

## *A Return to Innocence*

*By Wendy Taylor*

Again I find myself traveling to a part of the world I never thought I would visit once, let alone twice. I am returning to St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, where I previously spent an infinitely long week that sadly began on September 11, 2001. This time, however, I go by choice. This is a happier visit.

Alliance Atlantis, a production company from Toronto, is filming a documentary for television about the relationships forged between the Canadian volunteers and the stranded travelers they cared for during the week following our country's tragedy. I have remained in contact with a volunteer and Newfoundland native named Sarah, who had lifted my spirits, provided comfort, support, conversation and several hot cups of coffee over the course of that week. She and I have each been asked to participate in the documentary. It will offer me the chance to see her and the rest of the volunteers again. I eagerly agree. I clear my schedule, and a few days later I step onto a plane. My first one since September.

The film schedule is tight. Getting to St. John's is not easy, even on a good day. I arrive early in the morning with only enough time to shower and change before the production assistant rushes me off to Sarah's house where a camera crew awaits our reunion. I will be a surprise for Sarah. I am instructed to ad-lib the conversation and to not look directly into the lens. Sarah is both happy to see me and overwhelmed by the commotion. We have no time to talk without a microphone inches from our heads. I want to giggle and she wants to crawl behind the couch. I give her some gifts I brought: a red-white-and-blue chew-toy for Hope the dog, a Christmas ornament for her and an American flag pin for her son, Robert. I also brought some tastes of home – coffee-milk syrup and Johnnycake mix. Our exchange is brought to a halt as we are told we are late for the Mormon service at the "shelter." And by the way, do I think I could give a speech in about ten minutes?

As we walk toward the former shelter, I am not sure if the rest of the volunteers would remember me. Much time has passed. They have moved on with their lives. I decide that I will remind them that I was the tiny one who wore the donated Salvation Army flannel teddy bear pajamas. But as I walked through the door, one of the volunteers hands me the pajamas. She had saved them all this time. After dozens of hugs and hellos, we move, along with the camera crew, into the chapel to start the service. I am given the honor of testifying first today.

When the passengers of Delta flight 149 said goodbye three months before, we all meant it when we said we would never forget the people of St. John's. I have again found myself being one of the lucky ones, for I have the good fortune of seeing them all once again. This time I am not crying, or dirty or exhausted or scared. I am emotional, but it is good. This time I can speak in a steady voice. I use my opportunity to thank them for teaching me about their country, their people, their charity and their religion. I took much away with me the first time, and will take just as much with me the second time. This time I hope to learn about them.

Instead, I have volunteers thanking me for all *I* did for *them*. How their time with us truly blessed their lives and how grateful *they* are to *us*. They call the United States their family. A man named Ryan says we were a milestone in his life. We helped him learn of man's innate ability to put differences aside and to love unconditionally. He saw the human spirit shine through during that week we were brought together. He had cried with people from all over the world. He learned words from New Yorkers that he had never known before. He also learned a new meaning of Freedom. Their service is summed up with a quote from Thomas Paine, "Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated." I remind myself how amazing a people they are, for all of these reasons and more.

The service ends with quick goodbyes and the director shuffles us out the door. The camera is still rolling and the day is growing short of sunlight. The rest of the afternoon proceeds with a film crew filming every move, every word, the director giving cues from off-camera, and the production assistant holding a coat over my head in between takes, to shield me from the falling snow. We revisit all of the places the volunteers had taken me to during my last stay.

Ten hours later, the taping ends with an interview back at Sarah's house. Some tough questions are thrown at me. Would America have responded the same way as the Canadians did if the roles were reversed? How has this changed you as a person? What was your first thought when your plane lost altitude? How did you react when you finally learned of what happened? The visit had been happier until now. Now my eyes fill with tears. I think that reliving that day will forever make me weep. I hope we all feel that way. We can never forget.

Upon arriving home from St. John's in September, I published my very first article in this newspaper. I did it because I needed to talk about it. It helped. It was also published on the web site, and people reached out from all over the country via e-mail to share their thoughts and fears. That also helped. And the production company reached out. They have helped too. Like all of us, I am still seeking peace of mind. I am still seeking closure. Like every American, I need to find it in my own way. The journey continues. I hope we all get there.