BEVERLY ECKERT, 55, remembers her husband, SEAN ROONEY

Beverly Eckert: Sean had warm brown eyes and dark curly hair. He was a good hugger, one of those people that are just comfortable to be around, and a favorite wherever he went. I used to tell him I thought my family liked him more than they liked me.

He had a cerebral job, but in his spare time he liked to do really tangible things, like carpentry and plumbing, electrical, masonry—you name it. He loved to cook too. I keep rosemary in the kitchen now because the aroma reminds me of this marinade he made for grilled steak. He used our Weber grill year-round, even in the winter, even in the rain. He would be out there with an umbrella in one hand and his steak tongs in the other.

There are things I can picture so clearly still. Early evening on a summer night: We’re relaxing before dinner, sitting next to each other on the stone step out back, and we each have a glass of wine. We’re just watching the fireflies rise out of the lawn, steak on the grill, and we’re talking and laughing.

Sean and I were together for thirty-four years. We met when we were only sixteen at a high school dance. He died at fifty. I try not to think about what I lost but what I had. For Sean and me, fate, in a way, was merciful. I know what happened to Sean, because he was able to reach me by phone from where he was trapped in the South Tower.

I was at home. I had left work when I heard about the towers getting hit. It was about 9:30 A.M. when he called. When I heard his voice on the phone, I was so happy. I said, “Sean, where are you?” thinking that he had made it out, and that he was calling me from the street somewhere. He told me he was on the 105th floor, and I knew right away that Sean was never coming home.

He was very calm. He was very focused. He told me he had been trying to find a way out and what he wanted was information. So I relayed to him what I could see on TV, what floor the flames had reached and on what side of the building. I also used my other phone, my cell phone, and called 911 and told them where Sean was and that he needed to be rescued. Sean told me that initially he was with some people that tried to escape by going down the stairs, but they had to turn back because of the smoke and the heat. They headed for the roof, but when they got there they found that the roof doors were locked.

He told me the other people were now in a conference room and that he was alone. I asked him to go back and try the roof doors again, to pound on them, and that somebody on the other side would hear him. I said, “The doors couldn’t be
locked. They are emergency doors.” We both remembered the helicopter rescues from the roof at the ’93 bombing.

Sean was gone for maybe five minutes, and then he came back to the phone. He hadn't had any success, and now the stairwell was full of smoke—he had actually passed out for a few minutes while pounding on the doors.

There was a building in flames underneath him, but Sean didn't even flinch. He stayed composed, talking to me, just talking to me the way he always did. I will always be in awe of the way he faced death. Not an ounce of fear: not when the windows around him were getting too hot to touch; not when the smoke was making it hard to breathe. He will always be a hero to me because of that.

By now we had stopped talking about escape routes. I wanted to use the precious few minutes we had left just to talk. I knew it was time to say good-bye. He told me to give his love to his family, and then we just began talking about all the happiness we shared during our lives together, how lucky we were to have each other. I told him that I wanted to be there with him and die with him, but he said no. He wanted me to live a full life. At one point, when I could tell it was getting harder for him to breathe, I asked if it hurt. He paused for a moment, and then said, “No.” He loved me enough to lie.

In the end, as the smoke got thicker, he just kept whispering, “I love you,” over and over. I was pressing the phone to my ear as hard as I could. I wanted to crawl through the phone lines to him to hold him one last time. Then I suddenly heard this loud explosion through the phone. It reverberated for several seconds. We held our breath; I know we both realized what was about to happen. Then I heard a sharp crack, followed by the sound of an avalanche. It was the building beginning to collapse. I heard Sean gasp once as the floor fell out from underneath him. I called his name into the phone over and over. Then I just sat there huddled on the floor of our living room just holding the phone to my heart.

I remember how I didn’t want that day to end, terrible as it was. I didn’t want to go to sleep, because as long as I was awake it was still a day that I shared with Sean, still a day where he had kissed me good-bye before leaving for work. I could still say, That was just a little while ago. That was only this morning. I knew there would never ever be another day where I could say that.

I think about that last half hour with Sean all the time. It traumatized me to the core of my being, but it was also a gift. My last memory that I have of Sean isn't about pain or fear, but it's about bravery and selflessness and, most of all, about love.

Recorded in New York, New York, on November 19, 2006.

Beverly Echert died when Continental flight 3407 crashed near Buffalo on February 12, 2009.