

Young Survivors' Presentation to WTCHP-STAC, June 21st, 2023

Statement by Abishai James, Armani James, and Alijah James

Good afternoon, I am Abishai James, and I was 9 years old on 9/11

I am Armani James and I was 5 years old

I am Alijah James and my mother was pregnant with me, I was born in October.

Abishai – we were living here at Southbridge Towers, 4 blocks East of Tower 1. I was at Our Lady of Pompeii and when I became aware of the attacks, I was so worried, I went to my sister's classroom to make sure she was OK.

Our Grandfather who also lived with us came to get us at school and bring us home. When we arrived, our building had lost power, and water. Our apartment was dark. My grandfather started pulling food from the refrigerator and sent me down the stairs with a bucket to get water.

Armani – We waited and waited for our mother Mariama James. We had lost phone contact with her hours earlier. When she arrived around 10pm, she was covered in dust like the rest of us. She had walked all the way from her workplace in Queens.

Abishai – we didn't know it yet, but our Grandmother had reported to work that day at the Deutsche Bank, which is on the WTC site. We didn't know where she was.

Armani – 9/11 was scary. Our mother had found soldiers with automatic weapons in the stairwells. She was told not to evacuate because her doctor told her to stay in our building which was across the street from the hospital. Our mother and grandfather were concerned about all the dust covering everything in our apartment. They started cleaning right away.

Abishai – All of us developed health problems – a range of respiratory problems and GERD. This includes Alijah who wasn't born yet.

Our first recommendation is that kids like Alijah, who was inside our mother on and for more than a month after 9/11 need to be included in this cohort, since they are exposed to what their mother is breathing and ingesting.

Allijah – My mother was advised to take us to a pulmonologist and she took us to Dr. Leistner at NYU, who did tests on all 3 of us. I was diagnosed with asthma and other health problems when I was 10 months old. When I complained about my breathing and my stomach, my teachers said I was lying because I hadn't been born until after 9/11. But Dr. Leistner understood that I was exposed to the same dust and smoke as the rest of my family, and the rest of our community.

Alijah – Our second recommendation is that this cohort needs to be racially and ethnically diverse. It needs to reflect the kids who were in Lower Manhattan on 9/11, some of whom look like us.

Abishai: This is very important, otherwise the cohort will not be equitable and cohorts that exclude groups in the population who were affected are biased and don't produce good science.

Armani: Lots of people who experienced 9/11 as children still have PTSD, and some have anxiety and depression. The research needs to look at how mental health and physical health problems work together to affect each of us.

Abishai: And we continue to be affected when we lose loved ones to 9/11-related diseases. Last year, both of our grandparents passed away from 9/11 cancers inside of 18 months. It's re-traumatizing. This impact should also be tracked.

Alijah: A really good way for the WTC Health Program to establish trust with us would be to provide timely mental health care. Lots of us need it. Right now, for lots of people in our age group, it's a priority.

Abishai: Our third recommendation is that if you want to bring young people into the cohort, as well as into the WTC Health Program, then eliminating barriers to mental health care would be the best step you could take. We would also ask that the clinics are flexible about virtual visits or visits outside of working hours...because lots of us are working.

Armani: We have participated in studies of 9/11 health – all three of us. Why? We want things to be better, better for us, and better for everybody.

Our final recommendation is that building community and solidarity is part of building this cohort. We think young survivors will embrace the goal of helping themselves and helping everybody, because what will be learned from tracking and researching this cohort is going to benefit everybody.

Everyone: Thank you!