

What Makes a Hero?



Andrea Booher, photograph, FEMA Photo Library, September 13, 2001.

Supporting Question

1. After the 9/11 attacks, what actions did people take on 9/12 and in the ensuing months?

Focused Inquiry on 9/12

What Makes a Hero?	
C3 Standard	D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.
Disciplinary Practice	Evaluation of sources; understanding of perspectives
Staging the Question	After watching a video about the attacks on 9/11 and the work that began on 9/12, identify examples of heroic behavior.

Supporting Question

After the 9/11 attacks, what actions did people take on 9/12 and in the ensuing months?

Formative Performance Task

List the actions people took on 9/12 and in the ensuing months.

Featured Sources

Source A: Bucket Brigade (responders at the site of the Twin Towers)

Source B: Candiace Baker (NYPD officer)

Source C: Lyndon Harris (Episcopal priest)

Source D: Juan Gonzalez (newspaper columnist)

Source E: Gary Aker (communications expert)

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT What makes a hero? Construct an argument that addresses the compelling question using a bulleted outline of claims and relevant evidence based on the sources provided.
	EXTENSION Make a poster representing the qualities of the individual(s) students identified as heroic.

Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of the construct of a “hero” and the actions of those who, starting on 9/12, were engaged in the rescue, recovery, and cleanup operations for the next nine months. Those attacks and the aftermath have now passed from current event to history. By focusing on a relatively recent event, students should see that history is not resigned to the distant past. Moreover, by featuring individuals and groups who responded to the 9/11 attacks in a variety of ways, students should see that history consists of more than the actions of a famous few.

These insights into the nature of history are complemented by the interest teachers can expect their students to have in the human stories of those responding to tragic circumstances. The featured sources highlight a range of actions taken by people immediately after the attacks and in the weeks and months that followed. Telling those stories offers students a glimpse into the experiences of those involved in a situation of dramatic proportions.

Although this inquiry might be taught at any time during the school year, we recommend it as particularly useful on the first or second day of classes. The focused nature of the inquiry offers an opportunity to introduce and establish a classroom environment that features investigation into genuine questions.

Note: This inquiry is expected to take one-two class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students would benefit from additional instructional experiences (e.g., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, featured sources). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry to meet the needs and interests of their students. This inquiry lends itself to differentiation and modeling of historical thinking skills while assisting students in reading and responding to a variety of sources.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question through a focused inquiry, students have occasion to participate in a genuine inquiry experience, but one in as little as a single class period. To do so, students work through a series of featured sources as they reflect on the compelling and supporting questions and address the formative and summative performance tasks.

Staging the Compelling Question

In staging the compelling question, teachers offer a brief overview of two elements of the inquiry. First, by showing students a short video describing the 9/11 attacks and the actions that began on 9/12, teachers set the historical stage for the compelling question. Then, by having students brainstorm the qualities of a hero, teachers call attention to the key concept of the investigation.

Supporting Question 1

The single supporting question for this focused inquiry is “After the 9/11 attacks, what actions did people take on 9/12 and in the ensuing months?” Cast in this fashion, the question asks students to reflect on the various ways that people responded to the attacks in the immediate and near-term period. The formative performance task asks them to list the range of actions taken. The featured sources (A-E) draw from William H. Groner and Tom Teicholz’s book *9/12: The Epic Battle of the Ground Zero Responders*.

Featured Source A describes the Bucket Brigade, a group of New York police, firefighters, and others who immediately began removing debris from the Twin Towers site in the search for survivors. Featured Source B profiles NYPD officer Candace Baker who aided in the initial response to the tragedy and then served to help identify remains. Featured Source C depicts the actions of Lyndon Harris, an Episcopal priest who organized food and drink services for victims and responders at Trinity Episcopal Church. Featured Source D outlines the investigations conducted by Juan Gonzalez, a *New York Daily News* columnist, who wrote a series of reports on the health effects of the dust created by the collapse of the Twin Towers. Featured Source E describes the actions of communications expert Gary Aker in restoring communication lines in the aftermath of the attack.

Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have explored the nature of the 9/11 attacks and the 9/12 rescue, recovery, and cleanup operation and have read and reflected on profiles of several individuals and groups who responded immediately and over time. In doing so, they have considered the broad-brush question of what makes a hero by focusing on the actions taken by the people described in the featured sources. In the summative performance task, students construct an evidence-based argument that addresses the compelling question. It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms. Given the focused inquiry setting, however, students might represent their arguments in the form of a bulleted outline.

Students’ arguments likely will vary, but could include any of the following:

- A hero is someone who risks her or his health in service to others.
- A hero is someone who perseveres in light of confusing and adverse conditions.
- Heroes are people who make a contribution to a cause.

To extend their arguments, students could make a poster representing the qualities of the individual(s) students identified as heroic. They can then display these posters around the classroom as use them as points of comparison as they encounter other historical and contemporary individuals in their studies.

Staging the Compelling Question

Featured Source

Source A: William H. Groner, *9/12*, video. Available at:
<https://vimeo.com/398393382/d03b7a3cd9>



Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source A: William H. Groner and Tom Teicholz, book section describing the Bucket Brigade in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York City, *9/12: The Epic Battle of the 9/11 Responders* (excerpt), 2019.

Bucket brigade:

In those first days the disorganized mass of police, fire fighters, emergency response personnel, construction workers, and volunteers who showed up at the site formed a human chain to remove buckets of debris and allow the search for what they hoped were trapped survivors. The bucket brigade snaked throughout the site, a sea of hardhats of different colors. They wore gloves but little other protection; some had paper masks, and some of the firefighters had breathing masks, but many, many on the bucket brigade did not.

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source B: William H. Groner and Tom Teicholz, book sections describing the actions of NYPD officer Candiace Baker in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York City, *9/12: The Epic Battle of the 9/11 Responders* (excerpts), 2019.

Candiace Baker:

On the morning of September 11, 2001, (Candiace) Baker was sitting at her desk at One Police Plaza when she heard a boom. She chalked it up to somebody moving something or something falling. It was just a noise in New York City. When she learned that a plane had flown into the North Tower, Baker joined her fellow detectives in their gym room, which had a panoramic view of the WTC. There she watched as the second plane flew into the South Tower. She did not understand what was happening, but tears flooded her eyes. Other detectives were crying as well.

Baker was soon assigned to the missing persons' hotline. She took hundreds of phone calls. To this day, she remembers them vividly: voices full of fear and the desperation of those who didn't know what happened to their loved ones. Baker and her fellow officers sat in a small room answering all those phone calls, taking down names, addresses, phone numbers, and other information. After each call, she would stand, walk to the water cooler, have a drink of water, and wipe away tears. Then she would go back and sit down, waiting for the next phone call to come in....

When Candiace Baker showed up at Ground Zero on September 12, she was assigned to do perimeter security at the site. On that day and those that followed, she sometimes had to stand in place for twelve-hour shifts, answering questions of anyone who asked. She also worked on the bucket brigade. They were using their hands to lift rocks, move them aside, and keep digging because they were still hoping to find survivors of the rubble. She was breathing in dust that made her choke whether she was wearing a paper mask or had taken it off because it had become clogged. Baker's fingers were hurting, blistered, and filthy....But she continued while breathing in dust and coughing and choking, knowing that every little thing she did would help.

The Fresh Kills landfill, which was opened on Staten Island in 1948 to accommodate New York's ever-growing store of garbage, had been closed because it had exceeded its capacity. However, on 9/11 [Mayor Rudy] Giuliani asked the governor's permission to re-open the landfill as a site where they could gather the debris, sort through it, and search for evidence and for human remains. By 2:00 a.m. on September 12, the first truckloads of rubble began to arrive at the landfill....

Thousands of workers, rotated in shifts of twelve hours or more, examined and sorted debris. When identified, metal from the WTC was taken to another area of the landfill, where it was further sorted by type and size. Small debris was put on the conveyor belt to be sorted.

There was no logic to what you would find sorting through the debris of Ground Zero. What items survived seemed so random. Candiace Baker recalled, "We found muddy panties with the store antitheft sensor still on them, which were from the Victoria's Secret store in the underground WTC shopping concourse. We found parts of shoes that

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were probably from DSW, the shoe store that was also in the underground concourse. They were muddy jeans that we presumed were from The Gap. There are all these metal items– identical—that I kept finding. It looked familiar, but it took me the longest time to figure out what it was. It was actually the lever for a toilet bowl. There were tons of them. No faucets or toilets, but those little levers, they survived”

While working at Fresh Kills, (Candace) Baker had nightmares and lost much of her appetite. When she tried to sleep, she'd instead think about some of the phone calls she answered on September 11...”You don't pick and choose your memories and your thoughts,” she learned. Her fiancé at the time was also a police officer who also worked on the cleanup. When they got home after work, they would take off their clothes in the garage and put everything in a garbage bag because she didn't want any of the dust to come into her house. She would clean the washing machine both before and after washing their clothes. One day, when her fiancé blew his nose, all this black tar-like mucus came out. "What is that" She asked. He answered, "I don't know"....

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source C: William H. Groner and Tom Teicholz, book sections describing the actions of Lyndon Harris in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York City, *9/12: The Epic Battle of the 9/11 Responders* (excerpts), 2019.

Lyndon Harris:

Lyndon Harris and his family had moved to New York City in 1995 so he could pursue a doctoral degree in theology and teach one day. While still a full-time student, Harris worked in a variety of churches in and around New York City. He was particularly adept at working with young adults. Doing so brought him in to contact with St. Paul's chapel in Lower Manhattan, part of the parish of Trinity Episcopal Church, which stood less than a mile from the World Trade Center....

Harris would never forget the morning of September 11. He was in his office at St. Paul's, about to have coffee with the future archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams....Harris did not think it all that unusual when sirens suddenly went off. Then he heard that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. He imagined it must have been a small private plane....

Harris and John Allen, A Trinity colleague, decided to walk to the World Trade Center site to offer help. They made it to the corner of Liberty and Church Street and were standing right outside the Burger King there when the second plane hit the South Tower....He and Allen thought that perhaps St. Paul's could be used as a triage center.

Despite the chaos outside, St. Paul's was following their own emergency protocol. Harris helped evacuate children from their third-floor nursery school to the basement. Shortly afterward, the first tower collapsed, shaking the ground and filling the building with thick, dark smoke. Harris could barely see, but he and others St. Paul personnel each grabbed a child, and together they ran out the back of the building. As they ran, the second tower collapsed, and they were engulfed in an enormous ash cloud.

Eventually the children were reunited with their worried parents and Harris made it home. The next day he put on his work boots, grabbed a bag of water bottles and his Trinity Church ID, and headed downtown, walking down Broadway....The chapel was open to any who wanted to take a rest, have a drink of water, or pray. At the corner of Broadway and Fulton, Harris set up a food service offering hamburgers and hot dogs, grilled right there in front of St. Paul's. They called it "the Barbeque on Broadway." By the weekend after the attacks, they had eight grills going and were serving three hundred to four hundred hamburgers a day. It wasn't long before the Health Department came by. Because they didn't know the source of the food and had no idea what was in the air, the health inspectors shut down the operation. But after the inspectors left, Harris fired up the coals again. This continued for several days, with the Health Department shutting them down twice a day, and Harris starting back up each time....

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source D: William H. Groner and Tom Teicholz, book sections describing the actions of Juan Gonzalez in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York City, *9/12: The Epic Battle of the 9/11 Responders* (excerpts), 2019.

Juan Gonzalez:

Juan Gonzalez had been a *New York Daily News* columnist since 1987....Within days of 9/11, Gonzalez was hearing stories about officers developing hacking coughs and spilling up dark phlegm....He'd been in the Financial District himself and knew the air at Ground Zero did not smell healthy—and he certainly didn't believe the government officials' claims that the air was safe. Wanting to learn more, he spoke with Joel Kupferman of the New York Environmental Law and Justice Project.

In his column on September 18, 2001, "Health Hazards in Air Worry Trade Center Workers," Gonzalez reported that Kupferman had independent labs test the dust around Ground zero and that they found greater-than-normal asbestos contamination. The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) explained away these concerns as temporary spikes and that any irritation or respiration issues were not serious and would subside with time.

Kupferman, undeterred, had filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the EPA to release its own test results on the air, dust, and debris at Ground Zero. He shared more than eight hundred pages of the released EPA documents with Gonzalez, which formed the bases of his October 26, 2001 column featured on the newspaper's front page with the headline, "A Toxic Nightmare at Disaster Site." Gonzalez's reporting forced the EPA to confirm that they had found elevated levels of toxic substances such as benzene, PCBs, lead, and chromium in the air and water at Ground Zero.

Supporting Question 1

Featured Source

Source E: William H. Groner and Tom Teicholz, book sections describing the actions of communications expert Gary Akers in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York City, *9/12: The Epic Battle of the 9/11 Responders* (excerpt), 2019.

Gary Acker:

Gary Acker, a satellite communications expert, was head of AT&T's Network Disaster Recovery Team. He was running a training exercise at a location in New Jersey on the morning of 9/11. His team was readying one of their command vehicles, an emergency communications vehicle (ECV), a trailer full of sophisticated technology, and was loading a satellite dish onto its roof—basically putting a delicate piece of equipment on a moving platform—when Acker received an urgent call from his wife, Alison. “Turn on the radio, turn on a TV,” she demanded. Acker would later say of that morning, “God was with me, because we were on the Bird,” meaning they already had the satellite and the ECV ready to go. The bridges and tunnels had been closed, but Acker’s team was able to call ahead and get approval to drive to Ground Zero to help restore phone service to Lower Manhattan. They arrived at the site at midnight on September 11. Amid the tall buildings in Lower Manhattan, they searched for the right spot to put the ECV to connect with the satellite. Acker knew it could take hours to get the setup right, and that reestablishing communications was going to be a nightmare, but he remained overwhelmingly positive and confident. They decided to park the ECV outside police headquarters at One Police Plaza, and in no time they completed their setup. During the first minutes of September 12 they worked to restore police communications, then worked at manning phone lines across from the Pile. They were able to get a dinner cruise ship from New Jersey to set up ship-to-shore communications for emergency responders and to make humanitarian calls. Acker had about a dozen members of his team going all night, in the ECV and outside of it. It was like being everywhere at once, and Acker had no time to think about anything other than doing the job he knew best.

At first, Gary Acker’s doctors didn’t know what was ailing him. Then, suddenly, people were talking about “World Trade Center cough,” and his doctors decided that Acker, . . .who had been almost a month working at Ground Zero, was suffering from that. His wife, Alison, recalled that, on a July 2002 break from being at Ground Zero, they went up to Lake Placid. It was particularly memorable because, although Gary had never before taken so much as a sick day, after returning from Lake Placid he was sick for most of the next year. . . Acker was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a plasma cell cancer, in August 2005, it was already in advanced stages and had spread to his bones. For the next month he underwent chemotherapy every day. He tried to remain positive, upbeat, strong. He remained loyal to his employer, about whom he would never say a bad word. He talked about wanting to take another hunting trip with his sons.

Following chemo, Acker needed to undergo a stem cell transplant, which, in itself, is a risky procedure. The body becomes very vulnerable to infection, and sometimes the patient’s system just gives out and closes down. Even if patients survive the procedure they are kept in intensive care for around a week, during which time things can be touch-and-go. Acker underwent the procedure, but it took its toll. “I have no energy. My energy level is down,” he said, “but I am alive.”

“I know why I got sick,” he said. “We had no masks, no respirators. The company and the city provided nothing.”

Still, he said, “No matter what the outcome, I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Gary, a bull of a man, couldn’t stand. (T)hen he said, “Call an ambulance,” which he’d never done before. The next morning, at 6:00, age fifty-nine, he passed away at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in Hamilton, New Jersey.