

MASTER'S STUDENT CAPTURES SEPTEMBER 11 MOMENTS

# The will to survive



BY KATHLEEN CRAVEN

In the midst of the unbelievable destruction following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center stood a large sphere, battered and covered with rubble. Once the center of the towers' Tobin Plaza fountain, the sculpture now stands in nearby Battery Park as a memorial to survival and endurance.

For recent Boise State master's graduate Michelle McGee-Werner, that sphere is an analogy of the American spirit. "It stands for strength and the ability to endure," she says. "The survivors of the World Trade Center inspired the rebirth of the American culture through the public's understanding of their narratives."

It is their stories of survival that form the basis for McGee-Werner's master's thesis in interdisciplinary studies, combining communication and public affairs.

Moved by the World Trade Center disaster, McGee-Werner looked through close to a thousand tales of survival and analyzed 30 first-person narratives in an attempt to provide public administrators with a greater understanding of how the human family



Michelle McGee-Werner based her interdisciplinary studies master's thesis on World Trade Center survivor stories.

reacts to a crisis experience.

From Chris Young, who found herself trapped alone in an elevator for an hour on her way down from the 99th floor and was escorted out of Tower 1 by a firefighter just moments before its collapse, to George Phoenix, who worked with other survivors to literally chisel a hole through an elevator shaft wall in that same tower so they could climb to freedom, the stories resonate with heroism and determination.

McGee-Werner noticed two recurring themes in the stories she read — family and cooperation. The thought of reunion with family members spurred many to heroic effort, she says. Many also reached out to help others, despite the danger to themselves.

"An interesting point is that of the 30 stories, none of them talk

about crawling over each other trying to get out," says Marvin Cox, communication department head and chair of McGee-Werner's thesis committee. "People were helping other people; there wasn't a mass scramble or panic. I thought that was interesting. It seems to fly in the face of other disaster stories you hear about."

Cox says McGee-Werner's analysis could be a useful tool for disaster relief organizations, a thought echoed by Dick Kinney, a public policy professor who also sat on the thesis committee.

"Michelle's study offers important ideas for the training and actions of disaster response people," he says. "It suggests how they should listen to and talk with survivors and how they can help them."

"This helped me realize how important life is, and how I sometimes take life for granted," McGee-Werner says. "After doing research like this, it makes your eyes open up to an understanding that life can go at a moment's notice."

The thesis, titled "Survivalism in America: A Narrative Analysis of Stories From the World Trade Center Disaster," is available in Boise State's Albertsons Library.