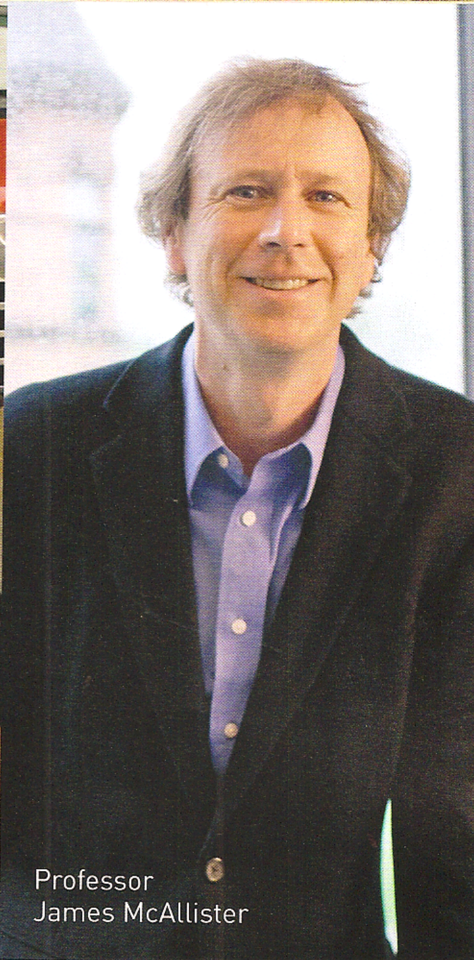
Kevin Kelly '72

Erin Peaslee '08


Professor
James McAllister

In their own words

How 9/11 changed the life paths of three members of the Williams community.

—As told to Denise DiFulco

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT BARROW

Psychiatrist **Kevin Kelly '72** changes careers and helps to change the culture of the NYC fire department

My wife is a lawyer, and after 9/11 she volunteered her services to families of victims. That brought her in contact with a lot of New York City firemen. She saw what they were going through, which was this unimaginable routine of three or four memorial services a day interspersed with digging up body parts. She came home to me and said, "You, Dr. Kelly, have a unique opportunity here to be of service, because these guys desperately need to talk to somebody. They're not going to talk to anybody very easily, but you might have a foot in the door because of your background, so you'd better do something about that."

At the time I was in private practice as a psychiatrist. But I found her logic inescapable, so I assembled a panel of therapists from the New York Celtic Medical Society—four or five people with Irish names—and we contacted the fire department and volunteered our services. I had no

specific expertise in working with psychic trauma in adulthood, so I had to do a lot of fast reading-up and a lot of learning from experience. Also, I had some anticipation that the fire department would be a close-knit tribe, wary of outsiders, and especially wary of someone who encouraged people to discuss feelings and admit weakness. I was right about that latter part, and the art of overcoming it has been one of the most interesting and satisfying parts of the job.

I've heard some astonishing stories, the details of which are too harrowing and gruesome to repeat. But more generally I can say that what the firefighters experienced at the World Trade Center site, especially in the body-recovery work that continued for nine months after the event itself, was horrific beyond anything a civilian can imagine. I realized eventually that their reluctance to discuss these things came not only from a wish to avoid revisiting the trauma themselves, but also from a wish to protect me from the horrors they had faced. Eventually they got past that, and I've often had the experience of seeing a square-shouldered fireman break down in tears. Being a witness to that moment, and to the mixture of embarrassment and relief that they feel at those times, is a deeply moving privilege.

Sometime in the winter of 2002, the head of the fire department's Counseling Services Unit called and said he appreciated what we were doing on a volunteer basis, but their needs were growing, and they needed someone on site full time. I hadn't been looking for a midlife career change, but it seemed like the right thing to do. So I joined up. I didn't give up my private practice entirely, but I did have to cut it back significantly and add a number of hours to my total workweek. I took a cut in income as a result, but it was worth it to have this opportunity to do some good for a deserving group.

Lots of people retired from the fire department in the years right after 9/11. So at this point the people who are still on the job who were involved then are a distinct minority. There's a whole different mentality that people who were there have over people who weren't there. Also, the culture of the department has changed. The idea of seeking mental health treatment is much more acceptable than it used to be. Nowadays it's not uncommon for people to sit around the kitchen of the firehouse and talk about "what my shrink said." A decade ago, that would have been unthinkable.

I remember one guy who was injured in the collapse of the World Trade Center who told me a story about going back to work. His 5-year-old daughter was obviously worried. As he was leaving home, she said, "Daddy, is there something I can do to help?" And his first response, he told me, was: "Oh, no, sweetheart, that's OK. The big, strong fireman can take care of everything. You don't need to worry." But something told him that wasn't the right answer. So he thought for a minute and said, "Yeah, you know, there *is* something you can do to help. You can give me a hug, and I can take that hug down to the firehouse and pass it around to all the guys in the house, and then everybody would benefit from your hug." That's a mark of a change there that a guy can think of that response.

> "Nowadays it's not uncommon for people to sit around ... the firehouse and talk about 'what my shrink said.'"
>
> —Psychiatrist Kevin Kelly '72

I've wondered about how this job has affected me. Particularly I worry about burnout—the effect of listening to horrific stories all day long. The official term is secondary traumatization, and if that's happened, I've failed to notice it. I feel kind of invigorated by being lucky enough to be in a position to help. But maybe if you asked my wife, she might say, "Oh, God, yeah. He's impossible."

Teacher **Erin Peaslee '08** embodies the legacy of an alumna who perished in the Twin Towers

Sept. 11 was the first time I really understood that my dad's job was dangerous. I was a freshman in high school, and I was terrified. Everyone thought we were going to war. My dad is a senior captain in the Pittsfield (Mass.) Fire Department, and on 9/11 he picked me up early from school. We watched everything unfold on TV, and I felt kind of helpless. My immediate fear when they were talking about firefighters going to Ground Zero was that my dad was going to have to leave us. I couldn't say to him, "I don't want you to go," because I saw all these people that needed help. I was at an age where I realized he had an obligation as an emergency worker.

I always took a lot of pride in what my dad did, and that was especially true after receiving the Lindsay S. Morehouse '00 Scholarship