**[00:00:00] Speaker 1:** There are few things that make people successful. Taking a step forward to change their lives is one successful trait, but it takes some time to get there. How do you move forward to greet the success that awaits you? Welcome to Next Steps Forward with host Chris Meek. Each week, Chris brings on another guest who has successfully taken the next steps forward. Now here is Chris Meek.

**[00:00:33] Speaker 2:** Hello. Welcome to this week's episode of Next Steps Forward, and I'm your host, Chris Meek. As always, it's an honor to have you with us. Next Steps Forward is committed to helping others achieve more than ever while experiencing greater personal empowerment and wellbeing. With the 24th observation of the 9-11 attacks just two days away, we're joined by remarkably brave and determined woman, Kristen Breitweiser. Kristen lost her husband in terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of 2,977 innocent people at Ground Zero, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. After losing her husband, Ron, in the attacks, Kristen Breitweiser became a leading voice for the families of 9-11 victims. She was instrumental in lobbying for the creation of the 9-11 Commission to investigate the attacks and ensure accountability from the U.S. government. Her work included testifying before Congress and pushing for legislative changes to support victims of terrorism. Kristen shared her story in her book, Wake Up Call, The Political Education of a 9-11 Widow, in which she chronicles her journey from suburban housewife to outspoken activist. It details her personal experiences, the challenges she faced, and the political battles she fought to seek justice for her husband and other victims. Kristen Breitweiser, thank you for being here and your willingness to share your story.

**[00:01:44] Speaker 3:** Thanks for having me, Chris. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you.

**[00:01:48] Speaker 2:** No, it's an honor. You and I met a handful of months ago, randomly, and so I would like to say, hopefully you feel the same, that we've become friends through this journey. And so it's an honor to have you here, and I've met some others in your circle, so again, thank you. Kristen, before we talk about that day and everything that followed, could you tell us a little bit about your life, your family, your work, Ron's work, and what life was like with him before September 11th, 2001?

**[00:02:16] Speaker 3:** Sure. Well, I think that we lived kind of, in retrospect, I realized we lived in a bubble. We had a typical, normal life. We lived in the suburbs of New York. Ron commuted into the city every day to Wall Street, and we had just had a little girl. She was two years old. And our life revolved around our little family. And we thought we were good citizens, good Americans. We were patriotic. We volunteered. We paid our taxes. I thought we were pretty engaged with the news and worldly events. We had traveled and seen the world. And I think what shocked me the most, as thinking that I was an educated person and pretty up on things, I truly had no idea who Osama bin Laden was. I had never heard of al-Qaeda. And yet, somehow, al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden and 19 hijackers stormed into my home and my family and destroyed it on the morning of September 11th, leaving my daughter and me alone. And my husband turned to ash before my very eyes. And so when I look back at the years that I had with Ron, that Caroline and I shared with Ron, it just seems like some dream, like an idyllic bubble that I had hoped my life would be like. And obviously, it's nothing like that. We wanted to have four kids. So that never happened. And Ron was 39 when he died. He was a hardworking man. He was a great dad. He loved Caroline, spent every minute he could with her when he was not at work. And that was what our family was like, basically like every other family across America.

**[00:04:07] Speaker 2:** And what are some of the small everyday moments with Ron that you treasure most when you look back now?

**[00:04:12] Speaker 3:** I mean, he was a very thoughtful, romantic guy. So there were just so many little things that he would do that I wish Caroline had in her life to see, like that's how a man treats a woman. And so everything from always buying me a bouquet of simple flowers every week and sometimes picking the flowers in our own garden and letting me know that he appreciated everything I did in helping run the house and raise our little girl. And then I think of silly things, something that's like a life lesson. He was a money manager and one of the stocks that he was looking into at the time, remember this was in 2001, was Costco because Costco had just sort of come to our neck of the woods in New Jersey. And he wanted to go with me because he was sort of like a Warren Buffett disciple. And he's like, I'm going to go with you to Costco. And I was like, really? And so on a Saturday morning, we go into Costco and he's like with the big cart and Caroline sitting in the cart and he goes past like this huge bucket of peanuts. And he's like, oh, they have peanuts. He's like, I'm buying those. And I'm like, you're going to buy a container of peanuts. I'm like, you're going to die. I'm like, no one eats that many peanuts. I'm like, that's not healthy. And he's like, I'm getting them. And so, you know, after he had died, I opened the cabinet where the peanuts were. And I just sort of thought to myself, you know what? You should have eaten the damn peanuts because it's like in life, it doesn't matter. Like if you want the peanuts at Costco, eat the peanuts because life is short and you never know when it's going to end. And so it was sort of like this emblazoned memory in my head, like eat the peanuts. Like, you know what I mean? It sounds like a silly little thing, but it just stuck in my head. And on the morning of September 11th, you know, one of the cute things that he used to do was we used to juice vegetables and fruits in the morning. And he kissed me and Caroline goodbye and said, I'm sorry, I didn't clean out the juicer. He's like, but I want to catch the early ferry. And if he had cleaned out the juicer, he probably would have survived because he would have caught the next ferry, which would have been just arriving when the first tower was hit. And so little things like that, that he was just so thoughtful and caring and wanted to do nice things for people, not just me and not just Caroline, but everyone. And so that's what I remember about him. That's what I instill in Caroline about him. And honestly, that's what I see inside Caroline as a human being. Like she's she's just such a good person and has a kind heart. And I believe that that's Ron shining through her.

**[00:06:56] Speaker 2:** Thank you for taking us back to that. And if it's not too difficult for you in the hours after the attacks, what were you hearing, thinking or hoping for?

**[00:07:05] Speaker 3:** I mean, Ron called me on the morning of September 11th. I had been running late and rushing out the door with Caroline. She needed to go to some speech therapy classes and usual typical morning with kids and dogs, right? Like dogs barking, dragging in, you know, yard pine cones and whatever. My daughter is running around and I'm just trying not to be late. And the phone rang and I picked it up and it was Ron. And he was like, sweet, sweet. I'm OK. I don't want you to worry. I'm OK. And I didn't have the television on. We weren't big television people. And I was like, OK, you're OK. And he's like, no. He's like, you don't know. And I was like, no, what's the matter? And he told me to turn on the television and I turned on the TV and I saw that the one tower was on fire. And he's like, it's not my building. I don't want you to worry. I knew you would worry because you wouldn't know where I was. But it's not my building. I'm OK. I remember being like, holy shit, what happened? And he's like, I don't know. I was sitting at my desk. He had a corner window office seat and he's like, I was working and my cheek got red. And I felt warmth. And he's like, and I turned and I just saw like a huge fire. And he's like and and then his voice cracked. And he was like, you know, people are falling out the windows. And the way he said it, I just knew he was terribly scared. He had told me to turn on the television to look at it. And he was asking, you know, what was going on. And so his voice cracked and he had said that he was watching people fall out the windows. And I could just tell that he was so scared. And I was like, but you're OK. And he's like, yeah, I'm OK. He's like, it's not my tower. I didn't want you to worry because I knew you wouldn't know. He's like, but I'm OK and I love you. He's like, I'm going to go down to the trading floor and try to find out more information. And he told me that they were told to stay at their desks to not evacuate. And, you know, frankly, in retrospect, I blame myself to some degree. I wasn't really plugged in in ninety three. Ron and I were not together then. So like I didn't I didn't have some impulse to say just get out of the building, disregard that order to stay in the building, just get out of there. I think ironically enough, many of the women in Ron's office did survive. Many of the survivors were there in the towers in ninety three. And I think it's interesting that women survived, considering you always hear that old idiom about women's intuition. But Ron did not leave. He remained at his desk or went down to the trading floor. And so we had just hung up the phone and I saw his building exactly where I knew he was explode on television. I was watching a channel that didn't show the plane pierced through the building. It just showed the other side of it, which was where Ron was. And so I just, you know, I literally have a recollection of like my brain splitting in half and just like everything just shifted in my head. And my world has just never been the same since. I it's just it was the most horrendous, horrible. Thing, I don't think my brain ever really could actually process what it was seeing at that moment because it was so just incredible, right? Like so not believable. It didn't look real. And I didn't I couldn't imagine that it was happening, you know?

**[00:10:45] Speaker 2:** Well, to that point about, you know, seeing it real time and not processing that. We all know that for the days, if not weeks after that, that's all that was on TV where those planes were in the towers. Did you just have the TV shut off completely? Did you then process it? I just can't imagine going through that.

**[00:11:05] Speaker 3:** It's pretty bad. I mean, and it's something that I don't think a lot of people realize with the widows and the kids, you know, we have to see the murder of our loved ones all the time. And it happens when you don't even think it's going to happen. You can be on a plane and someone could be watching a stupid movie and you see the murder of your loved one on a plane, on your way to a vacation in Florida or wherever. If your kids are in school out of nowhere, it comes up, you know. And I don't know that other than, you know, families of the Kennedys or Martin Luther King, I don't think people have to really witness the absolute moment of their loved one's murder in the kind of way that we have to year in and year out, day in and day out. And it is something that keeps the wound open. And it really makes it impossible to sort of have closure and to have a sense of peace. And what compounds that, I think, is that here we are 24 years later. We still don't have any answers. We didn't receive any accountability. There has been no attempt for the government through any presidential administration or any Congress to provide us with truth, transparency, accountability and justice. And so when you take those two things, having it be such a public death, a death that is repeated endlessly, a death that a mass murder that is used as the predicate to roll back privacy rights, to go into wars based on lies, to expand the executive branch powers and the war powers. I mean, even to this day, presidents go into countries and they cite 9-11. So it's constantly brought up that way. It's constantly brought up in video, on television, in movies, in places that it really you would never expect to see it. And then coupling that with the fact that the government itself that has frankly used 9-11 in so many different ways, you know, that really have not done anything for the widows and children in 24 years, it's really it's sort of like a torture in the way that we have not been provided closure. We have been not been provided peace. And we certainly have not been given any, you know, genuine substantive path to justice. What we get is what's called symbolic justice, where 9-11 is wrapped in a flag. But we don't have some substantive justice, which is what's most meaningful to to real victims' families.

**[00:13:40] Speaker 2:** Talk us through that a little bit more as as a victim. You mentioned there hasn't been justice. And Osama bin Laden's been murdered. You know, obviously, there's the wars are over. There's the 9-11 commission report, which you were a champion for. And then there's a victim's compensation fund. There's those three components that someone from the outside says, OK, we got the son of a bitch. There's been this big fund that's been paying people fairly or not fairly, I don't know. And then there's the commission that said we just didn't have the imagination to see the weaponization of jetliners. From your perspective, from the as you mentioned, the widows, widowers and children's perspective, what are they looking for? What is going to give them that that peace and that closure that someone's finally done the right thing by your your perspective?

**[00:14:29] Speaker 3:** I mean, I think first off, the commission, you know, saying that they didn't have the ability to foresee planes being used as weapons is a flat out lie. The U.S. government had that information in its coffers for years. There were regular drills throughout the intelligence apparatus with planes being used as missiles, with suicide pilots and in fact, targeting buildings like the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Capitol and the White House. So there was absolutely foreknowledge. I think one of the things that the commission did bring out, Chairman Cain said that 100 percent the attacks could have and should have been prevented. They were not prevented. And since that day, the widows and children have not been given access to all of the information. I think there's something like 72 million files. They're all kept secret. They're slapped with what's called state secrets, privilege and national security. They have heavy redactions. Tom Cain, one of the things that we fought very hard was for the commission source documents to be made public. They are not public. They anything that is public is heavily redacted. So there's no information out there. You know, that leads a normal, reasonable human being to be like, well, what are you hiding? Particularly now that it's 24 years later, there are no sources and methods. There's no need to protect any kind of information. It should all be brought out so that the families can hold people accountable. So the commission being a form of justice is an absolute hollow form of justice. It's a it's a it was a cover up. Secondly, you've got bin Laden. Well, we find out that bin Laden was living openly in Pakistan across the street from a CIA safe house for, I think, six or seven years. Pakistan is supposed to be an ally. We give an enormous amount of financial aid to Pakistan. And somehow across the street from a CIA safe house, we had Osama bin Laden living openly and known by the entire town for six or seven years. And then a SEAL team swoops in, grabs him and then kills him. And he's buried at sea. I you know, that's not really justice for the families. Then you've got Guantanamo Bay, where we've got I don't know how many detainees that have been released. And we're told after the fact, we're not given an opportunity to question the detainees. Our lawyers are not given access to the detainees. We are not given access to the files and records from Guantanamo that any of the information that was gleaned from the detainees through torture or otherwise. So oh, and then Guantanamo is still in its pretrial phase, and that's 24 years after the attacks. So most likely the detainees, the quote unquote high value detainees, the co-conspirators of the 9-11 hijackers, will likely die on Guantanamo without ever facing trial. And in fact, we've learned that that's what they wish. They prefer to stay at Guantanamo and to just die there. They have carved out somewhat of a normal life for themselves there. And so that's what we're told about that. Judges move in and move out of Guantanamo. Prosecutors move in and move out. I think so far since May of this year, the trial has been delayed probably close to 20 times. And we get notified the week before that it's delayed one more time. And that's 24 years out. So that's Guantanamo. And then I forget, oh, the Victims Compensation Fund, which was the airline stabilization bill in 2001. This was the legislation that created a discount no fault government compensation program for the widows and kids. It was run by Special Master Ken Feinberg, who was, with all due respect, not exactly the appropriate person to put in charge of that fund. He was given an unlimited budget and incredible discretion to create the quote unquote rules for the fund. As part of that discretion, even though there was an unlimited budget, he capped what he called awards from the fund. He also decided to deduct things like life insurance and Social Security. Fortunately for the uniformed officers, the FDNY and the NYPD families who received an awful lot of charity, they were able to get lobbyists down there to lobby the special master so that charity wasn't deducted. But so what happened is the non FDNY families, like the civilian people that worked on Wall Street, your life insurance was deducted from the government fund. That's against public policy. It's never done in the court system in a wrongful death. In addition, Social Security was deducted. So what that meant is that the more children you had and the younger your children were, the more penalized you were. So what you had were two things that Ken Feinberg used to penalize families. He penalized life insurance. So if you were a responsible individual and you were protecting your family in case of your untimely death and you took out a million dollar life insurance policy, that was deducted. And if you had several children, which many of the Wall Street families did, the more children you had and the higher your Social Security until that child was 16, that too was deducted. And so what happened was the average payout from the U.S. government was one point six million dollars before deductions for Social Security and life insurance, which left some families with around five hundred thousand dollars for the murder of the breadwinner, who was a successful young person working on Wall Street. I'd also like to add. That Mr. Feinberg used to tell us and threaten us that it was the, quote, only game in town and that we had to go into the fund, and he took great pride in citing the numbers that I think 94 percent of the estates went into the fund. Of course, estates and the widows that were on the planes didn't need to go into the fund because the lawyers were happy to represent those families. Because if you think about it, all of the victims on planes, it's a finite number of victims, and each plane is insured for 15 billion. So there was plenty of money for the 30 to 42 families from the planes. They were allowed to sue, whereas the rest of us who were the, quote, unquote, ground victims, there were so many of us. And because the insurance companies and the reinsurance companies needed to sue and several of the lawyers represented not only the widows and children, but also the insurance corporate plaintiffs. The widows and kids were corralled into the fund. The discount airline bailout fund, whilst the. Families on the airlines were allowed to sue and the corporate plaintiffs were allowed to sue. And so, yeah, I think a U.N. report came out two years ago that said that we were forced into the fund. It was coercion. We were not in our right mind. We were under duress. We were still grieving. And I think the most important part from a legal standpoint, because I did go to law school, although I don't practice, was that Congress, 10 days after 9-11, created the airline stabilization bill where they inserted the language for the Victims' Compensation Fund. Hillary Clinton apparently takes credit for it, along with Tom Daschle, whose wife was a lobbyist for the airlines. They were the ones that apparently reportedly crafted the Victims' Compensation Fund language. And they retroactively capped liability for the airlines, for the airport security companies, for the United States government, New York, the Port Authority, which basically left the widows and children with no recourse, because if you cap the liability levels and you've got thousands of ground victims and you allow people who are on the quote unquote pile to breathe toxic air, well, there's not enough money to pay for all the damage. And I'm not just talking about the damage brought on the country by the terrorists. I'm talking about the damage that was compounded by the U.S. government's failure to stop the terrorists and its failure to alert the New Yorkers about the toxic air. And I simply would ask Ken Feinberg, you know, why he created the rules, why he instilled a cap that did not properly and fairly and fully compensate widows for what we were entitled to receive under the law. I can tell you firsthand that widows have lost homes 24 years out, that children of those killed have, you know, serious health issues. We've got families that are struggling to pay for mental health care. And again, keep in mind the non-uniform families, the non-FDNY, we do not have a support network. The companies abandoned the families. My husband's company, Fiduciary Trust, canceled our health insurance on September 30th, 2001. I was scheduled for surgery for having a, what we thought was a cancerous tumor in my breast on September 20th. And I went into that surgery without a husband, thinking I was leaving a two-year-old behind, thinking I was losing my insurance and had some sort of horrible breast cancer on September 20th. And that's what we were facing, the civilians. We did not have a support network. We didn't have, you know, that sort of built-in family of the uniform, the FDNY and the NYPD, who sort of come around the widows and the families, adopt them, look out for the kids. They have health insurance. They have all the death benefits. Our husband's benefits were all deducted, just like our Social Security was deducted and our life insurance. So that's kind of what I was faced with in the immediate aftermath, was first of all, I needed to get my surgery done. And second of all, I had a lot of questions about why the government took away my right to sue, why they put someone like Ken Feinberg in charge of a program that essentially robbed the widows and children and protected the U.S. government, the airlines, the corporations, the city of New York and everyone else for their blatant liability in the murder of 3,000 people on U.S. soil.

**[00:24:51] Speaker 2:** Two minutes ago, you had a few questions directed at Ken Feinberg. He's my guest on the show next week. If you were sitting in my seat and you had him for 52 minutes. What questions would you ask him?

**[00:25:05] Speaker 3:** I mean, I would first ask him who in Congress was giving him direction to make the decisions that he was making with regard to the fund, whether it was carrying out the deductions, whether it was, you know, treating widows in the manner that he did, calling it the only game in town. No, I don't think he needed to to behave in the manner that he did. I don't think that the fund needed to be so discounted and unfair. And I I think that he really I don't know how he sleeps at night. And I think that going further, my real questions to Mr. Feinberg center on his special master position for the what's called the United States Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Fund. First off, Feinberg's role as the special master in the VCF one should have prohibited him from being a special master in the USVST because DOJ has post employment restrictions. Nevertheless, Mr. Feinberg found himself as the special master in 2015 of the USVST. And in that position, he once again used his broad discretion and excluded the 9-11 widows and children from being compensated with restitution in that fund. I want to be clear, restitution is different than compensation from the US government. Restitution is when widows and children of murdered terrorism victims receive compensation from the so-called terrorists. It's holding the criminals accountable. That's what restitution is. Mr. Feinberg took it upon himself to exclude the widows and children from his fund in 2015 because he interpreted the language of the governing statute in a certain manner. It's come out that the non-9-11 attorneys who are behind the fund and who are apparently friendly with Mr. Feinberg were concerned that if the widows and children of 9-11 went into the fund, we would take up all the money. There were just too many of us. So Mr. Feinberg made a decision to exclude us. Interestingly enough, he allowed the non-heirs of the people killed on September 11th, the people that were not financially dependent on those killed, they were allowed into the fund if they so chose to go into the fund. So Mr. Feinberg had no problem with that, while the widows and children were knowingly excluded. And so what ended up happening when you look at the numbers is that the siblings and parents who are not entitled to recover under New York, New Jersey, Connecticut probate law when someone is murdered were in this fund collecting millions of dollars in excess of the money that the widows and children had ever received in the first VCF-1 were barred from receiving restitution from the so-called terrorists, because that's how this fund paid out its claimants. And it took us until 2019 to correct Mr. Feinberg. We went to Congress and finally got people like Senator Schumer and Senator Gillibrand, Senator Menendez to allow us into the fund. Of course, those individuals knew from 2016 that we were wrongfully excluded, but they made us wait until 2019 until we could get into the fund because so many people were just so concerned that there were just too many 9-11 widows and children to receive full, fair, equitable compensation in this USVSST. And so as it stands today, the widows and children have received six to 66 times less restitution in a Department of Justice run compensation or excuse me, restitution fund that is supposed to treat all victims of terrorism equitably and fairly. And that's all thanks to Mr. Feinberg.

**[00:28:47] Speaker 2:** Might need two shows with him.

**[00:28:49] Speaker 3:** I mean, I think that, you know, there's some questions there. You know, I'd like to know what his relationship is to the non-9-11 attorneys. I'd like to know who in Congress was directing him to make the decisions that he was making. I'd like to know why the post-employment DOJ restrictions didn't bar him from being the special master in 2015 and not only bar him from being the special master, but disallow him from using special information that he gleaned in 2001 while special master of the VCF1 to harm and exclude the widows and children in 2015. That sort of thing is expressly prohibited by DOJ. And yet he did it and got away with it. So, I mean, that's kind of interesting, isn't it? I'd also like to know, you know, how he was also simultaneously working as a trustee of, you know, an escrow fund for some non-9-11 victims. He's named as the trustee for that in like 2017 and 18. The same sort of lawyers that were trying to exclude the widows and kids. So I don't understand how he was able to be a trustee of one of those accounts for those non-9-11 plaintiffs groups while making decisions in the fund that benefited those same exact non-9-11 plaintiffs groups by excluding the widows and kids. I think he's got a lot of explaining to do. And, you know, I don't think he's quite given enough sufficient answers. But of course, when no one's asking him the questions, he kind of gets away with it.

**[00:30:22] Speaker 2:** Let's go back to Senators Clinton, Jill Brand and Schumer for a minute, if we could. You mentioned that they were aware of it in 2015, I think you said, or 16. But didn't allow you in, but then allowed you in 2019. Why didn't they allow you into the fund the first time?

**[00:30:39] Speaker 3:** So first off, Senator Clinton and Daschle were the ones back in 2001 that took away our rights to sue immediately after the attacks to protect the airlines and everyone else. In 2015 and 16, it was people like Senator Jill Brand, Senator Schumer, Senator Menendez. Senator Grassley, Senator Graham, those are the people that created this fund and apparently gave broad latitude to Ken Feinberg to exclude this nation's largest group of state-sponsored terrorism victims, the widows and children from 9-11. And so eventually, by 2019, we were successful in encouraging our champions in Congress, people like Senator Schumer, who was really the biggest stumbling block, along with Senator Menendez, which is ironic because, you know, Senator Schumer and Senator Menendez are from the New York area. So you would think that having so many widows and kids as constituents, they might have shown an interest in protecting our rights and making sure that we actually received restitution from the terrorists, especially since DOJ, you know, usually, Chris, when there is a murder, one murder in any city in the United States of America, there's a murder investigation and there's a trial. Well, 3,000 people were murdered in broad daylight in lower Manhattan. And the SDNY, who's known as indicting ham sandwiches, has never indicted or prosecuted anyone for the 3,000 murders. OK. And then, as I said in the beginning, you know, we have Guantanamo, which is a debacle. And so we just want to hold terrorists accountable. And this fund is the only place that we're allowed to actually receive any kind of restitution, the pennies that we get. And so finally, by 2019, Senator Schumer and others decided to allow us to go into the fund. However, they used that opportunity to structure the fund in a way that would continue to allow those non 9-11 victims with the very powerful attorneys to continue to maximize their payments in the fund. So basically, they let us in and it looked like they were doing a nice thing for us. But in reality, they sort of were actually really helping these other victims groups because they were maximizing their payments. And that's actually borne out through data. We have an economist that's written up a report on that. So that's not me just talking out of the air. I have the evidence.

**[00:33:17] Speaker 2:** So I mentioned the beginning of the show that you and I met a handful of months ago and you introduced me to your conciliar, you referenced her as, you met mine as well. Are there other like-minded individuals within the victims in your group that are still pressing forward in terms of looking for that justice, looking for... And it's not the conversation you're looking for. You keep using the word justice and that's what matters. And you've mentioned several times, several people, you don't know how they sleep at night. And you've said that to me on different conversations we've had regarding several people from different administrations and not been one political party. It's been both parties, different administrations for 24 years. Who's looking to charge? How many people are still there? Has everyone else just given up and walked away and saying it was terrible and we're moving on?

**[00:34:05] Speaker 3:** I mean, I think a lot of people have aged out. I mean, frankly, we've lost, you know, one of the things that stress and I think going through something like losing a loved one in a terrorist attack does is give you cancer and all kinds of problems. And so we've had a lot of widows that have passed away. Unfortunately, we've had a lot of 9-11 kids that have also passed away through. Other sad ways, and so I think our community is facing those kinds of hardship, but I think those of us that are left behind that are still fighting for justice are, you know, feeling like this year is going to we're starting into the 25th year and it's unacceptable. You know, you can't have 3000 people murdered in broad daylight and not have any justice, any truth, any transparency or any accountability. And, you know, wrapping Bin Laden and throwing him in the sea is not accountability. Allowing a commission report that is based on, you know, a story concocted by a staff director who was utterly compromised is not justice. You know, it's just not. And we're going to demand to be given what every American is entitled to under the law when someone they love is murdered. And that is, you know, a path to justice. And if you can no longer give that to us, then you need to give us substitute justice in alignment with what we would have received if things were treated the way they should have been treated under the law. And it's 25 years later. And so I don't know how you fix that. You know, one of the most sobering things for me in the last couple of weeks is that the former director of the FBI, Bob Mueller, who I had many, many meetings with years ago. He was a formidable adversary. He you know, there were some very tough meetings between us. I used to joke that he's he was, you know, the best liar I ever met. Yet, you know, it was reported widely, I think, last week that he's in, you know, a memory care facility and he has Parkinson's. Well, this is what happens if you wait 25 years to allow people, victims of terrorism, to have what they're entitled to under the law, a path to justice. People like Robert Mueller, who has blood on his hands, who knows where all the dead bodies are buried, who knows all of the failures that occurred under his watch, the cover up that took place under his watch. You know, this is a guy that was involved in Iran-Contra in the 80s. So he was there at the very beginning. He's like the government cover up guy. And he's now lost his marbles and is unable to provide information and evidence. Well, you know what? That, to my mind, is an atrocity. That's that's not acceptable. And it's because my own government didn't allow us to hold anyone accountable for the last 25 years. And now it's too late because the people that need to be held accountable, that have the evidence and the information that we are owed, are either dying or in, you know, long-term care facilities. That's unacceptable.

**[00:37:32] Speaker 2:** You know, you've referenced 25 years a couple of times as we come through this week's 24th observance of the terrorist attacks. To your point, next year is the 25th commemoration. Next year, on July 4th, is the 250th anniversary of our country. The current administration has already had a big kickoff with that on July 3rd of this year in Iowa, looking to have a year-long celebration across the country, patriotic flags everywhere, red, white and blue, USA, rah, rah, rah. And 69 days later, you've got the 25th observance of the biggest terrorist attack in this country's history, the single largest murderous event to happen in this nation's country. You and your group of survivors and victims have been fighting this battle for 24, soon to be 25 years. What can those of us from the other side, those of us who weren't directly affected or impacted, what can we do to help support you, to help get you that justice that you've been looking for for two and a half decades and that you certainly need and deserve?

**[00:38:28] Speaker 3:** I just think that there needs to be an awareness and a public demand that after 25 years, the widows and the children, the direct heirs of the 3000 killed, deserve substantive justice, not symbolic justice. I think what's so hurtful to our community is that, you know, 9-11 has been used in so many different ways for so many years, for 25 years, yet the widows and children have not been properly protected. Our rights have not been respected. Our loved ones' lives have not been properly, you know, provided the accountability and the justice that they're owed by the country. And I think that if there was a public outcry and a demand, you know, to President Trump to take care of the widows and children, to allow us to have some closure and some peace, to give us, you know, fair and full compensation and alignment with what we are entitled to under the law, if the government didn't rob us of our rights. I think that that's something that President Trump can do. And I hope that it's something that he will, you know, consider because I think it would be a real legacy for his presidency. And I think it's time for this country to provide the peace and closure to the widows and children. Real substantive justice instead of just hollow symbolic justice is what we want.

**[00:40:09] Speaker 2:** I think I know the answer to this question, but I want to ask you anyway. It's been 24 years since the attacks. Do you believe the lessons of 9-11 have truly been learned and applied?

**[00:40:18] Speaker 3:** Absolutely not. I think that many of the problems that the country has today, the world has today, is because we didn't learn the lessons from September 11th. Instead of taking all of the failures that occurred, everyone who screwed up their job facilitated the attacks when they were supposed to be preventing the attacks. That information should have been thrown on a table, made public. People should have been held accountable. People should have been fired. People like George Tenet, who was the director of the CIA in charge of the entire intelligence community, should not have been given a medal of freedom. He should have been sanctioned and held accountable. I certainly don't think that we would have ended up with a war in Iraq if people were held accountable for the failures leading up to and on the day of 9-11. But that's what happens when you leave people in place that have utterly failed the people and the country, like what happened on the morning of September 11th, like what happened with the USS Cole, like what happened with the East African embassy bombings, like what happened with the 1993 bombing, like what almost happened with the Millennium bombing. All of those attacks involved the same core group of people. These hijackers were not unknown to our intelligence community. They weren't unknown to the FBI. They weren't unknown to the CIA or the NSA. They weren't even unknown to those on the National Security Council. They were all known and identified. They had been known for years. So I think if those things had been brought forward and made public and people were held accountable and all of the loopholes and lapses and mistakes were remedied, I think we would be living in a very different world rather than the world we're living in that, in my opinion, is just filled with more of the same. We've got a group of people running Washington, D.C., in many ways that are just as corrupt as they've ever been. They pass legislation that's not in the best interest of the people, people like victims of terrorism. They are not looking out for regular citizens, are looking out for themselves. And I think that that's a problem. And so that's why I wish that the lessons of September 11th were learned. And I wish the American public demanded for this country to live up to what it's supposed to be, that we all will hopefully be celebrating next July. We are an amazing country, full of amazing people, and we can do so much better. And it's just so incredibly frustrating. I've spent 24 years being forced to have to work in Washington, and I've seen president after president, Congress after Congress. And it is heartbreaking to see how horrible things are today in the country, in Washington. And I believe that things can be made better. And so that's what my hope is. My hope is that obviously no one ever has to walk in the kind of shoes that I had to walk in and watch your husband get murdered on live worldwide television to know that your country and your government turned its back on you and actually in many ways covered up the murder and tortured you for 24 years, making you beg for things that you are entitled to under the laws of this country. I don't want anyone to ever have to know what that's like to know that you can't trust your government because your government protects terrorists and protects bad people. That's not my America. And so that's what I hope for. I don't know how it could happen. It's probably some ephemeral dream, but I would like the country to be the kind of country that my husband, Ron, believed in and loved. That's what I would like for the 250th anniversary and the 25th anniversary of the 9-11 attacks.

**[00:44:12] Speaker 2:** Kristen Brantweiser, couldn't close the show better than that. Thank you so much for being with us. I appreciate you sharing your story.

**[00:44:19] Speaker 3:** Thanks, Chris. Be well. Stay safe.

**[00:44:21] Speaker 2:** As well.

**[00:44:22] Speaker 3:** OK.

**[00:44:23] Speaker 2:** On this 9-11, please take an extra moment to think about those victims and their survivors. I'm Chris Meek. We'll see you next week. Same time, same place. Until then, stay safe and keep taking your next steps forward.

**[00:44:39] Speaker 1:** Thanks for tuning in to Next Steps Forward. Be sure to join Chris Meek for another great show next Tuesday at 10 a.m. Pacific Time and 1 p.m. Eastern Time on The Voice America Empowerment Channel. This week, make things happen in your life. I'm Chris Meek. We'll see you next time on Next Steps Forward.