retired firefighter, remembers the fateful day he lost his two sons. Joseph’s father Joe was a police officer, and John — also a young father — was a firefighter like their dad.

John Senior talked to each of his sons every day at the beginning of their shifts. That day, “Joe told me to turn on the television, that a plane just hit the Trade Center. ‘I’m heading south on West Street. This is a big one.’ I said, ‘Be careful. I love you.’ ‘I love you, too,’ he said. That was it.”

Thoughts of his father’s and uncle’s service accompany Joseph every day. Similarly, the fortitude of family can carry us all through the most difficult times in our lives. When they are no longer with us, the legacy of the decisions they’ve made becomes the compass of our actions.

We all carry the weight of expectations. Some are heavier than others. As we walk the beat of our lives, we can ease the burdens of others by sharing in the responsibility of making them feel safe. We can serve in our own ways. We can use the example of those who have gone before us as a cautionary tale — and the stuff of heroes.

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