

Arnie Quibranza Mejia: Kenny and me on 9/11

The bus driver pointed out towards the city. He wasn't exaggerating at all when he told Kenny and me about the towers going up in flames and that downtown was in a state of panic. We could see smoke billowing out of what seemed like miniature towers from miles away in Little Neck. Kenny holds out his left hand towards my lap, sensing my anxiety. I reached for my cell phone in my pocket and make a call to my brother. I'm sure the agency would forgive me for breaking the rule of making personal calls during work. Kenny and I were miles away from the twin towers and I just had to make sure my brother was safe. The bus driver said that circuits would be too busy with all the people using it at the same time, but still I had to try since Arnel worked just a few blocks away from the towers and God only knows if the building he works at is also affected.

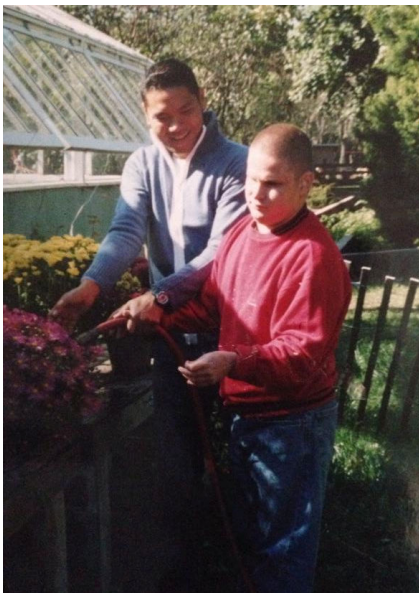
The bus driver doesn't know exactly what was going on. He said he heard through dispatch that the towers were on fire and some people were actually leaping to their deaths to get away from the smoke. My heart raced even faster when I couldn't connect to my brother. It's amazing the wealth of information a bus driver learns from overhearing conversations and listening to dispatch and talk radio during their shift, but even he didn't know if my brother was okay. With thoughts of Arnel being caught up in what must be a chaotic scene downtown, I forgot to press the yellow tape to indicate our stop. Thankfully, our friendly bus driver knew our stop for Queens County Farm Museum since we've been taking his route for almost a month when I started working with Kenny. I thanked the bus driver as I climbed down the bus.



Kenny smiled and gurgled happy sounds as he descended from the bus holding his cane, like a staph, on his left hand and the railing with his right. One step at a time just like we've been working on for the last month. The final step was tricky and I intervened by guiding his cane towards the curb and gently pulling his right hand towards me.

We walked down the sidewalk towards the farm. Kenny could make it to the farm just with his sense of smell, but the uneven sidewalk made it too dangerous to let him walk on his own even with the use of his cane. He instinctively reaches for my right shoulder with his left hand as he sweeps the sidewalk with his right as we walk. I correct him by placing his hand on the fleshy, back part of my arm instead. I knew it would be a challenge to work with somebody who couldn't see, speak, or hear, but I never realized that the smallest gestures could be even more effective than using words. Although Kenny couldn't hear and was not able to understand the conversation I had with the bus driver about the twin towers going up in smoke, he must have sensed my urgency since he walked a little faster than usual to get to the farm. I am much taller than Kenny who stands just under five feet, five inches so it's only natural his steps would be shorter than mine with his shorter legs and smaller build. I had to learn how to walk twice as fast when I moved to New York from Las Vegas to keep up with all the pedestrians, but I had to unlearn rushing when I started working with Kenny.

Working with Kenny is literally a walk in the park. One of the two buses we take to get to the farm from his house stops right in front of a small park. We often stroll around the park since we have a twenty to thirty minute wait for each bus. Queens County Farm itself is a big park. It's owned by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and serves as an educational destination for schools and tourists with its farm animals, greenhouse complex, chicken coop, function hall inside a barn, and colonial farm house. I was able to find a job in New York right away since Kenny's mom insisted on a large, preferably male, intervener to work with her deaf and blind son who just turned eighteen and had aged out of the school system. Kenny's mom, Clara, feels that Kenny would respond better to a physically imposing figure since he would sometimes bite his arm or pull his hair when he didn't get what he wanted such as sitting down and entertaining himself by beating on his head. Beating on his head wasn't necessarily an act of violence or defiance on Kenny's part. It was at times a way to amuse himself, but still it is a behavior we discouraged since it could lead to injury.



The smell of the dirt, animals, plants, and fertilizer in the morning puts a huge smile on Kenny's young and handsome face as we enter the farm. I sign "chicken" and "egg" with my fingers on the palm of his hands to indicate that we are at the farm to work. We walk into the nursery to drop off his backpack and we're greeted by a more nervous than usual Rosa, the nursery attendant. She tells me teary eyed how it was terrorists that crashed two planes in the tower. I tell her that my brother worked just a few blocks away and that I couldn't get a hold of him. She tells me to try the telephone by the cash register as she greeted Kenny by holding out her hand towards him. Kenny grabs her hand towards his nose and sniffs her arm all the way to her hair. He giggles and laughs like an innocent child as he gets a whiff of Rosa's Herbal Essence shampoo. Rosa gives Kenny his daily morning hug and kiss on the cheek while ogling over how cute he is. I remind her that Kenny may look like a young kid, but

he's older than Rosa's high school aged daughter. She then heads out to water the rows of house plants and flowers for sale.

Kenny and I walk towards the register and I sign with my fingers on his open palms to sit and wait. I then guide his hand towards the chair and make sure he is securely seated while I use the phone. I pick up the phone, but there is no dial tone and my heart sinks even further as I feel helpless. I stand by the phone in a daze and neglect my ward longer than I should since he starts hitting his head with his fists while smiling and making happy, gurgling sounds. I run to grab his hands and make him gently caress his head with his palms and sign on his palm to stand. Kenny unfolds his cane from his lap and grabs my arm as we walk towards the chicken coop across the nursery.

I wouldn't have imagined that I'd be working at a farm when I moved to New York to be closer to my brother, his wife, and their son whom I became extremely attached to. I thought that I'd be working in an office somewhere in the city and fighting off the crowds for a seat in a park bench during my lunch break, but just like my previous moves, the perfect job always found me. It was Kenny's mom ,Clara, who pictured someone like me working with her son years before I even

fathomed of living in New York. Clara, whose presence and motherly instincts are a hundred times bigger than her petite frame, planned and took action regarding Kenny's future from the time he was born prematurely and unfortunate events during and after childbirth led to Kenny's deafness, blindness, and cognitive delays. Clara's South American accent never quite disappeared even after building a life in New York for over thirty years with her Jewish husband and three children and so I presumed she converted into Judaism. When I asked if it was a requirement to convert to her husband's religion she politely informed me that a lot of Jewish people migrated to South America to escape the Nazi. I felt ashamed for having missed that lesson during world history class. She took two weeks off from work to help train me work with her son. It was in those two weeks that I learned to shed the initial pity I felt towards Kenny and his disabilities, but instead focus on the things he could accomplish and should accomplish independently.

Clara had big dreams for her son which included being gainfully employed at a farm environment since he loved animals. During the two weeks she spent with us, Clara packed a lunch for me as well and offered to drive me to the train station every day. She asked me questions about my family and my childhood and at the same time revealed details of her life and how having Kenny changed her life forever. It was Kenny's needs that led her to a fulfilling career as a Family Specialist for families like hers. She helps other families with children like Kenny lead productive lives and find much needed services from private and public sectors. Although the organization that I worked for that partnered me with Kenny encouraged me to keep professional boundaries with our clients and their families, it was impossible to not become a part of Kenny and his family's life. In order for me to understand how to work with Kenny effectively, I had to immerse myself into his family life. He couldn't verbalize to me what he was thinking and how he was feeling, but seeing him interact and spend time with his family gave me a clearer picture of what could possibly be going on inside his mind. In no time, Kenny and I became like brothers and eventually worked together for five years. I learned the ultimate lesson of gratitude from Kenny. Despite his disabilities, he exudes so much happiness and kindness with the way he is open to meeting new people. Kenny has proven that we are all born with love in our hearts.

I lead Kenny's hand towards the door handle of the walk-in chicken coop. I beam with pride as he opens the door independently and sweeps the inside of the coop with his cane. I hover over him to do a quick eye scan of the coop to make sure there is nothing that could hurt him , such as a rake with the teeth up, on the ground. I cover my nose with the sleeve of my shirt as the unmistakable smell of chicken dung and feed invade my nostrils. Kenny, on the other hand, takes an even bigger whiff of the putrid smell as he laughs and smiles. The Rhode Island reds are used to our presence by now. They no longer flock towards the other end of the coop as we enter. Kenny's short stature is perfect for the low ceiling of the chicken coop. I sign on Kenny's palm for him to fold his cane and hang it on its holster attached to his belt. I guide his hands to a pair of work gloves hanging on the wall and assist him in putting them on his hands. He takes a big whiff of the gloves on his hands and laughs heartily. I bend my neck down slightly as I lead Kenny's hand towards the blue, wire



basket hanging next to the nest boxes occupied by egg laying hens. Each of the two dozen nests is filled with eggs that Kenny has to collect as part of his morning duties at the farm. Kenny has become an expert at collecting the eggs independently. He places the blue basket on the rail like shelf attached to the nests. His left hand holds the basket as his right hand reaches inside the nest and grabs the egg before placing it in the basket. I stand back and watch in amazement how gentle he can be in collecting the eggs and how slowly he stacks them in the basket. The shelf acts as a guide as he slides the basket towards each nest after emptying each one of its contents. Occasionally, a hen inside the nest will peck at Kenny's hand, but thankfully all the hens have their beaks filed dull to prevent them from pecking each other to death. Kenny doesn't mind when he's pecked by a hen, but laughs and coos as he collects the eggs all by himself. I stand in close proximity to him as I wait for him to finish going through each nest.

Even though working with Kenny requires my full attention, I can't stop thinking about my brother and wonder if he is okay. I reach for my cell phone once more and make another call. Networks are still busy and I start to imagine the worst, but then I notice a telephone on a shelf on the far corner of the coop. I can't believe that I never noticed it before. I pick up the phone from its base and place it on my ear despite the fact that it is covered in layers of dirt, dung, and dust. I say a silent prayer that the phone will work and upon hearing the dial tone I dial my brother's number, but still a busy signal. I try his wife and yet the same. Finally, I call the house we share and I hear the sweet sound of ringing. I was never happier to hear my brother Arnel's voice. He tells me that he never made it downtown since he was running late for work and that by the time he was ready to leave, the burning towers were all over the news. I was heartbroken upon learning that hundreds of people died at the hands of terrorists, but I was also filled with relief and gratitude to learn that my family was safe. I give Kenny a big hug after he collects the eggs and he must have sensed my joy because he starts jumping up and down making happy, gurgling sounds. Even though a few eggs got broken from our excitement, Kenny still managed to collect a few dozen to wash, dry and place in cartons to sell in the gift shop.

The first three months of living in New York was more eventful than I could have ever imagined. Working with Kenny helped me to become a better person since he taught me how to appreciate the smallest things in life. September 11, 2001 will forever be etched in my mind as the day New Yorkers showed the world how they are able to turn a tragedy into a triumph through their small and grand acts of heroism. It is also the day that I aspired to be a proud New Yorker. Arnel, Cookie, and Tonyboy lived in New York for a short time. They soon moved back to the Philippines when their daughter, Lara, was born. It was easier to raise a baby in the Philippines and Arnel had a job waiting for him at our family's logistics company. I decided to stay in New York and continue my work with Kenny. I still had so much to learn from him. I was also lucky that Clara, her husband Jake, and her other children Sheldon and Karen welcomed me into their lives. It was being a part of their family that made my work with Kenny truly rewarding and enriching. My life is forever changed for the better because of Kenny and his wonderful family.