



Lesson:

An Anthem for First Responders

Grades 9-12



A lesson that analyzes the song, *Superman (It's Not Easy)*, by songwriter and performer, John Ondrasik, popularly known as Five For Fighting, and why it became an unofficial anthem for first responders after 9/11, giving insight into their sentiment and devastating experiences.

Lesson: An Anthem for First Responders

Implementation Schedule

It is recommended that the lesson implementation take place at any time during the school year, especially on or near September 11.

Lesson Description

This lesson is not intended to teach about the events of September 11, 2001, but rather to teach students about the experiences of the first responders working in rescue and recovery operations on September 11, 2001 and thereafter. Students analyze the song *Superman (It's Not Easy)*, by songwriter and performer, John Ondrasik, popularly known as Five For Fighting, and connect its message with first responders' emotions and resilience to understand why the song became an unofficial anthem for first responders following the 9/11 attacks on our nation.

Background for the Teacher

Video Summaries



In the first video, first responders in New York City discuss their experiences from the moment they saw the Twin Towers engulfed in flames, to the intense rescue mission to find civilians, family members, friends, and finally to the grief and guilt they were left feeling when they survived and 343 members of their Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY) family did not.

The song *Superman (It's Not Easy)* was released in April of 2001. Unbeknownst to songwriter and performer, John Ondrasik, popularly known as Five For Fighting, the song would become an unofficial anthem for first responders following the attacks of September 11, 2001. John Ondrasik performed *Superman (It's Not Easy)* at The Concert For New York City, a benefit concert held on October 20, 2001 at Madison Square Garden to honor first responders, their families, those lost in the attacks and those who had worked in rescue and recovery efforts in the weeks since 9/11. John Ondrasik describes performing at The Concert For New York City as the most emotional experience of his life, according to a private recording that he shared with the Tunnel to Towers Foundation. He explains how he fought back tears as he sang and performed, watching a man in the crowd sing along with him, crying. Still today, first responders of 9/11 find a connection to the song, because of their experiences following the attacks.

1. Begin With an Essential Question

How can music support emotions and experiences?

(The Essential Question is not designed to be answered directly. It is the overarching or big question. Its answer is contained within student responses to the guided questions.)

2. Introduce the Lesson

Teacher reads the overarching question of the lesson.

Teacher asks class to share if they have any prior information of the 9/11 attacks.

Teacher says, “On September 11, 2001, America was attacked in multiple cities by a group named al-Qaeda. The group hijacked four planes and crashed them into multiple locations. Two planes were crashed into the Twin Towers, two of the world’s tallest buildings at the time, located in New York City. One plane was crashed into the Pentagon, which is headquarters for the U.S. Department of Defense. Passengers on board the fourth plane fought against their hijackers and the plane was brought down in an empty field near Shanksville, PA, about 20 minutes flying time from Washington D.C. According to the 9/11 Commission Report it is believed that the hijackers’ target for that plane was likely the White House or the U.S. Capitol. Today we are going to be focusing on the time after the attack in New York City at the Twin Towers. The Twin Towers were two buildings that were part of a group of buildings that made up the World Trade Center. When the buildings were struck with planes hundreds of emergency personnel were called to help evacuate the area and contain the damage that was caused. With civilians and emergency personnel trapped inside, the Twin Towers collapsed. 2,753 people lost their lives in New York City on September 11, 2001 and many people are still losing their lives to this day, due to 9/11-related illnesses.”

3. Introduce the Video

Teacher says, “Immediately following the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York City, emergency personnel started climbing the pile of rubble, searching for any survivors. Many emergency personnel searched for their friends or family. After it was apparent that there were no more survivors, they spent months digging through the rubble

for human remains that could identify missing people, to try to give their loved ones closure. Many members of the Fire Department of the City of New York spent all the free time they had at the site, searching for their missing fire department members, friends, and even family members. We’re going to watch a short video to gain insight into some of their perspectives following the attacks.”

Teacher then plays the video of FDNY insight, located [here](https://www.t2t.org/lesson-911-first-responders) [T2T.org/lesson-911-first-responders].

4. Introduce the Song

Teacher says, “The next video we are going to watch is of music artist, John Ondrasik, who is popularly known as Five For Fighting. He wrote and performs for us a song called *Superman (It’s Not Easy)*, that was released in April 2001, before America was attacked on September 11. Shortly after September 11, 2001, this song became an unofficial anthem for the first responders in New York City, because they so closely related to the lyrics. Let’s watch and learn about his experiences after September 11, 2001, and his experience performing this song at a special benefit concert, called The Concert For New York City, that was held at Madison Square Garden on October 20, 2001, to honor first responders, their families, those lost in the attacks and those who had worked in rescue and recovery efforts in the weeks since 9/11.”

Teacher then plays the video of John Ondrasik, located [here](https://www.t2t.org/lesson-john-ondrasik-superman) [T2T.org/lesson-john-ondrasik-superman].

5. Students’ Task

Teacher should give every student a copy of the official lyrics to the song *Superman (It’s Not Easy)*, by Five For Fighting, located at the end of

the lesson. Students should take five minutes to silently write down along the margins of the lyrics page any similarities they notice in the lyrics of the song to the emotions and experiences of the first responders from the video.

6. Analyze the Song

As students share their annotations on the lyrics page, the teacher should assist students in analyzing the lyrics of the song, remembering that musical interpretations vary. The song resonated with first responders, because they risk their lives every day to help others. Teacher should also note the following;

- People look at Superman and first responders as if they are heroes. At the time, first responders didn't feel like they were heroes inside – they were humans with emotions, who were suffering and filled with sadness, grief and guilt, because they lived, and their friends didn't.
- Superman feels it isn't easy to fly and save the world. This was similar to how first responders felt, because they continued to go to work and tirelessly searched for remains of the missing victims of 9/11.
- Superman wishes he could cry. First responders put on a brave face, kept searching through the rubble, without being able to take time to process their own grief.
- Superman tells the world they can sleep sound at night, knowing that he will protect them. First responders make people feel safe, knowing that when there is danger they will be there to help them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Superman puts on his red sheet and becomes a superhero. First responders put on their uniforms and people see them as heroes who save people during their greatest time of need.
- Superman digs for kryptonite because it is his one weakness and could end his suffering. First responders worked tirelessly, hoping for the day closure could be brought to the families who lost loved ones.
- Superman looks for special things inside himself. After a hard day, first responders look for their achievements and accomplishments.

Superman (It's Not Easy), by Five For Fighting

I can't stand to fly
I'm not that naive
I'm just out to find
The better part of me
I'm more than a bird, I'm more than a plane
I'm more than some pretty face beside a train
And it's not easy to be me
I wish that I could cry
Fall upon my knees
Find a way to lie
'Bout a home I'll never see
It may sound absurd, but don't be naive
Even heroes have the right to bleed
I may be disturbed, but won't you concede
Even heroes have the right to dream?
And it's not easy to be me
Up, up, and away, away from me
Well, it's all right
You can all sleep sound tonight
I'm not crazy
Or anything
I can't stand to fly
I'm not that naive
Men weren't meant to ride
With clouds between their knees
I'm only a man in a silly red sheet
Digging for kryptonite on this one way street
Only a man in a funny red sheet
Looking for special things inside of me
Inside of me
Inside of me
Yeah, inside of me
Inside of me
I'm only a man in a funny red sheet
I'm only a man looking for a dream
I'm only a man in a funny red sheet
And it's not easy, ooh, ooh, ooh
It's not easy to be me

TUNNEL TO TOWERS 9/11 INSTITUTE™ CURRICULUM

Published by the Tunnel to Towers Foundation

www.T2T.org

