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Tom Burnett Jr.'s name is inscribed on the 9/11 memorial at the World Trade Center complex in New York. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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Martha Burnett Pettee can still remember the hug because it was unlike any her younger brother had ever given her.

It was Saturday, Sept. 8, 2001, three days before Tom Burnett Jr. boarded United Airlines Flight 93. He had come home to Minnesota, and their mother, Beverly, had summoned the family for dinner in Bloomington. She was making Tom's favorite: tater tot hotdish.

Pettee almost did not go. She had seen her brother several weekends in a row. She had three children, a job and plenty to do, but her mother insisted.

For the first time in years, Pettee recalled, the five members of the original Burnett household — their parents, Tom and his two sisters — sat alone around the kitchen table. When Pettee arrived late, Tom stood up in the middle of dinner and embraced her.

Then he placed one hand on the back of her head and pulled her close.

"He had never done that in his life to me," Pettee said. "I believe he was saying goodbye to me. I mean, he was telling me how much he loved me, for sure."

Twenty-four years later, on Aug. 27, 2025, Pettee said she received almost the same kind of embrace — with a strong hand on the back of her head — from her son, Devin O'Brien, after he survived the mass shooting at Annunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis.



Tom Burnett Jr. stands behind his nephew Devin O'Brien, son of Martha Burnett Pettee, on a tricycle in early fall 1984. (Courtesy of Martha Burnett Pettee)

That morning, a shooter fired through the church's windows during a school Mass, killing two children and wounding at least 28 others. O'Brien, who was seated in the back of the church, [ran toward a side door](#) hoping to get outside and confront the shooter. When the door would not open, he turned back, urged other adults to guard entrances and helped protect and tend to children inside the sanctuary.

During the attack, O'Brien later said, a voice in his mind told him simply: "Be a helper."

Pettee did not yet know any of that. She only knew there had been a shooting and that her son was there for Mass.

"I was certain that Devin would be killed," she said. "I knew in my heart and my soul that he would run towards the shooter."

Before that day, she had already spent nearly a quarter-century thinking about another man she loved who had run toward danger.

Her brother, Tom Burnett, 38, a senior vice president and chief operating officer for the medical-device company Thoratec, was among the passengers who attempted to retake Flight 93 after learning that other hijacked planes had struck the World Trade Center in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The plane, [believed to be headed toward the U.S. Capitol](#), crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Burnett had called his wife, Deena, from the aircraft and [spoke about a plan](#) they had come up with to do something. But to Pettee, the public figure remembered as a 9/11 hero was first "Tommy," the little brother, nine years younger, that she had adored from the beginning.



Martha Burnett Pettee's three children — Devin O'Brien, Mary Margaret and Kathleen — attend a memorial service at the Minneapolis capitol shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, for the three Minnesotans who died that day. (Courtesy of Martha Burnett Pettee)

Their mother had lost two children to stillbirth before Tom was born severely premature, weighing about 2 pounds and requiring multiple blood transfusions. Beverly Burnett pinned a Miraculous Medal to his crib.

"For my brother to survive was a major miracle for my mom in particular, my dad, our family," Pettee said, stopping as she cried during a Zoom interview. "He just started out way behind, just a little tiny person."

He grew tall and athletic, became a quarterback and, as Pettee remembers him, smart, funny and relentlessly quick-witted. As a boy he irritated his teenage sister by picking up the family telephone whenever she was on a call. Later he entertained

the family by mimicking Bill Murray and reciting scenes from "Caddyshack."

Catholicism was woven quietly through their home. The Burnetts attended Mass every Sunday, kept an Advent calendar and lit an Advent wreath at dinner, but Pettee does not describe her parents as overtly devout.

One Christmas, after attending the parish religious education class, Tom announced that he would be the little drummer boy at Christmas Eve Mass. The family had known nothing about it. He processed down the aisle playing the drum while the choir sang. Pettee remembers her father weeping.



Then 14-year-old Martha Burnett (top right) poses for a 1970 family picture with her 6-year-old brother Tom and 11-month-old sister Mary at St. Edward's Catholic

Church in Bloomington, Minnesota. (Courtesy of Martha Burnett Pettee)

As an adult, Burnett remained closely attached to his family even while building a demanding career in California. He called his mother every day, Pettee said, and often stopped in Minnesota on business trips. He earned an MBA from Pepperdine University and became increasingly reflective about success, purpose and faith.

Pettee watched the change through their phone conversations. Burnett began discussing books about leadership and character and speaking more insistently about treating each person he encountered as a child of God. He told his sister that when traveling he had stopped retreating into a book or nap and instead tried to engage the stranger seated beside him.

"Mart, I think it's really important to engage with everybody that we come in contact with as another human being," she remembers him telling her.

He also read Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, then pressed the book on Pettee. The two effectively formed a small sibling book club around Merton's conversion. In the final years of his life, Pettee said, Burnett began attending Mass daily when he was not traveling. He talked about leaving business early, studying more and teaching history. At another point, he wondered whether he might return to Minnesota and seek public office.

"He was a different person in that last year of his life," Pettee told the National Catholic Reporter. "Everything was sort of upside down from how he had looked at life just a couple years in advance of that."

Then came Sept. 11.



Visitors to the Flight 93 National Memorial in Shanksville, Pa., participate in a sunset memorial service on Sept. 10, 2012. (AP/Gene J. Puskar)

Pettee had started a new job in downtown Minneapolis the previous day. At work, someone told her to turn on the radio: A plane had hit the World Trade Center.

Her first thought was that her brother was in New York.

Soon she learned that Tom was on a hijacked aircraft. She left the office and drove toward her parents' house. She did not turn on the radio. Instead, she prayed aloud.

"God, please be with my brother. Please be with my brother," she remembered praying.

What has stayed with her in the decades since is what she did not pray for. She did not ask that the plane land safely. She did not ask for her brother to survive.

"He really needs you to be with him right this minute," she remembers repeating. Between those words, she prayed Hail Marys.

At her parents' house, her father paced and her mother cried. Pettee gathered her parents and sister in the kitchen, where they held hands and prayed the Our Father and Hail Mary. Her father later walked across the field to their parish church, the same church where Tom had once played the little drummer boy.

Then came confirmation that Flight 93 had gone down.

In the months afterward, Pettee began attending daily Mass at St. Olaf Catholic Church in downtown Minneapolis. At Christmas, she remembered sitting in church as music played and discovering tears streaming down her face even when she was not consciously sobbing.

"My whole self grieved and mourned," she said.



Martha Burnett Pettee and her son Devin O'Brien dance at O'Brien's wedding, Sept. 19, 2012. (Courtesy of Martha Burnett Pettee)

Over the next 25 years, she said, grief did not produce a clear answer from faith, but it changed the questions. She said she became more deliberate about identifying her values and living by them. For Pettee, the test of a life increasingly became whether a person was becoming who they were meant to be and whether they had tried to live what she called Jesus' "prime command": to love your neighbor.

Then, in August 2025, sudden violence entered the family again.

Pettee was at her daughter Mary's house, about a block from O'Brien's home, babysitting grandchildren when word arrived of the Annunciation shooting. As sirens sounded, Spanish-speaking workers at the house joined her in prayer. They formed a circle and prayed the rosary — some Hail Marys in English, others in Spanish.

Eventually Pettee learned that her grandchildren were safe and that O'Brien was alive. But she had not seen him.

Then she spotted him walking down the sidewalk. She shouted his name, ran outside and fell into his arms.

"I sobbed, sobbed, sobbed," she recalled. "I thought you were dead. I thought you were dead," she remembers saying.

O'Brien put his hand behind his mother's head and held it against his shoulder.

"And he gave me the same hug my brother gave me that dinner," Pettee said. During the interview, she stopped repeatedly to cry.

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"Since that moment, I have become really convinced that I should not be afraid of death," she said. "One needs to just love with all your heart and with all your mind, with all your soul, and that is our destiny."

Now, Pettee says her prayer is less about predicting or controlling what comes next. Her hope is to create a space for her grandchildren where they can "grow in love and experience the love of God."

She also admitted she makes mistakes. She describes herself, with a laugh, as "a pretty big know-it-all" who has become less confident that she knows what is right.

"What's in my prayers every single day is, 'your will be done,' " she said. "I can't predict a single thing."

And after all the questions that began in one kitchen in 2001 and returned in another family home in 2025, she said she has come to trust one answer: "Love is the only path."

This story appears in the **Sept. 11: 25 years later** feature series. [View the full series.](#)