

Survivors Begin Effort to Save Stairway That Was 9/11 'Path to Freedom'

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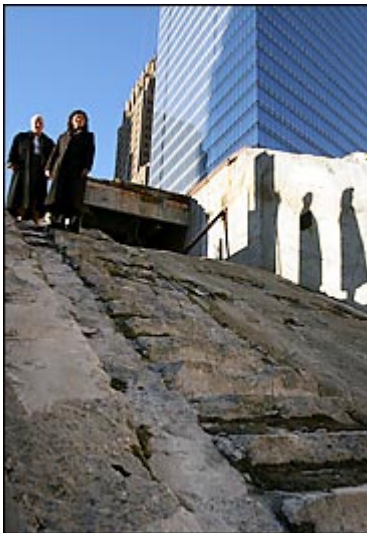
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By [DAVID W. DUNLAP](#)

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These were the final steps.

After hundreds of workers made a terrifying floor-by-floor descent from their offices in the sky on 9/11, as the twin towers shuddered and rained ruin, they found a gangway to safety from the elevated plaza down the Vesey Street stairs.



[Enlarge This Image](#)

Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Patty Clark, left, and Kayla Bergeron, revisiting the Vesey Street stairway at ground zero on Nov. 17.

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Shannon Stapleton/Reuters

Kayla Bergeron, left, and Patty Clark walked together to safety on 9/11.

"They were the path to freedom," recalled Kayla Bergeron, the chief of public and government affairs for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Her own 68-story journey ended as she walked down that staircase with Patty Clark, a senior aviation adviser at the authority, hand in hand for the last few yards to Vesey Street.

These are the final steps in another sense. The Vesey Street staircase, also called the "survivors' stairway," is the World Trade Center's last above-ground remnant.

It escapes much public attention because, from the street, it is almost unrecognizable.

Closer up, however, two flights of stairs come into view, next to what looks like a concrete slide but was once the base of an escalator. The upper steps still have their crisp granite treads. The lower steps are as craggy as a Roman antiquity. They convey a sense of human scale on the gigantically emptied landscape of ground zero.

But they also stand within the outline of the future Tower 2, an office building planned by Silverstein Properties. That is why a preservation effort has begun. Possibilities include moving the staircase elsewhere on the trade center site, making it an architectural feature attached to or enclosed by Tower 2, or - far less likely - redrawing the Tower 2 outline to avoid it.

"It's certainly a very significant remembrance of what happened that day," said Charles A. Gargano, vice chairman of the Port Authority, on a visit to the staircase last week with Ms. Bergeron and Ms. Clark. "Somehow I would hope that it can be preserved somewhere in the site, if not within Building 2."

The World Trade Center Survivors' Network hopes the stairs can stay rooted. "There's a great power in their being where they were," said Gerry Bogacz, a founding member of the group. "After the south tower collapsed, that was the only way anyone could get off the plaza."

Peg Breen, the president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and Frank E. Sanchis III, the senior vice president of the Municipal Art Society, have also asked that the staircase be permanently preserved in place.

"There will never be another original element of the World Trade Center complex in its original street-level location," they wrote to the site's developer, Larry A. Silverstein, on Nov. 10.

Silverstein Properties had no comment.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Ms. Clark and Ms. Bergeron separately made their way down more than 40 stories of 1 World Trade Center, the north tower, and found each other on the 23rd floor. As they reached a landing in a stairwell on the fourth or fifth floor, the south tower collapsed. There was a terrific noise, then a violent vibration. "At that point," Ms. Bergeron said, "I thought we were going to die."

Ms. Clark looked up to see the stairwell itself twisting. Then the lights went out. "You just closed your eyes and you prayed that it be over," she said, adding, "And then it stopped and the lights came back on."

Getting out of the tower proved hellish, too, through calf-high water, under dangling electrical wires, by a dim emergency light that faded to darkness. They felt their way along a row of lockers, until a firefighter opened a door.

What greeted them outside was a dust cloud so opaque and white that it appeared luminous. "It was light," Ms. Clark said, "but you could not see." Rather than dash across the open plaza, they made their way under the protective eaves of the United States Custom House and 5 World Trade Center to Vesey Street.

"What we had to walk over getting out of 1, if we had to negotiate out to Church Street - I'm not certain that we'd be having this conversation," Ms. Clark said.

Their trial did not end when they reached the Vesey Street staircase. A large man ahead of Ms. Clark began to clutch his chest. "I hit him," she recalled. "I'm like: 'Buddy, keep going. You cannot have gotten this far and not get out of here.' "

At the base of the stairs, Ms. Clark said, a Port Authority police officer heading back into the building stopped to allow the man to use his respirator - a gesture that may have saved the officer's life.

Speaking personally, Ms. Clark called the Vesey Street staircase a "monument to all of us" that embodies the metaphorical power of steps.

"It's religious. It's literary," she said. " 'Ladder of success.' 'Jacob's ladder.' It's all of those things. 'Step program.' It's all very much woven into how we explain things. 'Stairway to heaven.' "

Ms. Clark said: "Your image of the World Trade Center is two towers piercing the sky. This is the only thing that's above grade. And the only remnant that was part of that thing that pierced the sky