

**The Center for American Progress interviews John Feal
August 21, 2007**

Center for American Progress: Tell me a little bit about why you started your foundation and why you keep doing it.

John Feal: Well, I'll start from the beginning. On Sept. 11, I was up in Nanuet doing a demolition job and when the first tower hit, everyone heard over the radio that a tower had been hit by a plane, but no one knew the full extent. So when the second tower was hit they shut the job down immediately and I gave everybody the option of finding shelter or going home to their loved ones because no one knew, we weren't given any information, like we were under attack or anything.

CAP: You were there in Manhattan?

JF: No, I was in Nanuet, about 45 minutes outside of the city.

With that, I decided to go home, I wasn't going to stay there. Which, what was usually an hour and a half drive, from Nanuet to Long Island, I got home in about 35 minutes. There were absolutely no cars on the road, because nobody could go westward toward the city. So going over the Throgs Neck bridge I could see the mushroom and uh, I said, oh my gosh.

When I got back to the office they said "Do you want to go down there," and it was just me and the owner out of a business of about 200 guys and five foremen, me being one of the foremen. I was the only one not married, plus with my military training and everything I did I was there whole informant. I traveled the east coast, and the next day I went down there, on the 12th.

From the 12th to the 17th I supervised the clean up of Site 7. Then on the 17th of September, roughly about 8,000 pounds of steel crushed my left foot. The guy next to me fainted. I took his belt off and I made a tourniquet because blood was shooting out of my foot about six feet into the air in three different directions.

I looked like a human sprinkler. I hobbled over to the curb and took my boot off and all my bones were sticking out of my sock. So I had to cut off my sock with a razor blade knife. The fire department was there in about three minutes. God bless them. With that, they put me on a cart, put me in an ambulance and I had a four car police escort to Bellevue like I was Elvis. They were literally stopping cars at the intersections just for me to get to Bellevue.

I spent about nine or 10 days in Bellevue where I developed gangrene. Little did I know—I was so naïve and gullible I thought gangrene was something from the 1900s with a gunshot wound. And the doctor goes, "This guy's going to die of gangrene." I became organ septic. When you become septic you have organ shutdown.

So I was becoming sicker, and I made my mother get me out of that hospital. I went to North Shore University in White Plains, New York, first fighting for my life, then for no organ

removal. I spent about nine or 10 weeks there. My consolation was losing part of my foot after surgery after surgery after surgery.

I went from 188 pounds to 120 pounds. After I got out of the hospital, that first year I was like every other 9/11 responder. Why me, why am I getting denied? The fact that I had to fight while everybody else had respiratories and cancers, I was fighting for a physical injury. It's hard for them to prove it even though they shouldn't have to; I had a physical injury, documented, but I was in the same boat as [the other 9/11 responders] being denied. I eventually won my workman's comp case though, which was an insult, of \$52,000.

CAP: That's from your employer?

JF: Yeah, that's comp. Then I got denied the first time around on social security. And I appealed and Congressman [Tim] Bishop's office helped me out and I won. 2002 I started going to support groups, just meeting other 9/11 responders. Then 2003 came, and it was a chain of events that really put life in perspective. I just had surgery, I was averaging about three or four surgeries on both feet. I had heel spurs and plantar fasciitis. The equivalent of walking on broken glass is the only way I can describe it.

But in 2003, I had just come back from the doctor, I'm on crutches, I'm sitting in McDonald's, and I remember this day. I'm sitting there eating a No. 2 and I don't usually eat McDonald's because I'm usually pretty healthy, but I'm really hungry. So this guy came in with his two daughters, and one of them was severely handicapped, and they sit right next to me, and the handicapped daughter was probably a year or two older than the younger daughter.

And the father never helped her once. And for her to eat a Happy Meal, she had to struggle just to get her mouth around the straw. It took her 45 minutes just to eat a little cheeseburger and little fries. And she was severely handicapped, couldn't speak, sitting there playing with her sister.

I was sitting there thinking to myself, how bad do I really have it? This girl was born without a choice. I have a choice. I can feel sorry for myself or I can help others and fight back. With that I started calling different politicians and media and trying to advocate for others who were sick and dying

Then my sister called and said my mother had been rushed to the hospital. My mother has never been to the hospital as far as I've been alive. And I knew right away there was something wrong. I got there and she's laying in the hospital bed with all my family members around and a few hours later the doctor comes over and says she has cancer. I just knew it, you know? And my mother died Apr 2, 2006, and the three years she had cancer she never complained once.

She raised me—mother, father, best friend—and I didn't need 9/11 to know right from wrong. I need 9/11 to show everybody what my mother taught me. And she put up a fight for three years and not once complaining. So I thought once again, how bad do I have it?

She was given a disease and she fought for her life. The day my mother was diagnosed with cancer, I'm on crutches now and I'm coming home. I was given a dog the day I got home from the hospital. Laying on my floor, there's a knock on the door and I couldn't get to the door fast enough. When I got to the door I looked around and there was no one there, so I opened the door, and I knocked over a basket with a puppy in it. And there's a card in it saying I hope this cheers you up. I have ideas about who did it but no one ever claimed it.

So anyway, it's a Rottweiler. But he has the mindset of a French poodle and you could break into my house and he'll lick you to death. But when I came home from the hospital, my dog was laying in a pool of blood out of his butt. Oh god, why me. Now I'm trying to get him into my Expedition. I'm on crutches, in a cast, and this is a 130-pound dog. So I get him to the vet. And the vet says, John, your dog has Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted fever. He got bit by a tick.

It's \$100 to put him to sleep or \$2,700 to keep him alive. And I was like, oh no, what do I do. I was like, do you have a payment plan. I wound up paying \$75 per month for the next however long. So for eight days between my mother and my dog are in the hospital and I'm going back and forth on crutches to see both of them.

And I started advocating and as an individual I started helping people. I would just shame grocery stores or lumber yards to donate materials to 9/11 responders who couldn't afford it. I didn't have a name, you know, I was just doing it. And I refused to, I've been diagnosed by four doctors with post-traumatic, and I refuse to take a pill for it. And I refuse to take any more medications and put anything else in my body. So that was my therapy, helping people.

So in 2004, I co-founded an organization called Unsung Heroes Helping Heroes with a couple other 9/11 responders. Those responders were compensated by the Sept. 11 fund, so they didn't know what it was to suffer financially.

CAP: So they were mostly the firefighters?

JF: Right, so they also wanted to pass new laws and new bills. I was a strong believer in the laws and bills that we have now would be effective if our elected officials would just do what is morally right. That's wishing.

So with that I resigned. Because I wanted to help 9/11 responders on an everyday basis. Because they needed help every day. So I started the FealGood Foundation. So my first fundraiser I did a golf outing and three 9/11 responders went home with \$1,300 each. And I was like, Wow. But the FealGood Foundation's not about fundraising. It's about advocating for worker's comp, Social Security, crime victims, and the basic benefits that these people deserve. When we get a 9/11 responder who comes to us, we turn him to a lawyer who sits on our board, and he's from Brecher Fishman in the city. They're in good hands now. And then we have a public relations lady who does a video on them and it goes on the internet. And it gets them out there.

But three four five times a year, we'll do a fundraiser, and we'll raise some money for some 9/11 responders. Is it a lot of money? No. I just did a July 21 concert and we wrote checks to 12

responders. That's pretty good. It's not great. Last year I raised \$15,800, and I donated \$16,400, so money's coming out of my own pocket.

CAP: About how many people do you think that helps?

JF: I've probably written close to over 100 checks to different responders. But I've helped hundreds in workman's comp, social security, crime victims. You know, a lot of these guys didn't even realize, a lot of them didn't even have a lawyer, I've gotten David Worby over 300 clients. He's the one who's leading the class action lawsuit. So we're about spreading awareness and advocating and educating the mass.

CAP: Rudy Giuliani recently remarked that he was "at ground zero as often, if not more, than most of the workers." A lot of people have been pretty upset by the implications of his statement. What are your thoughts on Giuliani's response to the issues that 9/11 responders are facing?

JF: What Rudy Giuliani said is an insult to all of us. He was down there a total of several hours. I was there for days, worked 48 hours straight. What people don't realize is that Sept. 11 happened, and then he was done being mayor in January 2002. He couldn't lead in New York. He couldn't even help the heroes of 9/11. He wouldn't be able to help the American people. And now he's trying to run for President on this platform.

CAP: You're donating a kidney next week. What inspired you to do that and who will it be going to?

JF: I get these emails and I got an email back in September last year from a man named Paul Grossfeld. And Paul's like, "I think what you're doing is great, and by the way, can you link me to your website because I'm on the kidney donor transplant list." And I'm like, "No, you can just have mine." So he emailed me back and he was like, you're kidding me. So it took three or four days to convince him, but that was how fast my response was, you know.

In November of last year we made an appointment to go to Columbia Presbyterian in Manhattan to see if we would be a match. And there was a one in 30,000 chance we would be a match, and I should've played lotto that day, because we were. And we weren't 100 percent match but we were compatible. With that over the next couple months there was some blood work and some minor testing and then in May of this year I went in there and I did seven hours of physicals and every test you can imagine and I passed every one. With that, the hospital approached me and asked if I would do a swap that would include six people, including Paul. There was a person who was a better match for Paul, and I would be a better match for somebody, and that person's spouse would give it to somebody, and to Paul. So it would be a three-recipient, three-donor, six-person operation only done once before.

So with that yesterday I went to the hospital to see my surgeon, because tomorrow is a week from the surgery. I did another chest x-ray, I did another CAT scan, EKG, they took blood; then I saw the surgeon. I kinda got lucky because the CAT scan showed I have a couple extra valves

going into my right kidney, which means more flow. They're taking the left one. So that's pretty good.

They tried to scan me, it didn't work. Once I've made up my mind to do it, I do it. I've upset my family, and even my wife. But it's something my mother would want me to do—I'm going to do it, there's no backing out now. Now this woman's life and Paul's life depends on my kidney. I'm going to help two people.

You know, as Americans, we have extra food, we have extra money, we have extra body parts. Through the foundation, we give out money, we give out food and individually I'm giving a body part. And I don't think there's a better feeling in the world, other than winning lotto, and I never won the lotto, so I don't know that feeling. But this is a pretty good feeling that I get to actually make a difference. And I'm going to use this as a platform to raise awareness for 9/11 responders who need organ donations.

So many 9/11 responders need double lung transplants because they have pulmonary fibrosis. Officer Borgia died of pulmonary fibrosis. Vito Valenti, who sits on my board, has PF. Andrea Nitza, who lived around the block from there, she has pulmonary fibrosis. This is not a coincidence. I never knew anybody in my life who had pulmonary fibrosis, let alone heard of it, before 9/11. And now 12 of these people have come to our foundation for help. You could donate your lungs while you're alive, I would donate my lungs, but obviously you can't. I'm going to raise awareness for people to find their driver's licenses, be organ donors, reach out to America. And they lose a loved one, as sad as that may be, it could be going to a good cause, they could be helping a 9/11 responder. And that's the real reason why I'm doing this.

CAP: Wow. That's very inspiring. To talk a bit about Michael Moore, you put him in touch with the responders who he took to Cuba in his movie.

JF: Michael Moore in March 2006, they came to my house and asked me if I wanted to be in a documentary about people who fell through the health cracks. And I was like, yeah, I qualify, so come over. So they came over, filmed me for about six hours, and they fell in love with me. But then I didn't hear from them after that.

But they called me a few months later and they're like, "Uh, we're taking a different approach on the movie. You want go to Cuba?" And I was like, "What am I going to do in Cuba, grow a foot?" And they laughed. I laughed. And I said, I'd rather give my spot up to somebody who really needs it. I mean if you're going to go and get them help, I'll give you the people, but get them help. And if you don't get them help, and you just use them, you're going to have a problem with me.

And with that I gave them, every day, somebody in the media calls and I give them a list of responders. And so I gave them a list of responders who they could interview to go to Cuba. With that, I worked with them closely over a couple of months and they narrowed it down. I had a Christmas party last year to raise money for Christmas present for first responders, so they can put presents under the trees for their kids. They can't afford it. And he sent \$1,000 worth of toys,

and he didn't have to do that, because I'd already sent him the list. It wasn't like, "I'll give you the toys if you give me the list."

And I found that to be rather noble.

CAP: How has the publicity from "SiCKO" affected your organization and awareness for your cause?

JF: It benefited us. So with that, in February I did another fundraiser for two 9/11 responders. One a priest from Ohio who was at Ground Zero reading last rites. And the other was an ironworker. We raised \$3,500 for each of them that day. That was pretty good. Michael Moore's crew came and filmed that, but at that time his other crew was in Cuba with the 9/11 responders, but part of that event is in the movie "SiCKO."

With that, about two months later they asked me if I wanted to see the private screening. They picked me up in a car and brought me to see it, and you know, it's a two-hour movie, and they didn't get to the 9/11 part until the end, the last 15 or 20 minutes, but before it got to the 9/11 part, I must have cried six or seven times, and I'm not the world's most emotional person. Just not am.

I found myself wiping my nose and my eyes on my sleeve throughout the whole movie for Americans across the board without this universal health care or any coverage and people are getting sicker and dying because our federal government. It's just, it's criminal. With that, as I was watching the movie, and as the movie closed, and in the closing credits there's my name, and there's the FealGood Foundation and I was like, well, what's the big deal?

After the movie he stood up and he did Q&A and everybody was like blah blah blah... I got a chance to bring a couple FealGood Foundation Board members to the screening room and they got up and asked a couple of questions. And he said, "Oh, you're from the FealGood Foundation," like he knew who we were. Because I had always dealt with his producers. And he said, well, "I'd love to meet John." And I said, "Well, I'm John, Michael."

And he was like, "Well, please come down here." And I was like, "Well, I'm shy." You know, I don't like attention drawn to me. When I'm behind a microphone or a podium I'll say what's on my mind, I won't sugarcoat it. Like when I give a speech.

But with that, there's like 100 people there, in this little private screening in Tribeca, and I go to shake his hand, and he pulls me down and he hugs me. Now, I'm 5'8," 175 lbs, and he's a big man, he didn't just hug me, he literally squeezed the poop out of me. And when I went to walk away, he grabbed me by the arm and he had to tell everybody who I was and what I did. And I said it right to him, I said, "I don't agree with everything you do, but I respect you and I find you to be the most humble person I've ever met." He's so sincere and humble.

And with that, I went on "Fox and Friends" in the morning a couple weeks later because the media—everybody in the media kept calling me every day, 20 times a day asking me who were the three responders who went to Cuba, and I wouldn't tell them. Channel 2, I said, I can't tell

you guys. When you guys call me up for a 9/11 responder, I give it. These people call me and they ask for someone. And I kept saying I didn't know, but I knew it. Through that, he heard through the grapevine. And I could've told that to anyone in the media at any time, and I probably could've gotten paid for it, and I didn't. And he was impressed by my loyalty.

I went on "Fox and Friends" in the morning and it's a die-hard Republican show. And they put me on there with another 9/11 responder who is anti-Michael Moore. In the green room, he's telling everybody that yeah, Michael Moore's people approached him to go to Cuba, which they never did, because I gave them the original list. I went up to the guy and I said, "Look, you're a 9/11 responder, I love you, I'll even help you," and I have helped this guy a couple times before. And I said, "If you go out there on national TV live and say that they approached you, I will call you a liar. I will verbally abuse you."

So when he got out there, he didn't say it. But they were anti-Michael this and anti-Michael that, and I said, "You know what"—I said it to the host of the show—"If you had a 12-year-old son who had a brain tumor, and he was dying, and they said the only place that kid could get help was in Cuba, you would take your son to Cuba." They all looked at me like, "Oh, yeah, I guess."

Then the 9/11 responder that was there, he was like, "Well, I believe in Mt. Sinai and I believe that Mt. Sinai is helping 9/11 responders." Now, the three people that went to Cuba, they were all enrolled in Mt. Sinai. So my response to him, on national TV, was, I sit on the advisory board of Mt. Sinai, which I do, I've earned that title. I go to their meetings and I tell them what's wrong with them, because they want to hear that. So that shut him up right away and so they focused on me. I sit on the advisory board, so what.

You're promoting something. Mt. Sinai does not *treat*, Mt. Sinai *monitors*. There's a difference. When we get federal money there's no treatment, it's all monitoring.

The last time I checked treatment saves lives, not monitoring. Preventive medicine saves lives. What the government has been giving all this time is an insult. And the politicians—when they open their mouths there's nothing more than political rhetoric because you can line the bottom of your birdcage with what you read in the paper.

CAP: Is there anything that they can do? Or what would you want them to do if they were to act?

JF: Well, what they need to do now and they need to do immediately is to reopen the Sept. 11 fund. And the only reason why I say they need to reopen the 9/11 fund is that in 2004, Congress created the billion-dollar fund to compensate the people that were sick and injured at Ground Zero and to offset the lawsuits that the city and the contractors would face.

The city and Bloomberg, Mayor Bloomberg, that pompous arrogant billionaire. He's so out of touch with reality. Granted, he wasn't the mayor at 9/11 but he treats the city as a corporation and everybody's a number. He's sitting on a billion-dollar fund that was given to the city to help 9/11 responders and he won't release it unless Congress reopens the 9/11 fund because he's a smart man. He doesn't think a billion dollars is going to be enough to pay off all the lawsuits.

But in the process of waiting for those lawsuits, he could at least be starting to hand out that money. A lot of these guys, they don't want to be millionaires. If you give everybody a million dollars it's not going to save their life. But you know what, it's going to help them with their medical bills that are astronomical now—their prescriptions. Some of these guys are on 20, 30, 40 pills a day. A day.

That's just amazing. I have a roommate that rents out one of the rooms in my house. Twenty-six pills a day. That's amazing.

So you know, listen, my lawsuit, on paper—I lost half of my foot. I've had about 30 surgeries. They were ready to settle my lawsuit, the insurance company, until the city lawyer said no, we're not paying anybody. Out of that billion-dollar fund they've paid one person. They paid that person \$45,000 dollars because he broke his ankle, fell off a ladder. It was a carpenter. I don't know who it is. Now I'm saying to myself, I spent 11 weeks in the hospital. Now on paper, my lawsuit's worse, about \$2.5 [million] to \$3 million dollars. I don't want to be a millionaire, I've already been on TV. I'll give a third of it to my foundation to help 9/11 responders.

Eventually I know we'll win, I have faith in our judiciary system. But the fact of the matter is that it's six years later and people are getting sick and dying. It's almost like mass murder and genocide is OK with us, because we attack other countries when they perform this on their own people. And last time I checked, there's one God, and politicians and elected officials, they're playing God with human life.

First priority when they're elected into office is to serve and protect their constituents. That's their job. I don't see any serving and protecting.

CAP: You just haven't had that experience?

JF: No.

CAP: Is there anything else you want to add?

JF: As a country, we took one on the chin. We got knocked down and we bounced back up on Sept. 11. We're resilient and we move forward, and believe me I'm all for moving forward. But in the process of moving forward we forgot what we left behind. And that's about 40,000 people that are sick and dying. The heroes. And if you look up the word hero in the dictionary, it says person noted for noble achievement. That title doesn't fit these brave souls. These men and women who are sick and dying and have been left stranded by their federal, state, and local governments.

The very people who we vote into office are not doing their jobs. And that's just sad. And they say, well, you know, some of the things you say, they're just un-American. And I say to them, you know, I volunteered, to join the army at 17 years old. I had to get my parents' signature. I served my country. I served my country again at 9/11. I founded two organizations, and I'm donating a body part. I don't think there's anybody more American than me.

I think I'm allowed and I'm entitled to say what's on my mind what's wrong. If you're wrong you're wrong. You should be allowed and not be afraid to say, that person's wrong.