

In the Ashes of Sept. 11, He Found a New Calling

Mat Tully was headed to a Manhattan grand jury appearance on Sept. 11, 2001, when he decided to make a quick detour.

It was just before 9 a.m. and the late summer morning was already so warm that the lawyer for brokerage giant Morgan Stanley figured he'd stop by his office at Two World Trade Center to drop off his coat.

But as he stepped inside the lobby to head up to the 65th floor, a plane crashed into the building's twin next door, unraveling a nightmare before his eyes.

His life was changed forever.

Five hundred miles away, Joe Mansour's life also changed.

The native of Beirut, Lebanon was working at a Lee County, Va. federal penitentiary when he began receiving derogatory e-mails almost immediately after 9/11. He was called racially insulting names and he was passed up for a series of awards.

Mansour, 33, filed a discrimination claim in June, and Tully took the case - for free.

For his compassion and hard work, on May 28 Tully will be named the 2005 American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee's Pro-Bono Attorney of the Year during the group's 25th Anniversary National Convention in Washington.

"Once I wanted to be the richest, most powerful lawyer on Wall Street," said Tully, a former military paratrooper and a major with the Army National Guard at Watervliet Arsenal. "But 9/11 changed my life. Now I get up in the mornings just happy to get up."

Tully, who also is a former federal law enforcement officer with the Department of Justice, said he took Mansour's case because no one - regardless of race or ethnicity - should have to suffer for the misdeeds of others.

Mansour said he doesn't know what he would have done without Tully.

"I love this country more than anything," he said. "This tragedy changed my life, too. Matt survived it and still had the courage to defend an Arab-American. I want the public to know that not every Arab-American is a terrorist."

Until the attacks, Mansour, who became a naturalized U.S. citizen at ages, said he'd never had trouble with any of his colleagues. He was a dispute resolution specialist and member of the prison's SWAT team.

As a patriot, Mansour also played a vital role in the war on terror, including warning federal agencies, of known terrorists corresponding from prisons with other known terrorists, Tully said. He had received 70 awards from the Department of Justice, FBI and federal Immigration service.

But during meetings with supervisors, the 10-year employee and Arabic translator said he was told to go back to where he came from.

"One gentleman came up to me and said, 'I see your brothers -are at work again,'" Mansour said. "A note on my car said, 'Death to all Arabs.'" Another said, "Why don't you go make a bomb? You're good at it."

Hours after the attacks, Tully was called to patrol a devastated Ground Zero for the first three days. But even earlier - as the buildings, collapsed - he had struggled to find 'his fiancée, Kim, in a cloud of choking dust as she desperately tried to find him.

She had been arguing with police to let her into the tower when it collapsed and, he feared for her safety.

In the panic that ensued, Tully managed to get word to Kim through cellphone calls to their parents and eventually found her near the courthouse several blocks away.

First he told her to meet him at the base of the Brooklyn bridge. But once the span was closed, he arranged to meet her near the downtown courthouse he had been heading to.

"She was 500 feet in front of me, covered in ash he recalled. "I couldn't recognize her."

Today, life is good for Tully, the 30-year-old former downstater, who has a successful Colonie law firm with childhood friend Greg Rinckey that is about to expand. He and Kim, now his wife, live in Troy and will soon move to Niskayuna.

"This isn't just a job for me, it's a passion," he said. "I gave up an extremely promising Wall Street career ... for a different way of life. But my priorities are different now."

Some people go to law school to make big bucks, Tully mused, "But I think I went to law school to make a big change."