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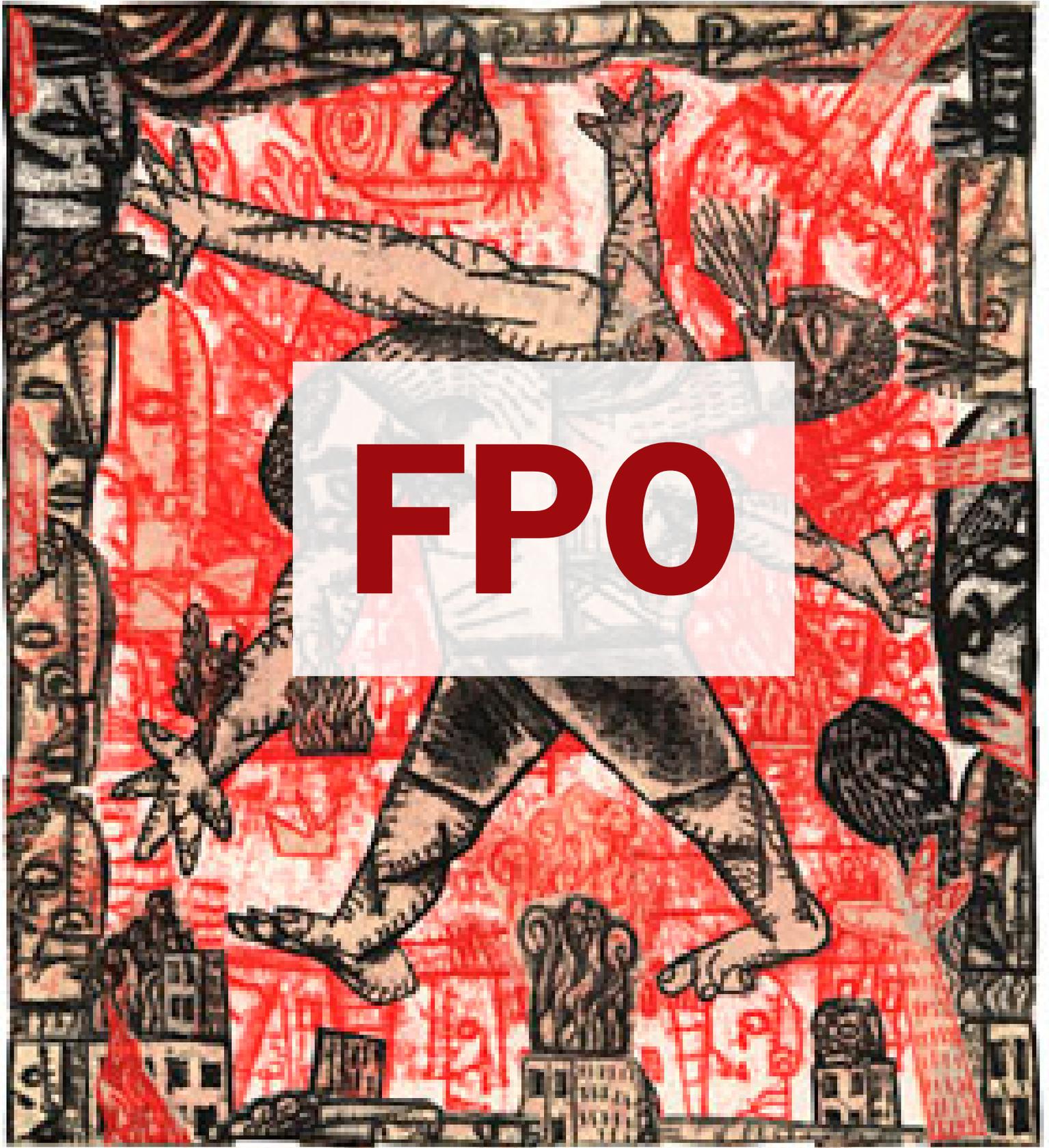
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# From the Ashes

By Ruani S. Freeman

On 9/11 Andrew Rice  
lost a brother and  
found a greater purpose

*“One day I’d like to meet Zacarias Moussaoui. I’d like to say to him, ‘You can hate me and my brother as much as you like, but I want you to know that I loved your mother and I comforted her when she was crying.’”*

Andrew Rice '96

The first time it hit him, in 1995, the destruction stopped close to his childhood home in Oklahoma City, at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The second time, six years later and 1,454 miles away, it took his brother.

When he woke up on a clear September morning four years ago, Andrew Rice '96 was in Canada, covering the Toronto Film Festival for the BBC. Before lunch, with words and images that have now become the history of a nation—the planes, the towers, 9/11—his life changed.

“David worked for the investment firm Sandler O’Neill, and he had called my mother to tell her he was okay, the plane had hit the other tower. I walked into work and saw the second plane hit his tower. I turned and ran back to my hotel and got there just as the first tower collapsed. I screamed. I knew that David was dead.”

Andrew Rice’s boss, Tom Brook, paid more than \$1,500 for a taxicab to take Rice home to New York City, where his sister Amy also lived. When Rice arrived, he joined Richard Von Feldt, best friend to both brothers since childhood and best man at Andrew’s wedding, in the search. By the night of September 13, Von Feldt had identified 31-year-old David Rice, one of only a dozen complete bodies to be found.

How does a 28-year-old filmmaker, enjoying his brother’s company in New York after years apart in college and graduate school, cope with burying his brother in the glare of a national tragedy?

For Rice, the answer took the form of intense and varied public service.

From the moment he lost his brother, Rice plunged into re-examining his life and direction. When he left what Von Feldt calls “the coven of grief” that his friends and family had become, he did not walk into activism. He hurtled.

“Andrew saw what happened on 9/11 as a bridge to a higher purpose,” Von Feldt said, speaking from San Francisco. “Even before [9/11] there had been a restlessness in him ... a sense that he wasn’t being true to his soul path. He had wanted to be a minister, but he grappled with what that meant. In a sense, what he has done with his life is taken on the mantle of ministry. It is just that his congregation is not in one place.”

Not only is it dispersed, it is varied and complex. Between September 2001 and today Rice has headed the Texas Freedom Network’s ([www.tfn.org](http://www.tfn.org)) Fundamentalism Education Project to counter the influence of religious extremism in politics; joined the board of September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, an advocacy group nominated in successive years for the Nobel Peace Prize; launched the Red River Democracy Project, based on Chautauqua-style community festivals and designed to educate and engage Oklahomans in civic issues; served on the board of The People’s Opinion Project; and founded the Progressive Alliance Foundation, of which he is the executive director, which works throughout Oklahoma to advance progressive, constitutional solutions to public policy problems.

He has spoken at gatherings in the United States and South Africa and has been interviewed on the BBC, CBC, MSNBC, and Fox News. He has been covered by the

*Sunday Times* in Scotland, the *London Times*, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. He was awarded the 2004 Angie Debo Civil Libertarian of the Year Award from the ACLU for his courageous work on unpopular issues under the most trying of circumstances.

Rice now is the head of the Progressive Alliance Foundation, a non-partisan group that advocates on behalf of initiatives ranging from civil rights to ethical foreign policy. He's a new dad who traveled the hard road to political involvement, and he argues eloquently in favor of reconciliation. And to pursue a life in public service, Rice left the political haven he found in New York—a blue city in a blue state—for Oklahoma, where he would be in the minority.

Rice made a conscious decision to do important work where he thinks it is truly needed, rather than, as he puts it, “being a progressive activist where we are the majority... in places like New York City or on the West Coast.”

His decision to return to his hometown was made easier when his wife, pathologist Apple Newman Rice, got a job in Oklahoma City. But she was not the sole reason. Among his muses Rice counts Cornel West, whose work he studied while at Colby and under whom he studied at Harvard Divinity School.

“He talked about the gramscian idea of the organic intellectual, that if you go from a rural area to a place of culture and gain knowledge and experience there, it is your organic responsibility to return to your community to effect change. This was my chance.”

The journey has catapulted Rice into the national arena of advocacy and electoral politics. Throughout, he has held close the image of his brother and the event that brought about his loss.

“I had, ironically, studied fundamentalism in graduate school, and it took on a new meaning once 9/11 happened and David was killed. I wanted to go back to what I had learned about the role of religion in social justice movements.”

Rice's faith (raised a Catholic, he recently joined the United Church of Christ), heavily infused with a strong desire to bridge the gulf between secular need for a just society and organized religion, has guided him throughout his adult life.

It is a characteristic noted by his mentor at Colby, Professor of Religious Studies Debra Campbell. “What makes Andrew different is the particular way in which he combines the personal and the political in a spirituality with deep intellectual roots. There is nothing insubstantial about his faith.”

In 1996, after having made the short list for a Watson Fellowship, Rice deferred enrollment to Harvard, raised funds independently, and went to Sri Lanka to carry out the work outlined in his Watson proposal, drawing on contacts he made while on the ISLE (Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education) program at Colby. First Rice worked with Sarvodaya, the largest Buddhist grassroots organization in Asia, and then he went to Thailand, where he joined forces with that country's largest private AIDS hospice, housed in a former Buddhist monastery.

A year later a grant allowed him and his sister to travel to Banga-



Andrew Rice '96 with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Rice's sister Amy during a visit to Capetown, South Africa. Rice advocates the reconciliation model offered by post-apartheid South Africa.

lore, India, to make the documentary film *From Ashes*, which focused on an ex-convict who ran a hospice for HIV-positive people who had been refused treatment. The film was shown at film festivals in Bombay, Los Angeles, and Canada and was used in the United States and in India as educational programming for physicians. “It became a story about rebirth out of the ashes, literally, after they had to go against tradition and cremate a baby who had AIDS,” Rice said.

That preoccupation with renewal, and a stubborn determination to be unbridled by obstacles, came to the fore again for Rice after 9/11.

“After graduate school, I had two interests: work on religion and activism and documentary filmmaking.” For a time, the films won out, and Rice moved to New York to edit and produce segments for the BBC and PBS (his credits include *The Merrow Report* and *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*).

Rice's brand of progressive politics embraces his opponents. One year after 9/11, he and several other 9/11 family members got a call from the Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation, and they agreed to meet in New York City with Madame al-Wafi, mother of 9/11 conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called “20th hijacker.”

Rice and others sat in a room waiting for her, nervous both about the meeting and the prospect of the U.S. government finding out. Finally she entered the room with the mother of another man who had died in the towers on 9/11. They were both sobbing, their arms around each other.

The sight overwhelmed Rice, he said, and his heart opened up. “Madame al-Wafi reminded me a lot of my own mother, who had cried so much after David died,” Rice said. He cried along with everyone else in the room.

Following that meeting, and grappling with the issue of reconciliation, Rice traveled to South Africa to meet with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. His brother David loved South Africa and lived there as a Fulbright Scholar studying the redistribution of land. “It was a very personal journey for me and my sister, who accompanied me to [the former prison on] Robben Island, where we were involved with representatives from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” Rice

said. “The things they were talking about held immense meaning for my own path to healing.”

It was in South Africa that Rice met Marina Cantacuzino, the creator of the Forgiveness Project (an initiative whose patrons include Tutu and other luminaries). Cantacuzino added Rice’s story to the exhibit. His is one of only 42 chosen from events around the world—from Belfast to Chechnya, from Australia to Rwanda—and the only story connected to 9/11.

Rice had found his focus: reconciliation. “It’s a humbling process to see commonality between you and someone who has brought harm to you and your family, but one we must undertake as part of the process of self-introspection,” he said. “Introspection is one of the most important and powerful aspects of every religious tradition.”

Rice appears to make a genuine attempt to reach across divides. He opposes the war in Iraq and supports the soldiers who fight and die in it. In June 2004, when Michael Moore offered a premiere of his movie *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a fund raiser to organizations in 10 cities, Rice’s organization, Progressive Alliance Foundation, was one. At the end of the evening, half of the proceeds were given to military families in Oklahoma affected by the war in Iraq.

The Progressive Alliance Foundation is as widely engaged as its founder. Through planning public forums and brainstorming strategies for communicating policy to Oklahomans, the organization has attracted an impressive roster of speakers that includes Bud Welch, who lost his daughter in the Oklahoma bombing and later befriended the parents of bomber Timothy McVeigh. The group launched the traveling exhibit of the Forgiveness Project in Oklahoma City.

It is not altruism that drives his determination to reconcile with those who harmed him and his family, Rice said. “It is an effort to protect my brother’s spirit. I do not want to embody a visceral hatred between two sides. I want to have a spiritual supremacy that rises above that.”

The loss of his brother notwithstanding, it might seem that Rice has led a life of unmitigated success. And yet some of his most fulfilling work, he said, has come from campaigns that failed: opposition to the war in Iraq and countering the effort in Oklahoma to define marriage as between a man and a woman, for instance. “Andrew lives a principled life. He counts his success in small victories,” Von Feldt said, “and he does not balk at taking the hard road.”

The trajectory of his path, however, leads back to that September morning.

“I was uneasy with the retributive, simplistic language of the administration that refused to look at the political underpinnings of the 9/11 event,” Rice said. “We were going against the democratic and pluralistic principles of our country in response to 9/11. I took it personally.” Rice worked full time lobbying against the war and was speaking out in Alaska when the first bombs fell on Baghdad.

Disheartened by the federal government’s lack of accountability in relation to 9/11, the decision to go to war amid what he and others saw as a haze of deception, and his difficulties bringing transparency

to the political process, Rice decided to run for office.

Soon after the birth of his son, Noah David Rice, in 2004, Rice announced his run for the Oklahoma State Senate seat that covers much of central Oklahoma City. “There are a lot of negative trends here, and I want to make sure that the state deals with the state, with issues of infrastructure and accountability, not interferes in people’s personal lives.”

It is a highly contested seat, with Republicans challenging the last bastion of the Democratic Party in Oklahoma, but Rice has connections that go beyond the district. Eli Pariser, head of the successful online advocacy group *moveon.org*, is supporting his candidacy (the organization itself has not endorsed him), as are those in groups he has worked with outside of Oklahoma.

Admittedly, family and friends share concerns about Rice’s entry into politics. “Oklahoma politics are as dirty as they get,” Von Feldt said. “There are people whose lives have been destroyed, suicides that have occurred because of the vile nature of the political world there. I worry that someone as pure as Andy will be tarnished by it.”

Yet, who better than an American who lost his brother on 9/11, who speaks in the language of faith, a patriot whose vision of life stems from a deep spirituality, to throw his hat into the ring?

“I wanted to be on the inside so I could have some power in preserving the integrity of our democracy,” he said, “because I saw that there are limits to the efficacy of outside groups, which are tremendously marginalized. Instead of giving up, I want to do more.”

The idea of representative government has a direct, emotional meaning for Rice and others who were so directly affected by 9/11, he says. “It is not in

the realm of the intellect or the abstract,” Rice said. “We know that the basic principles of our constitution and the checks and balances of power are key to American democracy. Of course abuses of power have always occurred, but the use of 9/11, the deaths of our family members, to consolidate political power and benefit certain demographic groups and interests over others—this is a travesty to us.”

Writing from New York, his colleague on the Peaceful Tomorrows group, Adele Welty, described Rice as “a rare man of integrity and good will.” His bid for the Oklahoma senate stems from “a personal conviction that he can have a positive impact on the people in his state, not from a desire to have power.”

“Those within the 9/11 family completely get what I am doing with this senate run,” Rice said.

Colleen Kelly, co-director of Peaceful Tomorrows, agrees. “There are those who hold onto anger and choose to let grief overwhelm them and those that take this horrific tragedy and try to make something better for the world. Andrew is one of the latter.”

Kelly listened to Rice speak at the one-year 9/11 memorial, a vigil held as the sun set on New York’s Washington Square Park and attended by more than 10,000 people. Rice’s speech was memorable, she said. “He did it then and he does it now: Andrew speaks the unfettered truth without self-censorship. When someone like that attempts to do good, everything falls into place.” ■

*“It’s a humbling process to see commonality between you and someone who has brought harm to you and your family, but one we must undertake as part of the process of self-introspection.”*

ANDREW RICE ’96