

Written Testimony for Sarri Singer, Director of “Strength to Strength” a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

Chairman Desantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today and share with you my personal story, which is unfortunately the story of thousands of Americans, people living in Israel and around the globe who have felt the brutal impact of Islamic terrorism.

My name is Sarri Singer. I am the founder and director of Strength to Strength and I am the daughter of New Jersey State Senator, Robert Singer. I always was taught that it’s the little things in life that make a difference. But I never understood the impact of the most minute details, a missed bus, a few seconds shaved off a marathon, a seat change, even just the blink of an eye. I sit before you today as a survivor of a violent terror attack because of series of split second decisions that left 16 people dead and many others injured, including myself. When a terror attack occurs the smallest details determine the outcome of everyone within range and it’s those fated moments that haunt victims for the rest of their lives.

September 11, 2001 was a turning point for me. I worked near the World Trade Center, but somehow that morning my alarm didn’t go off and I overslept. While my colleagues were running for their lives, I was safely uptown watching the towers burn and the murder of thousands of Americans on television. Helplessly watching this unfold, while knowing that if not for a small twist of fate I would have been there, changed me. I felt an urge to make a difference and within three months I had quit my job and moved to Israel to volunteer with organizations that assisted victims of terror and their families.

My personal 9/11 came on June 11, 2003, the day I boarded bus #14 in Jerusalem and barely escaped with my life.

It is now twelve and a half years since that horrific attack and the memories are still fresh in my mind. When I close my eyes I am brought back to that day and remember everything, I relive every moment and shudder as my mind wanders into the alternate endings, each scenario increasingly terrifying. I was heading to meet a friend for dinner and boarded the bus. At the second stop I spotted two empty seats and sat by the window. Strange, I always preferred sitting in the aisle seat, but that day I didn’t and I lived, but the woman in the aisle seat next to me died instantly.

I remember the sounds of crushing metal and feeling the shockwave as the explosion tore through the bus. I remember immediately shutting my eyes, an instinct which saved my sight. And I remember the moment of total silence that followed the blast - a silence so frightening, the silence of those who were dead in every seat around me.

I screamed.

I screamed so loud that a stranger, who had heard the blast from three blocks away, heard my cries and ran toward the mangled, burning bus and pulled me out. I will never forget the old woman who stood by my side holding me as I was burned, bleeding and frightened. I will never forget the kindness and love that was shown to me by those I had known my entire life and by those whom I had never met.

My injuries were extensive.

Shrapnel went through my left shoulder breaking my clavicle bone, both my eardrums were blown from the impact of the blast, my hair was burned, my face burned and bruised, my legs badly cut, and I have shrapnel in my mouth that is inoperable. One of the most memorable days of my childhood was the day my orthodontist removed my metal braces. I felt pure freedom as he removed the assorted metal pieces and wires. Today I sit before you with shrapnel imbedded in my mouth. They will remain a part of me for the rest of my life.

A few days after the attack I was told that approximately two people had stood between me and the terrorist and every person seated and standing around me was killed on impact. A busload of innocent civilians boarded the bus that day, and a suicide bomber, wearing a vest loaded with shrapnel, injured over 100 innocent civilians and murdered 16 people including an American citizen, 46 year-old Alan Beer, originally from Cleveland, Ohio.

I suffer pain and anguish on a daily basis from the trauma of being in the eye of one of the most extensive bus bombings targeting Israeli citizens. The Hamas terrorist who strapped himself with explosives and shrapnel, who boarded that bus in order to hurt and murder innocent people, was just 18 years old. This teenager was the 8th homicide bomber to be recruited by Hamas from a children's Palestinian soccer team for the sole purpose of carrying out terrorist attacks in Israel on innocent civilians. In America our soccer teams play soccer. In Israel their soccer teams play soccer. Using an organized sport to recruit Jihadists from impressionable children should be unacceptable in every culture & every part of the world.

Survivors of terror are often asked if they are filled with hate or a desire for revenge. I can only speak for myself, but I refuse to give in to those emotions, because I will not let this tragic experience destroy my humanity, not after the destruction I witnessed. I had no control over what happened to me that day but I do have control over how I live my life going forward and I intend to live my life showing kindness to others as others have shown kindness to me.

An attack happens in an instant but the impact lasts a lifetime for survivors and their families. I established Strength to Strength to create a support environment for victims, both survivors and bereaved family members, essentially survivors healing survivors. Strength to Strength is part of a global network bringing victims of terrorism from all ends of the world together, all in agreement that terrorism is not one country's problem, but a major issue in the world today. Strength to Strength is a grassroots organization, where we work with existing organizations in various countries who assist civilian victims from a variety of backgrounds and religions. We work with victims from attacks in Algeria, Argentina, Colombia, England, France, Israel, Kenya, Mumbai, Northern Ireland, Spain, Uganda, and those in the United States.

We are headquartered in New York City where we hold monthly Survivors Circle meetings, where we foster an atmosphere of mutual understanding and healing. These meetings are attended by victims and family members and are both therapeutic and recreational.

We run Victim Weekend Retreats for victims and bereaved family members where they have the opportunity to share their stories and be a voice for those who did not survive. These weekends provide support and create long lasting bonds between survivors and bereaved.

Our Young Ambassadors Program brings together participants ages 14-20 who have either lost a parent or family member to terrorism, a family member injured or were injured themselves. Many of the teens travel overseas to attend, some flying for the first time. Past participants have joined from Algeria, Argentina, Colombia, England, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Spain, France and the United States. The teens spend a week in New York City sight-seeing, attending therapeutic programs and sharing their personal stories with political leaders, community leaders and each other. The program empowers these teens to move forward as life must go on even after the most unimaginable sorrow. Connecting to a global peer group with very diverse backgrounds

and advocating on behalf of others is very healing. The teens head home looking towards their future and wanting to make a difference in their community and in the world.

Most recently, on December 9, 2015, we launched our Boston Division. Forty victims of the Boston Marathon bombings attended and enjoyed an inaugural dinner and connecting with other survivors in a warm and safe environment.

It's difficult to find anything positive or any semblance of meaning in an act of terror, the act of maiming or murdering another person to support a political or religious agenda is not one that I will ever understand. There is nothing positive about experiencing a bombing or a shooting, but sometimes the most horrific events are the motivation for action and the best action we can take is to make sure that there are no more victims to a violent, agenda driven tantrum. We must do everything in our power to make sure no more lives are ruined by terror and we must remember that victims need support from their family, friends, community and especially their government.

While the physical injuries I endured were very difficult, nothing compares to the long term psychological impact that surviving something so horrific, something that was planned and calculated in order to try to murder me and others that were on that bus that day. Finding validation and justice is something that is vital in dealing with the long term impact of what I, and others, have been through. We need your help.

In 2004, Congress passed the Koby Mandell Act which funded a special office within the U.S. Department of Justice to advocate on behalf of American victims of terrorism and tasked the Department of Justice not only to help families with various expenses resulting from terror attacks but to actively investigate those crimes and help bring the perpetrators to justice. While the Office of Justice for Victims of Overseas Terrorism has been responsive in helping families with the former and the civil servants who work at the Office of Justice for Overseas Terrorism undoubtedly have good intentions, Congress's hope that the Department of Justice would take an active role in investigating, extraditing and prosecuting terrorists who kill Americans overseas has come up against a harsh reality. As far as I know, since 2004, the U.S. Department of Justice has not sought the extradition of even a single terrorist responsible for the murder or injuring of an American citizen in Israel. During that same time period, I've spoken to a number of families in my position and while their interactions with the FBI and Department of Justice have generally been professional and polite, without exception, they have received no meaningful, substantive information about the investigations of the attacks at issue and no concrete evidence that any serious investigation has even been attempted. Then there are other victims who I am in touch with who do not even know that the Office of Justice for Victims of Overseas Terrorism exists.

In fact, since Congress passed the Koby Mandell Act in 2004, the only serious counter-terrorism effort I've seen relating to my terror attack and dozens like it, has come from two private civil suits I joined ten years ago against Arab Bank of Jordan and National Westminster Bank in Britain. The case brought against Arab Bank led directly to a regulatory investigation by the U.S. Treasury Department of Arab Bank's New York branch and culminated in a jury verdict in 2014 finding the bank liable for 24 Hamas terrorist attacks, including the terror attack that injured me. The case against National Westminster Bank is still pending but it has already resulted in the Bank closing the accounts of a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist – Interpal – whose accounts remained active for years, despite U.S. diplomatic efforts.

Chairman Desantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I don't expect perfect justice and I fully realize that the federal government cannot bring every terrorist to justice, but the government's track record in extraditing - or even seeking extradition

– of Palestinian terrorists who have murdered American citizens is non-existent. To take just one example, Ahmed Mustafa Saleh Hamed who was sentenced to 7 life sentences by Israel. He was released from prison as part of the Gilad Schalit Prisoner Exchange. Hamed was part of a Hamas cell that killed American Howard Goldstein in June 2003. He has since been linked by Israeli authorities to a fatal June 29, 2015 attack in Israel.

I have highlighted this case involving the Gilad Schalit Prisoner Exchange, of which there are a number of those released with American blood on their hands, because in this instance, we know who the specific perpetrator is, but there are many other terrorist attacks that remain far less well known and understood and the families of the dead and injured Americans in these cases have heard nothing from the government to make them believe that these kinds of terrorist attacks are being seriously and vigorously investigated.

I love my country, America has always been a great country that has created a safe haven for citizens and refugees. I grew up believing that my country would be there for me and protect me, no matter where I was in the world. These last years have left me feeling let down. I want to believe again, the way I always did that my country is protecting me and not the people who sent a teenage soccer player, strapped up in a bomb to blow me up. Please, for me, for all the American victims of Islamic terrorism, whether they were attacked at work, on vacation, enjoying an evening out, please for all of us who had our lives disrupted, please restore our faith that our government is on our side.

In closing, I would just like to say thank you Chairman Desantis for making this hearing a priority and being a voice for so many American victims of Palestinian terrorism. It always amazes me to see those like yourself, who have no direct connection to terrorism, standing up for us and making sure that we know we are not alone and that we are not forgotten.

Thank you.

Sarri Singer Biography

Sarri Singer, born in Lakewood, New Jersey, is the daughter of New Jersey State Senator, Robert Singer. Until 9/11, Sarri worked two blocks away from the World Trade Center. Deeply moved by the tragedy of 9/11, Sarri decided to resign from her position in December 2001 and move to Israel to help victims of terror. While there, Sarri volunteered with various organizations working with victims of terror and their families.

On June 11, 2003, Sarri was on Bus 14 in Jerusalem when an 18 year-old Palestinian terrorist dressed as a religious Jew boarded and blew himself up. 16 people were killed, including all those seated and standing around her, and over 100 people were injured. Sarri was hospitalized for two weeks and then returned to New Jersey to be with family. Her story became high profile. She appeared on television stations such as CBS, FoxNews, CNN and radio interviews. She spoke before Congressmen and Senators in Washington, D.C. and politicians in New York and New Jersey. In September 2003 she returned to work and volunteering in Israel. In June 2004, she returned to the United States to take care of medical issues associated with her attack.

Sarri is the Founder and Director of Strength to Strength (www.stosglobal.org), a non-profit organization which focuses on bringing together victims of terrorism from around the world and assisting with long term psychological needs. Sarri has addressed audiences throughout the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, and Israel and continues to share her unique insight into the ongoing struggle for victims of terror in Israel and around the world.