Anthoula Katsimatides: From tragedy comes strength

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By Kathy Tzilivakis

If there is one thing that can be said about Anthoula Katsimatides, it is that she lives her life with a drive and determination strong enough to overcome all obstacles. Hers is a story of tragedy and the strength that comes from it.

The 40-year-old “native Astoria girl” as she calls herself is pursuing an acting career in New York, dreaming of one day staring on Broadway or on her own TV show. But when this multi-talented actress is not performing on stage or in front of the camera, she works to keep the memory of her two brothers alive.

Katsimatides started a non-profit charity organization, the JAM For Life Foundation. JAM is short for Johnny And Mikey – the names of her two brothers. It is an initiative that was inspired by their tragic deaths-- two separate circumstances less than two years apart.

Mikey committed suicide in May of 1999 and John died in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 when Muslim extremists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center. His office was on the 104th floor of the north tower.

With very little (if any) time to grieve the loss of her brother John, Katsimatides took a job as the director of Family Relations at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation for many years after 9/11. She assisted with the massive rebuilding effort and served as the main point of contact for the families of other victims.

She was also appointed to the board of the National September 11th Memorial and Museum.
The Pappas Post caught up with Katsimatides on her way to the 59E59 Theaters, an Off-Broadway complex in New York, where she has a role in the production of *Murder in the First*.

It's a powerful courtroom drama inspired by a compelling true story of the case that ultimately led to the closing of Alcatraz prison off the coast of San Francisco-- the most notorious correctional institution in the history of the United States.

She was a bit nervous as we interviewed her. She plays a prostitute in the play and she just got a message that her mom was coming to see her performance tonight.

**So your mom's coming to see you perform tonight. Does she know you're playing a prostitute?**

Are you kidding me? Of course she doesn't! I'm a nervous wreck. It's a pretty racy scene, you know.

**What drew you into the acting profession?**

The story-telling and the stage. Two things I'm obsessed with. I love sharing stories, portraying characters, bringing them to life, creating them, developing them. It all started at a little theater in Astoria. I was offered a part in a play. It was

Before 9/11, Katsimatides had worked in advertising, taught English and served as a public liaison for the former Governor of New York, George Pataki.

She is now in a new chapter of her life, pursuing a career as an actor. And she's well on her way. She has won several parts in major films such as *Taking Woodstock* (directed by Ang Lee and starring fellow Greek American Demetri Martin) as well as television series such as *Big Lake* and *Damages*.

Katsimatides is now working on her own one-woman show.
a Greek play. I loved it so much. And being the Capricorn that I am I wanted to do what I was doing correctly so I signed up for acting classes.

**Are you attracted to stardom?**

Hell no. I hate fame. I'm attracted to the feeling you get when you hear applause, or when your director tells you 'great job'-- not because they are applauding me, Anthoula, but because you know you've convinced your audience, your director, your fellow actor, that you've fulfilled the role you set out to play. You've successfully told the story you set out to tell.

**So you've had these experiences before?**

Absolutely! When I worked with Greg Yaitanes during the Gabby Awards, I played a picture bride, on stage, in front of a thousand of the most influential Greeks in the nation.

Picture brides were these poor women who came over by the boatload to Ellis Island with only a photograph in their hand of the man they were set up to marry.

Greg, who is an amazing director who has directed shows like House and Grey's Anatomy, took me aside after my performance and said 'Anthoula, you gave me chills. You were a picture bride on that stage.'

**Are you working on something now?**

Yes, I'm on this wonderful off-Broadway play called *Murder in the First*. I have a small role-- as a prostitute named Blanche, but it's quite intricate and emotional. They're thinking about taking it to Broadway.
I am also in the middle of writing my own one-woman show called *What Will People Say?* because it seems like I’ve been raised with this concept hovering over my head all my life. You can’t do this because "what will people say?". You can’t do that because "what will people say?"

It’s autobiographical. I will talk about my experiences and about my upbringing. You know, my parents tried their best to shelter me – like many Greek parents do in order to protect their children. But what actually happens is that you are not ready for the shit that life throws your way. But it won’t be a typical Greek American story. I am trying to shake it up a little. I’m looking to start producing this show in the fall.

**What would be your dream job as an actor?**

My ultimate goal is to be a series regular on a television show, a dramatic comedy. That’s my goal. But I also can’t wait for a big juicy part on the stage. The theater is so transformative – so different from being behind the camera because you do it night after night and you play off the energy of the other actors and the people in the audience. There’s also the backstage banter, which I love.

**Do you have role models?**

In my life-- my two brothers, John and Mikey are my role models. I live every day of my life for their memory. In my career, Olympia Dukakis and Melina Kanakaredes. Two amazing actors. Two accomplished actors. Olympia is, well, she’s Olympia. She’s a legend. And Melina, because she is the real deal. She’s genuinely a nice person. Success couldn’t have come to a better person-- and so talented. Oh-- and because look at her last name-- KA-NA-KA-RE-DES... Sort of rhymes with KA-TSI-MA-TI-DES?

**Speaking of your name-- you own the domain Anthoula.com**

I do! I'm sure there are plenty of Anthoulas and Anthousas out there that hate me. But I got it and I've built my portfolio on the page. I also Tweet a lot... so you need to follow me on Twitter too!

**What was it like growing up Greek in Astoria?**

Well, both my parents, Antonios and Calliope, were born and raised on a tiny island in the Dodecanese island Nisyros – my second home. It really is a tiny island with only about a thousand people living there. It’s a very quaint little island where everybody knows your name.
So, my parents came here as immigrants. It was all about being Greek in my household. I spoke only Greek with my dad and my mom. My Greek heritage is incredibly, almost to a fault, important to me.

**How active are you in the community?**

I take pride in my Greek heritage and express that pride in what I do. I've been the emcee for the annual Greek Independence Day parade in New York City—the largest in the nation. I'm an avid Greek folk dancer and continue to perform and teach younger kids when I can.

**Have you ever thought about acting in Greece?**

I would love it. You know, the very first film I did was shot on Nisyros. It was a very small part in a film called *Athanasia*. I met the director and he gave me a role. To shoot on my island was incredible.

Everyone in the American world looks at me and they say wow you have this quintessential "Hellenic" face. So I feel like I am the quintessential Greek. I would love to give back to Greece. I would work in Greece for free. I would actually pay for my own ticket too and donate my time and talent for a cause. Philanthropy is important to me, in general... But for Greece, I would jump at the opportunity.

**Let’s talk about the JAM Foundation. You recently hosted a fundraising event. What’s it all about?**

After Michael committed suicide in 1999, he was only 26 years old, my family and I always wanted to do something in his memory. And then, about a year and a half later, the Twin Towers fell on 9/11 and my brother John died. He was working at Cantor Fitzgerald—a company that lost 658 employees.

This was obviously devastating to us as a family. This is when we knew we had to do something to honor their memory.

On a personal note, I wore black for a year after my brother Michael died. John couldn’t understand why I did that. He would tell me that I was too young and beautiful and that I should always be in color. So when he passed, I knew I just couldn’t sit around and be miserable and sad. I knew I had to do something.

As for Michael, he was really happy-go-lucky and really smart individual. Unfortunately not enough is known about mental illness. I feel like if I had known a little more and wasn’t so naïve in the notion that Michael could ever kill himself. I didn’t know what bipolar meant.
That’s another reason I wanted to do something. I felt a need to educate people and make them more aware about mental illness and suicide. So that’s why I started the JAM foundation.

What we do is we host a fundraiser each year in their memory. It’s not a very big fundraiser – about 200 people attend. We raise money for a variety of causes and try to make an impact.

After John was killed in the terrorist attacks in New York, you took a job helping others cope with their loss. How did you do this when you, yourself, were grieving the loss of your brother?

I still don’t know how I did it. It was probably the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life. It was such a tumultuous time – families were grieving and I myself had my own grief which I sort of put on a shelf. The theory was to get back to work to feel better. But I wasn’t getting back to work in a flower shop or an ad agency. I was throwing myself right into the nucleus of the crater.

But, for so many people, I was someone who could understand them. They could talk to the sister of a victim who also had the ear of a politician. But after a few years, there came a time when I really needed to do something for myself. That’s when I decided I wanted to become an actress.

And the rest, as they say, is history.