



Direduck!

Photographs & text by Jane Hanstein Cunniffe

I moved to New York City twenty years ago last May. I'm 41, married and the mother of Henry (age two), and Eli, born on June 11th, the day Timothy McVeigh was executed. Sometimes the days get long, so I invent tasks, errands and outings to keep the three of us from going stir crazy.

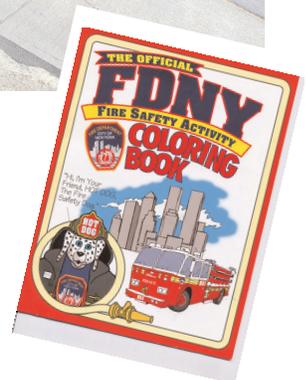
On a beautiful day in August, we were limited to venturing no further than two blocks from our apartment on East 28th Street. Eli was just seven weeks and Henry too big to be trusted walking long distances. So on that beautiful ok-so-I'm-a-little-bored August day, I head for the playground. On the way, we passed the firehouse on 29th. Henry has a particular fondness for *direducks*. But on this day, he's shy. A firefighter was standing out front, the two giant red trucks looming behind him.

The firefighter's name was Vinny, and without hesitating he had Henry going through a series of exciting drills one after another. In the truck, on the truck, the helmet, the hose. I had a camera and took pictures. Henry looked like a 35 lb. fireman, or at the very least a cadet. Vinny was unbelievable. He taught us about the trucks. He explained the difference between a ladder and an engine. It was fascinating stuff. I asked about the names on the side of the truck and he told us about the men who'd lost their lives in the line of duty. His stories were peppered with talk of his thirteen-month-old daughter. How wonderful she was and how he couldn't wait till she was old enough to go through similar firehouse antics. When he talked about her he glowed. I was ready to go, but Vinny still had to show Henry the hose. Spraying passing taxicabs with water proved to be a highlight. Henry was euphoric. Finally, we thanked him for the coloring book and said good-bye.

Already another mother-son team had approached and were going through the identical drill. It wasn't a fluke. Vinny had to have been one of the nicest guys in the world. Granted, I barely knew him.



On September 11th, Vincent Princiotta was one of the 343 firefighters lost at the World Trade Center.





Vincent Princiotta
Firefighter
Ladder 7

I didn't find out he was among the missing for a week or two. I hadn't known his last name. I hadn't seen his picture in the newspaper – having carefully studied each and every one of the many Vincents listed. Carefully looking at every moustache.

But Vincent Princiotta hadn't had a moustache in his FDNY photo. In the newspaper, he'd looked more like Tony Danza. Nor had his photo been posted at the station. At least not that I could see, as I sheepishly and somberly walked by the firestation in the days following the attack.

When I did find out that Vinny was among the missing, I was stunned. Till then there had just been the friend of a cousin and the husband of a woman in my Body by Baby exercise class. *Just?*

I went back to my file of 2001 Summer Photos and opened up the one called Firetruck. The pictures alone showed what a great guy Vincent Princiotta was. So I spent the afternoon gingerly printing them out and composing a note to drop off at the station. A few days later, I walked by the firehouse and there Henry and Vinny were, tucked in amidst the candles and collages, flowers, poems and pictures.



So this is life after September 11th. Thankfully, the only thing Henry took away from this still incomprehensible nightmare is an even greater affection for direducks (of course, he also likes the Merican dags). But direducks are front and center. We hear sirens...his eyes light up and he cocks his little redhead and says "Direduck?" All the while, I'm listening for more sirens and thinking of John Ashcroft's most recent terror warning.

I got a call a few nights ago from Jerry Marrone, a firefighter who worked with Vinny. He'd called all over town looking for me. They'd like to use one of my pictures on the alter at his memorial service. It is the most recent shot taken of him, not one from another time. I am honored to make even the smallest contribution. Vincent Princiotta had been a firefighter for sixteen years. His daughter, Christina is just a toddler. And she deserves to know her father. All I can say is, "Little girl, your Daddy loved you very very much."



August 2001



October 2001

On November 10, 2001 there will be a memorial service for Vincent Princiotta at St. Catharine's Church in Blauvelt, NY.