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Going back to New York to start all over

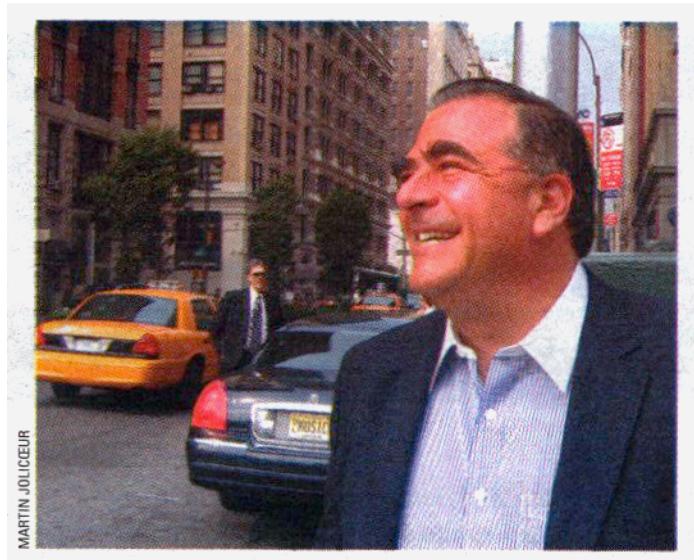
Or the amazing odyssey of **Stephen Leopold**, who rose again after the destruction of his food court project in the twin towers

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Some people decided to leave New York, while others chose to remain. But for **Stephen Leopold**, destiny followed a very different course: the attacks of 9/11 pushed him into returning to the Big Apple.

Mr. Leopold, a well known figure in Montreal real estate, revolutionized the industry in the 1980s. Rather than representing building owners and offering rental space, he made his fortune by representing large office tenants exclusively.



MARTIN JOLICEOUR

In September 2001, from a house in the country, Stephen Leopold was preparing the lavish retirement to be assured by the construction of more than 100,000 square feet in food courts, by far the most ambitious project of his career. What got in the way is that the space in question was located in the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

“The second airplane crashed into the 78th floor, where I was about to build one of the two food courts, the highest on the planet. Bang! Directly where I had been so often with my two sons watching the helicopters fly around us.”

The collapse of the twin towers, and with them of the project to which Mr. Leopold had devoted five years of his life, forced him to forget about the tens of millions of dollars he was going to get after the work was completed in the spring of 2002 and that he was counting on to enjoy a comfortable retirement.

“You know, the worst of it isn’t the money I lost. There are dozens of friends I will never see again. It still gives me nightmares,” he says, breaking into sobs. “But I didn’t suffer any burns, I didn’t lose my life, and I still have my sons. What more could I ask for?”

Refusing to admit defeat, Stephen Leopold got back into harness and is now chairman and associate of **William B. May**, a high-profile brokerage firm that has done business in New York since 1866 with clients including **Carnegies**, **Rockefellers** and **Vanderbilts**.

An insider in the true inner circles

James T. Connors, the former director of the World Trade Center, is hardly surprised by the speed with which this Montrealer, newly arrived in New York about 15 years ago, managed to rebound.

“He is a person of great merit whom I had heard about long before meeting him,” he told *Les Affaires*.

Stephen Leopold’s personality and his ability to hook up with people have enabled him all his life to move into the inner circles.

Upon completion of his studies, this young university graduate managed somehow or other to get appointed as an investigator with the U.S. **Senate Committee** looking into the Watergate affair. Today, through a set of circumstances worthy of a film script, he sits as a governor of the **Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute**.

“In his mid-50s, he brings us new blood, true dynamism, and interesting, completely new ideas that the Institute will soon be putting to work,” said **William J. vanden Heuvel**, co-director of the Institute and former U.S. Ambassador to the **United Nations**.

It’s little surprise that some people close to him have nicknamed him Forrest Gump, the movie character played by **Tom Hanks**.

Stephen Leopold, who was also executive assistant to former prime minister **Brian Mulroney**, says he could easily have decided to go back to work elsewhere, in Montreal, for example, a city to which he feels a close attachment.

“But I was attracted by New York’s intellectual and competitive level. It’s this degree of competition that forces you really to excel. It’s like the **National Hockey League**. You stay as long as you can.”

And when will retirement be coming? “You know, a number of people call me Forrest Gump,” he says, smiling. But in reality, maybe I should be called **Barbara Streisand**, who is forever giving her last concert!”