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It will take more than Muslims to rehab Ground Zero

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

NEW YORK -- Andrew Kelly was driving drunk the night his Jeep hit Vionique Valnord-Kassime in Brooklyn about a year ago. She was trying to hail a cab. He was speeding by.

She died. He lived.

The details are horrifyingly similar to the sad tales repeated every day in other places. In this case, a 30-something off-duty New York City police officer struck and killed a 30-something woman. She was black. He is white.

A week or so ago, Kelly met the woman's family in court. He got the surprise of his life. And so did the rest of us.

Kelly had struck a deal with the D.A., pleading guilty to second-degree vehicular manslaughter and leaving the police department. He got off with 90 days in jail. But that's not the real story.

Leaving court, Kelly approached the victim's family and apologized. Then, Varius Valnord, a Church of God pastor whose daughter died that awful night, looked him in the eye and said: "I forgive you, we forgive you, my family forgives you."

Could you believe? The father forgave the drunk who killed his daughter? No? Well, it really happened.

It actually is hard to believe when New York is too often the national headquarters of unbridled anger. Everyday some churlish blogger or vulgar commentator sets off another fire. The latest roiling controversy is a case in point.

The so-called "Ground Zero mosque" began as a residential condominium. Then a local imam convinced the developer to build a Muslim community center instead. So a condo became "Cordoba House," and then "Park51," with worship and meeting space for 1,000 to 2,000 people.

You had to know an Islamic community center near Ground Zero was an accident waiting to happen. No matter that it might improve the neighborhood (there is a strip club nearby). No matter that the buildings it would replace -- an old ConEd substation and a derelict commercial building -- are useless eyesores. No matter, even, as the cabbies have been saying, that there's not an inch of parking space down there.

They still want to build it.

What's going on? Does the imam not get it?

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What about the other side? Has compassion for the 9/11 families gone rancid and congealed into some kind of boorish hatred of Muslims?

Or is the classless whining about whether Muslims should be allowed to pray and play in downtown Manhattan erupting from beyond the fringe and moving inward?

Either way, three things are clear: first, a lot of people got hurt when the towers fell and they're still hurting; second, there is a growing and simmering fear of Muslims across our land; and third, too many loutish loudmouths fuel the anger on both sides.

It has to stop.

So, what to do? I think they should build -- or somebody should built -- a sparkling tower to replace those two crummy buildings. But I think it should be a place to bring people -- all people -- together, not just Muslims (and the folks who would picket the construction).

I think, however, that it should be called, and really be, the Park51 Interfaith Center -- a religious condo with space for all religions. Let's not get bogged down by the details. This is New York; they can figure out anything.

The important thing is to let common sense and faith in God prevail. You half want that young woman's pastor-father to be the one to cut the deal.

As politicians posture and intractable positions harden, the city and the country need someone with the mettle to forgive his daughter's killer to sit down and talk some sense into all sides.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic Studies. This column is provided by Religion News Service.]

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