

Vito After

9/11 Heroes . . . Paying an emotional, physical, spiritual price

a documentary by Maria Pusateri

Vito After is the story of Vito Friscia, a Brooklyn homicide detective who survived and bravely helped others on 9/11, then spent months sifting through toxic rubble searching for signs of those who perished. It is an intimate portrait of a selfless cop and devoted husband and father — a man whose life was forever changed by that fateful day.

*I could have been killed in that building collapse, but it wasn't my fate...
I'm here for a reason.*

Vito Friscia
Detective, NYPD

Vito was one of 40,000 workers and volunteers who participated in the 9/11 rescue and recovery efforts, a detective who was just doing his job. The film follows Vito for two years, beginning April 2002, interweaving interviews, recollections and vérité scenes as he mourns, tries to cope, deals with denial and struggles with health problems.

What price has he and others paid for their bravery and commitment?

*Thousands...remain ill and suffering today as a result of their heroic
rescue and recovery efforts, almost five years after the attacks on the World Trade Center...
Medical and mental health treatment, as well as short and longer-term
medical monitoring is critical.*

Dr. Stephen Levin, co-director national WTC Medical Screening Program

Maria Pusateri is an award-winning director/producer; Vito Friscia is her brother-in-law. Witnessing Vito's trauma and health issues impelled her to tell his story and make others aware of the problems faced by 9/11 rescue and recovery workers. Pusateri was a field producer for Metro Channel's *Unblinking Eye*, creating 40 cultural arts shows covering literary, music and film events in New York City. Her work netted four Communicator Awards, two OMNI Awards and an Emmy nomination.

Film Notes:

- Documentary feature
- Video/color
- English
- 48 minutes

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The Issue

On September 11, 2001, survivors, rescuers and community members were exposed to the cloud of debris resulting from the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings.

They inhaled noxious dust, fumes and smoke — potentially dangerous toxins that can cause severe damage and diseases years after exposure. The full extent of the health consequences of this unprecedented toxic mixture of carcinogens — asbestos, lead, mercury, chromium, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), organochlorine pesticides, and polychlorinated furans, dioxins and benzene from jet fuel — will be revealed in the years to come.

Once rescue attempts were over, more than 40,000 police, firefighters, other workers and volunteers spent months working as part of the recovery effort. Some 7,000 New York City detectives were the last to sift through debris brought from ground zero to the morgue and the already- toxic Fresh Kills landfill. At times, the dirt bubbled.

As of May 2006, the federally-funded WTC Worker and Volunteer Medical Screening Program has screened approximately 16,000 responders. In addition, the FDNY has screened about 14,000 firefighters.

Respiratory illness — in too many cases chronic — psychological distress and financial worries has tragically reshaped the lives of many...responders...

It is the very least that we can do, to provide...medical services and other support ...for those who became ill as a result of their putting their very lives at risk to help others.

Dr. Stephen Levin, co-director national WTC Medical Screening Program

Sample findings from the WTC medical screening program have shown:

- 50 percent suffer persistent upper respiratory ailments
- 40 percent suffer persistent lower respiratory ailments
- 51 percent showed symptoms of psychological distress

NYPD Detective James Zadroga became the first fatality directly linked to the World Trade Center clean-up efforts when results of his autopsy were made public in April 2006. Zadroga, a 34-year old widower with a 4-year-old-child, died in January from pulmonary disease and respiratory failure.

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The Film

Vito After is the story of Vito Friscia, a Brooklyn homicide detective who survived and bravely helped others on 9/11, then spent months sifting through toxic rubble for signs of those who perished. It is an intimate portrait of a selfless cop and devoted husband and father — a man whose life was forever changed by that fateful day.

Vito was only a block away — on his way to join the rescue effort — when the second tower collapsed. He was engulfed in the treacherous cloud that followed. In the chaotic aftermath, he helped thousands leave the city.

He was one of 7,000 NYPD detectives who were the last to go through the debris, searching for signs of loved ones in the hopes of bringing closure to victims' families. Their intense work exposed them to toxic substances in the rubble and dust.

The film follows Vito for two years, beginning April 2002, interweaving interviews, recollections and vérité scenes as he mourns, tries to cope, deals with denial and struggles with health problems. It shows him with family, friends and at a poignant gathering with his detective brothers where the men cope with the horrific tragedy by recalling their experiences with humor.

Vito suffers from frequent sinus ailments, congestion and cough; he finds himself short of breath when exercising. He often has to clear his throat and is hoarse. Typical of many members of the NYPD, he just ignores the symptoms.

Vito After shows his family's attempt to convince Vito to seek medical assistance. His wife even offers to quit smoking if he'll get evaluated. The film follows him as he goes to Mt. Sinai and finds out why he can't get back to normal. His health compromised, the possibility of serious disease in the future, Vito has no regrets.

Vito was one of 40,000 workers and volunteers who participated in the rescue and recovery efforts. The film explores the consequences of their heroism through his experience. It deals with the emotional, physical and spiritual aftereffects of 9/11 on a detective who was just doing his job.

What price has he and others paid for their bravery and commitment?

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About Vito

Detective Vito Friscia dreamed of being a cop as a child growing up on Long Island.

He is a reluctant hero, shying away from public recognition for the contributions he made to the 9/11 rescue and recovery efforts. More concerned about the welfare of others than his health, Friscia balances the tragedy with his duty as a NYPD officer.

I'd do it again. I'd do it a hundred times if I had to.

He joined the NYPD in 1987 and moved through every unit. He served as an anti-crime plain-clothes officer, working cases involving major felonies. He spent three years in street narcotics enforcement in Brooklyn during the most exciting time of his career.

When his daughter was born, Friscia gave up his fearless cowboy attitude. He transferred to the 90th and, ultimately, 77th precinct detective squads where he focused on homicides and assaults, replacing situations posing immediate danger with investigative work.

In March 2001, the 77th domestic violence unit was created. Most U.S. homicides result from domestic disputes. For the next four years, Friscia and his partner worked thousands of cases. The job required personality, violence probability assessment and the ability to counsel potential offenders and victims. In 2005, he was promoted to Brooklyn's homicide task force.

Friscia derives great support from his wife, children, family and friends. He copes with stress from the job by coaching youth sports teams. He shares a bond with a group of 13- and 14-year-olds who he considers his daughters — a soccer team he's dedicatedly coached for more than nine years. He and those close to him believe this special relationship prevented him from sinking into a deep depression after 9/11.

His interest in coaching children's sports began when his younger brother's team was in need of guidance and inspiration. Friscia's coaching theory is simple — learning the fundamentals of the game, anchoring it with morals and values, focusing on enjoying the experience of playing — will translate into success on and off the field.

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Producer/Director

Maria Pusateri is an award-winning director/producer and founder of DreamSlate Productions; Vito Friscia is her brother-in-law.

Although she studied acting and performed, she found her niche behind the camera while working as a field producer for *Unblinking Eye*, which was shown on Cablevision's MetroChannels. For the show, Pusateri created 40 cultural arts programs covering literary, music and film events in New York City. She also did a short piece after 9/11, in which she interviewed people at the center of memorial activity at Union Square soon after the attacks.

Programs covered a wide-range of subjects from inner-city youth performing slam poetry to celebrity play readings to conversations with independent filmmakers to movie stars. Her work netted a New York Emmy Award nomination in 2002 for *Unblinking Eye: Food for Thought* — a play reading series featuring Elaine Stritch, Judith Light, John Shea and others. The program also received an OMNI Award and two Communicator Awards.

Pusateri received her first two Communicator Awards for *Unblinking Eye: WWOW Radio - the Adventures of Nero Wolfe*, a vintage radio show re-creation. She also received an OMNI Award for *Unblinking Eye: New York in the Fifties*, a half-hour interview with documentary filmmaker Betsey Blakenbaker.

Her filmmaking career was inspired by Vito's experiences and Judith Helfand's critically-acclaimed film, *Blue Vinyl*. Helfand's film typified Pusateri's vision for her own filmmaking — exploration of people's intimate worlds through the social issues impacting their lives. Witnessing Vito's trauma and health issues impelled her to tell his story and make others aware of the problems faced by 9/11 rescue and recovery workers.

Pusateri is a board member of CineWomen NY, where she is programming director of the organization's monthly screening series at the Pioneer Theater in Manhattan.

She also is a member of New York Women in Film and Television (NYWIFT) and other organizations supporting independent filmmakers including Film/Video Arts.

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Director's Statement

I was compelled to explore my brother-in-law Vito's emotional journey in the aftermath of his WTC rescue and recovery experiences. I was humbled by his bravery and driven by a need to better understand someone who instinctively risks his life to help others. But, what price has Vito and thousands of others paid for their bravery and commitment?

As Vito admits, cops are good at hiding their feelings, so it was hard for me to really know how well he was coping. He, unquestionably, was helped by the vital support of his wife Lisa, family and friends, as well as the therapy he received through his special bond with the girls' soccer team he coached.

I became more focused on Vito's physical health as his sinus ailments and cough lingered into a second year. I was also gradually learning of more serious and debilitating illnesses that other recovery workers were suffering.

Five years after 9/11, media coverage of those suffering from WTC-related illnesses and related deaths has greatly increased. Thousands are suffering from related illnesses, ranging from debilitating chronic respiratory disease to rare cancers, heart ailments and psychological distress.

The autopsy of NYPD Detective James Zadroga in April 2006 was the first death officially linked to WTC dust exposure. Since then, Vito has expressed concern that he may be serving a death sentence.

Vito said that making this film was like a "therapy" for him. Ultimately, his journey has helped me to deal with my own grief and feelings about the tragedy. I have also seen the film's effect on audiences. For some, it has released bottled up feelings they've had about the tragedy.

The most touching — and a very defining moment for me as a filmmaker — came as the end credits were rolling. I was sitting in the darkness when, from behind me, two arms wrapped around me. It was a woman whose face was drenched with tears. She hugged me tightly, wetting my face, and thanked me for making such "a beautiful film." In that moment, all the struggles and doubts and hardships of making this film melted away.

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As a New Yorker who worked in Manhattan for many years, I felt very connected to the tragedy of September 11th, though I wasn't in the city that day. I'm also linked to it through the experiences of my family.

- My daughter, a freshman at NYU, watched the horror unfold through her dorm room window, which directly faced the towers. I'm heartbroken about how it changed her life.
- My brother, his wife and young daughter witnessed the entire disaster from beginning to end from their home in Tribeca. Not only did they have to live with smoky dust and acrid smells, but they also watched as the neighborhood was transformed into a rescue and recovery staging area. Debris traveled past their windows to barges a block away.
- My cousin also lives in Tribeca and experienced the tragedy from his apartment, in full view of the towers. Close enough to be enveloped in the dust cloud, he has developed WTC-related health problems. He owned the historic Puffy's Tavern nearby, where recovery workers sought comfort after a grueling day on the pile.
- My father worked at the Cotton Exchange at the World Trade Center complex for 18 years before retiring. He died just weeks before 9/11, spared from witnessing devastation that would have broken his heart.

By sharing one person's story, I hope to bring further awareness to the health issues facing the thousands of people – recovery workers as well as residents and workers in the area of ground zero – who were exposed to the toxic WTC dust.

I'm grateful that making this film has brought me closer to Vito, his wife and their family.

I've become more aware of the stressful challenges homicide detectives face, including the difficulty of keeping their work from spilling over into their home life. I've learned to appreciate what it means to be committed to such a dangerous job. I have a greater respect for these officers, and others like them, who work on the front lines of rescue and safety.

The journey towards recovery continues for all of us who were touched in some way by the trauma of September 11th. Sadly, the harsh reality is that the WTC disaster will continue to claim many more lives in the years to come.



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Crew

Daniel Baer, Editor

Daniel Baer is a producer, director and editor of nonfiction films. He directed, shot and edited *The Hotel Upstairs*, which premiered to rave reviews at the 2001 IFP/West Los Angeles Film Festival. It has been seen at film festivals worldwide. As a student, he produced and directed *Echo Soup* and *Horse Dreams in BBQ Country*, two award-winning short films that screened at film festivals around the world and were broadcast on various PBS affiliates.

Baer has worked as both shooter and editor on numerous documentary productions including MTV's award-winning *True Life* documentary series and the independent documentary features, *John the Road* (2002) and *Viva Chile Mierda* (2003). He has also taught filmmaking and editing on the college level.

Srael Boruchin, Director of Photography

Srael Boruchin is an award-winning cinematographer. He won a New York Emmy for Best Documentary Camera for *Get the Message* and a Daytime Emmy nomination: Outstanding Achievement in Single Camera Photography for *Full Frontal Fashion*. He has also worked on projects for HBO, PBS, A&E *Biography*, The Sierra Club and Madison Square Garden. He is President of Synchronicity Films, a production company based in New York.

Sean McGinn, Director of Photography

Sean McGinn is a New York-based DP and editor. After spending several years as a staff videographer for Metro TV, he moved on to TV, documentary and short film projects. Recent TV credits include CNN, VH1, ABC's *The View*, CBS' *Star Search*, Food Network's *Food Nation with Bobby Flay*, WE's *Full Frontal Fashion*, WNET's *New York Voices* and Metro TV's *Subway Q&A*. Short film credits include the award-winning *Washington Road* (2001) and *Hair Of The Dog* (2003). He is currently co-producing a documentary on monastic life in America.

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Christopher Ward, Sound Recordist

Christopher Ward is founder of Audio Craft productions, whose clients have included HBO, *Good Morning America*, A&E, Discovery Channel, MTV, and VH-1. He received an Emmy nomination for Best Documentary Sound for *Get the Message*.

Scott Healy, Composer

Scott Healy is a New York-based musician and composer best known as keyboardist on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. He has worked with Bruce Springsteen, Bonnie Raitt, Al Green, BB King, Taj Mahal, Sheryl Crow, Jackson Browne, Graham Parker, The Band, Branford Marsalis and Tony Bennett. He's also a composer and arranger.

Mike Worth, Composer

Mike Worth is a film and multimedia composer, who brings his rock/blues roots and his orchestral training to his projects. Credits include *Magnetism*, a short animated comedy shown at the California Independent Film Festival and on NickToons. He wrote the theme for the TV sketch comedy pilot, *Craig's Variety Show*. Worth is writing the music for a documentary, *Drawn*, and working on a new rock album.

Mark Geary, Musician

Mark Geary is a songwriter, guitarist and performer who has been compared to Van Morrison and Ron Sexsmith. Geary regularly plays the US club circuit and received critical acclaim for his latest CD *Ghosts*, which includes two tracks used in *Vito After*.

Guy Klucevsek, Musician

Guy Klucevsek recently performed on John Williams' score for Steven Spielberg's *Munich*. He is a world-renowned accordionist and founder of The Accordion Tribe, an international line-up of composers/accordionists who have recorded two albums. He has also performed and/or recorded with Laurie Anderson, Anthony Braxton, Dave Douglas, Bill Frisell, Fred Frith, Robin Holcomb, the Kronos Quartet, Natalie Merchant, Jubilant Sykes and John Zorn.

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Production Credits

Michael Citriniti, Executive Producer

Michael Citriniti is the co-producer of *Food For Thought* Lunch Hour Theatre, the primary company in New York City dedicated to providing a venue for one-act plays. Michael is also an actor who has performed in works by Shakespeare, Chekhov, as well as original theatrical projects. Mr. Citriniti's film credits include *Goodfellas* and *The Spiral*, which shared the prize for Best Short Narrative Drama at the 2000 Brooklyn Film Festival. Citriniti is also a musician, and his Sixties cover band The Windbreakers performs in New York City.

Judith Helfand, Production Consultant

Judith Helfand is a Peabody award-winning filmmaker, activist and educator and an inspiration to filmmaker Maria Pusateri. Her credits include *Blue Vinyl* (HBO), *A Healthy Baby Girl* (POV) and *The Uprising of 34* (POV). She has received two Emmy nominations and innumerable awards. Helfand co-founded Working Films, which is dedicated to leveraging documentaries' power and prestige for long-term economic, social and environmental justice.

Elizabeth Foley, Production Consultant

Elizabeth Foley has worked as a New York City film and television producer for more than 12 years. Her award-winning short film, *Jeanne & Hauviette*, screened as part of the New Directors/CineWomen NY Screening Series. She produced a UNICEF documentary narrated by Julia Ormond and was a line producer for Bravo's *The It Factor*. She is in development for *Funny Peculiar*, starring Rip Torn and Betty Buckley.

Robert Hawk, Production Consultant

Robert Hawk has been part of the independent film scene for more than 20 years. He's a longtime advisor to filmmakers and film festivals and founder of ICI (Independent Consultation for Independents). He is on the National Advisory Board of the Sundance Film Festival and other festivals. Hawk has served on juries at domestic and international festivals and has curated special film series. He is the founder of San Francisco's Film Arts Festival and was its director for eight years.

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9/11 Recovery Facts

- Workers sifted through 1.8 million tons of material at the Fresh Kills Landfill for approximately 10 months, during which they recovered:
 - 4,257 human remains
 - 54,000 personal items
 - 4,000 photographs
 - 1,358 personal and departmental vehicles
 - Thousands of tons of steel
- Noxious dust, toxic fumes and smoke inhaled contained potentially dangerous toxins that can cause severe damage and disease years or even decades later.
- Responders who were downtown when the towers collapsed, breathed in a highly alkaline cement dust known to produce chemical burns to respiratory membranes.
- Workers were exposed to an unprecedented toxic cocktail, including such carcinogens as asbestos, lead, chromium, mercury, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), organochlorine pesticides and polychlorinated furans and dioxins.
- Reported WTC-related illnesses include chronic sinus and lung disease such as sinusitis, asthma and sarcoidosis; gastrointestinal reflux; heart conditions; cancers of the throat, esophagus, lung, kidney, brain, pancreas and thyroid; and, AML – a rare leukemia caused by exposures to benzene found in jet fuel.
- In July 2004, a union survey found that over 400 NYPD detectives reported some type of WTC-related illness and/or an increase in post-traumatic stress syndrome. At that time, there was a noted spike in suicides.