

From This Terrace

MARCH 24, 2011 · 6:41 PM

Day 84: 11.3.25.11



Today is the 84th Day of the Year

Bessie, my young neighbor, will not come home from work tonight.

She lives a few doors down — her building is the one just before you reach the corner of First Avenue.

Bessie is 15 years old, far too young to work as hard as she does, 6 days a week.

She came to the United States from Italy with her family when she was a one -year-old child.

Bessie Viviano is an American girl.

I am certain Bessie has dreams of a better life.

That's what America is supposed to be about, isn't it?

To live a better life?

To breathe the air of freedom and opportunity?

That is why so many people came to our shores – to work hard enough and long enough to reach what would not have been possible in the places left behind.

My neighbor Bessie Viviano is a shirtwaist seamstress.



She works downtown at the Triangle Waist Factory, with hundreds of other immigrants, Italian and Jewish girls and women, and a few men too.

It's very difficult for them inside that factory, although I've heard it's not the worst of the factories.

They are crammed together sewing and sewing. No breaks, no considerations from owners or management.

They are treated poorly and paid little.

They are charged if they break a needle or make a mistake.

Bessie and her co-workers too often come home with no pay or reduced pay, punished for errors caused by fatigue or the company's faulty sewing machines.

Bessie will never come home, never come back to East 54th Street, never get married, never leave the factory alive, never find a better life.

Bessie and 145 others she works with will never know that much of what they demanded during the strikes will come true – eventually.

2011

I wonder what her family did that day and that night and during the days and the nights that came long after Bessie Viviano's death. Was she remembered?

100 years ago today, on a Saturday, the 25th of March 1911, at 4:40 p.m., a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory located on the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street. The factory was in the Asch Building, on the eighth, ninth and tenth floors. (Today it is the Brown Building of Science, of New York University.)



Bessie and 145 of her co-workers were killed that day. They were all immigrants, Jewish and Italian girls and women and a number of men. Exit doors were locked. Some jumped to their deaths in a desperate hope they would be saved by the nets the firemen held, but they were not. Some jumped when already ablaze. Some fell down the elevator shaft trying to escape. Some were crushed as the fire escape melted and collapsed and they fell to their deaths. The ground was 100 feet below them. Some were trapped inside and burned together in an inferno – the flames betrayed the American Dream.

There is no extant image of Bessie that I've ever been able to find. Yet, Bessie exists for me especially because she lived on the same street I do. Unlike Bessie Viviano I have lived much of the American dream she and so many others were denied. This anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire is important not only because it is the 100th year but also because workers all over the world are still in jeopardy of losing their lives or being severely injured in unsafe workplaces. This year matters because some among us seem to have forgotten why our labor movement existed. And why the right to a collective voice to redress unfairness and abuse still matters to us, to working people in a democracy.

Bessie became a part of my life, on a previous 25th of March, when I stumbled upon a chalked message in front of what was once 352 East 54th. Now the awning says: 350 East 54th. The chalked words said Bessie Viviano, 15 years of age, and gave a few more basic facts. A small poster on a tree noted the day of the fire. The visual experience stopped me cold as I stood and read it. Then I began to cry. Suddenly this was a real event, not just historical facts, not only a singularly important part of women's history, of the history of workers in our country, and of immigration. It was the story of my street, my neighborhood. On this street, in 1911 this young girl perished in that fire that I heard about from childhood. Then as now and for as long as I live, Bessie was and is my neighbor. I did not know then, nor do I know today, if any of the Viviano family's descendants survive. I know that Bessie did not have a family yet, not at 15. So I have become her family, a chosen descendent of my ancestor-neighbor. Names are written on sidewalks all over the city by a remarkable group of people at the Chalk Project. Volunteers mark each and every place a victim of the fire lived, on the 25th of March, each and every year.

What I say to Bessie quietly each year is that this is a better place than it was in 1911. But I confess there is still much work to do. I tell her that for too many, especially the poor and newly arrived, life is still harsh and often dangerous.

This year I wanted to do something within the space on From This Terrace for and about the 100th Anniversary of the Factory Fire. I asked Susan Springer Anderson to think about what she would do as an artist. The result is called simply 11.3.25.11. It is exhibited here for all of you to see. Susan tells the story in more vivid detail than any words or pictures of the tragedy could possibly convey. Art is often the best storyteller we have.



Susan designed and made a shirtwaist but it is not a replica of the shirtwaists of that time. It is a creative reinterpretation. This shirtwaist closely resembles what the workers would have worn. As you see it is white, has simple lines and gathers. In Susan's words: "It is a humble garment. But then I needed to add the names of the fire's victims. I wanted them to be integrated into the design, not just an added kitsch element. The idea came to take the names and write them out in an embroidery design, a design element that would have been reserved for the high-end shirtwaists (for women of means) due to the amount of labor involved."



Susan created the shirtwaist memorial out of Tyvek, the building material. Tyvek is most often used for insulation in construction. Susan's offering for this anniversary says many things to me, and each person that has seen it comes away with something else. That is the power of art, it transforms our lives, our reality and how we see the world – past and present. For me, the Tyvek represents a life of constriction, without freedom of movement permitted in work tasks or in daily or personal choices. The black satin ribbon waistband is an adornment but also a statement that we mourn this



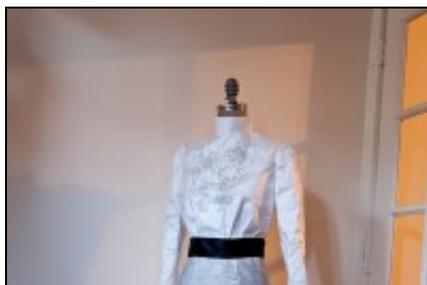
day. The creation of a floral pattern, which would not have embellished the worker's shirtwaists, is upon close inspection, not flowers at all, but the names of each of the dead, hand-inscribed. This shirtwaist is the inspiration of a fine artist who has in turn inspired me to want to work harder to help create better lives for all who are still diminished in the choices they can make. The high neck collar and closed cuffs, typical of the day, also remind me that girls and women were held back from so much.

I tell the story of Bessie, as I imagine that day for her family, because I believe that within each great sorrowful event in history, there is the story of the One Person who then tells the story of the many, because within an individual life is the reflection of all of us.



This Day, the 25th of March 2011 is dedicated to Bessie Viviano and each and every other girl, woman and man whose life was extinguished in an industrial workplace accident that never needed to happen.

May all their names be for a blessed memory today and for all time. May the memories of the lives that they were not permitted to live fully, move each one of us forward with a renewed sense that inequality and unfairness is never acceptable.





If you would like to share any stories or feelings about this day or Susan's work, please leave a comment or contact us. We have provided links below to other memorial projects and sources for more information about the history of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.

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Pictures of the 11.3.25.11 © Michael Markham Photography 2011

6-6:30pm (EST), March 24, 2011

Susan & Alida featured on *A League of Our Own* with host Fran Spencer

88.7 FM WHRU, <http://live.streamwrhu.net/>

[Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition](#) A great source for events surrounding the Centennial.

[Chalk Project](#)

PBS American Experience Film about The Fire: Watch online [here](#).

An [article](#) from the New York Times about Anthony Giacchino who wrote letters to the victims of the fire.

An [article](#) in the Washington Post.

[Wikipedia Page](#)

A [timeline](#) of events surrounding the fire.

