



Brian Fraga poses with his cousin Leah Oliver, who died in the Twin Towers Sept. 11, 2001. (Courtesy of Brian Fraga)



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I've written a version of this column a few times over the years, but it has never gotten easier.

Twenty-five years later, I still grieve for my cousin, [Leah Elizabeth Oliver](#).

Leah was 24 when she died on Sept. 11, 2001. She would have turned 25 the next day.

At the time, Leah worked as a consultant for Marsh & McLennan, which had office space in the World Trade Center. From what I understand, Leah was on her way to the agency's offices on the North Tower's 96th floor when the first hijacked airliner struck the building.

It's still surreal. I don't know if I'll ever completely process not only the events of that Tuesday morning, but everything that happened in the weeks and months that followed.

I was 24 and in my final year at Hunter College on New York City's Upper East Side, juggling a full academic course load, a part-time retail job, the sports editor's position at the school newspaper, and my responsibilities as a public affairs specialist in the U.S. Army Reserves.

Leah, a Top Ten student in high school, graduated from Columbia University, and had lived in New York for the better part of a decade. We both lived with significant others in Brooklyn but always found time to hang out amid our busy schedules. It could have been a night out bar-hopping in the city, catching a movie, going to Mass at the neighborhood parish, or laughing through a freewheeling dinner party with drag queens at Lucky Cheng's in the East Village.

"Fraga!" she'd sometimes yell to get my attention over the loud music in whatever New York City club or bar we were at.

We both grew up in Southeastern Massachusetts. Leah was a year ahead of me in school. We ran on the high school track and field team. We spent time together doing activities in our parish youth group. She entered the National Honor Society, and welcomed me to its ranks a year later.

Leah was a wunderkind: brilliant, driven, talented and motivated. She had a friendly, outgoing, and somewhat mischievous personality to complement her first-rate intellect. And she was beautiful with a smile you could never forget.

Leah worked hard and played just as hard in her downtime, sometimes to her poor mom's chagrin. I loved that about Leah.

Once after an evening out clubbing or drinking, Leah, another friend and I stopped at a McDonald's in Greenwich Village for 2 a.m. fast-food when an overly-friendly drunk man tried to kiss the top of my head. Leah laughed so hard she almost fell out of her seat. At the time, I was embarrassed, but now I adore that memory.

On 9/11, I had forgotten that Leah had not too long before started a gig at the Twin Towers. I sat on my couch and watched the news coverage of the attacks that morning just like millions of other Americans, even though the real-world events were unfolding less than 20 miles from my apartment.

A couple college friends called and said they were going to swing by to pick me up. We drove to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, which has a clear view across the East River of lower Manhattan. The towers were no longer there. A thick column of smoke, ash and debris rose from their place.

I knew the world had changed.

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It wasn't until later that afternoon that I thought of calling Leah's boyfriend, who was also a high school friend from Massachusetts I had introduced to Leah a couple years earlier. I wanted to check in on them, just to make sure they were OK. I didn't think too much of it at the time.

He told me Leah was unaccounted for.

All I remember next is my then-girlfriend and I taking the subway to my friend's apartment in Brooklyn Heights. We knocked on his door. He answered, holding a rosary, his face flushed with fear and anxiety as he spoke with someone on the phone.

The days and weeks that followed remain a blur.

My girlfriend and I made a missing person flier with Leah's photo that we posted all over lower Manhattan. We called several hospitals in the city, hoping that she had been checked into an emergency room or ICU, to no avail.

The phone calls and missing person fliers never brought her back.

There was a memorial Mass back in Massachusetts. I eulogized her in the Hunter College newspaper. Red, white and blue ribbons were everywhere in the city.

I think of all the conversations that Leah and I could have had these past 25 years about everything we've lived through: the election of Barack Obama, the Trump years, the advent of social media, smartphones, Pope Francis, the Red Sox winning the World Series, the 2008 global financial crisis, the coronavirus pandemic.

It pains me to reflect on how much Leah — who will forever be one day shy of her 25th birthday on this side of eternity — missed out on. She never got the chance to gain the kind of wisdom, insight and perspective that only the passage of time provides. .

Leah would have been beaming at my wedding, and she would absolutely have loved my daughter. I hope Leah would be proud of the man I've become in my middle age, and what I've been able to accomplish in my journalism career.

"Goodbye, primo. Love ya," Leah would often say at the end of our phone calls.

Goodbye, prima. For now.

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