Another 9/11... 17 years later

When the priest spoke about the many who continue to die from 9/11-related illnesses, I wept.

September 11, 2018 By Lisa Vento Nielsen

So here we are again, this day, this day that lives on in infamy that is getting longer and longer ago and yet is seared in my mind as if it were yesterday.

I was (am?) a traveler — always going, going, going and I just found my itinerary for my big trip to London and Rome in 2001… I flew to Newark on 9/10/2001 arriving at 430pm. I went home, went to bed and traveled into work the next day for an orientation scheduled for the new hires at my company. I had begun work at Standard & Poor's (which was then a division of the McGraw Hill Companies) in January 2001 after a brief bout of unemployment.

I loved working Wall Street adjacent and I was so excited to be making $60,000 a year despite having been laid off from work at a … wait for it… dot-com (most late 1990s story EVER)… I liked my colleagues and they seemed to embrace me and my "type A / Control Freak" ways. They knew I would be on vacation and then going right to training on 9/11. They had joked that they were so jealous I was going to Europe and that I was young and single enough to do it and I joked back that I would ALWAYS be single (I never wanted to get married) …

I slept well that night of 9/10. I woke up around 5am and got ready using some of the new things I got from Italy — I always used to stock up my wardrobe on my trips to my second home (I studied for my MBA in Rome and lived there for 11 months — life-changing months where I learned a new language, got an advanced degree and FINALLY no longer had a curfew — big things, my friends).

My outfit was a new cream-colored skirt with a blazer, matching and a shell top with the shoes that were just the whole point of the outfit — 1940s-style ankle strapped cream leather shoes with a hard wood bottom and a wedged heel. (Readers, I have chemo brain, I can barely remember what I ate for dinner yesterday but this, this I remember).

I was dropped to the bus stop by my brother (heels: not my thing — I cringed at the thought of walking to the bus about 3 blocks away). He stayed home "sick" or "psychic" or something. My dad and youngest brother were in Texas visiting friends. My mom had just walked out on her job in NYC to find something local to Staten Island.

It was a beautiful day — "Indian summer" we used to call it. Sunny, no clouds, warm but not oppressively warm, just pleasantly warm. I was so excited to get to this training and meet people from all over the world that were also new hires that year at the company. As we exited the

tunnel, the bus driver's small radio was talking about a plane hitting the World Trade Center and we all scoffed about some yuppie with a two seater accidentally landing in a building while we hoped no one was hurt.

I was one of the first ones who knew anything was going on as when I signed in to my training, I asked the desk if they had heard about the plane going into the WTC and they all looked at me like I was smoking something.

Our training was held in Midtown and it began with big floor-to-ceiling TV screens talking about all of the great things our company does when all of a sudden, everyone stopped talking. The screens switched to news and we all stood in shock as we watched a second plane hit into the other tower as the first tower was in flames. We were just absolutely shocked.

Immediately, the training was canceled and we were told to evacuate the building — that really no building, especially not a high rise one like the one we were in, like the ones ALL OVER MANHATTAN, was safe.

We huddled in the hallway for a bit and all tried to use our phones — I had folks with me from Canada, France, Australia — all of whom had no way of letting their families know where exactly their building was — even my European friends I had just visited were in a panic (though I would not learn this until 12+ hours later) not knowing if I was at 55 Water Street or in a training in the WTC or what. I finally got through to my mom and told her I was "ok" but that I had no idea if or how I would get home then I told her the phone numbers of every person around me and begged her to keep trying them to tell the families their loved one was ok. My mom spent hours until she got through to every number.

I found a desk phone and called my dad in Texas (I was not getting long distance on my funky flip phone / current paperweight). I will never forget my dad's voice as I told him, "I am in the city, we are under attack." And he said, "What do you want me to do? I cannot help you — I am in Texas!" — this from the man who helped / did everything all the time for us — I realized I was officially an adult and responsible to get my own ass home in one piece, preferably.

Do you know that no one under the age of 17 even remembers this day? Do you know that for those of us who were there, physically there, we can never forget?

I found two colleagues from my local office, I will call them Joe and Pat. We decided to band together to try to get home — one lived in Staten Island, like me, the other New Jersey. As soon as we left the building, NY1 was there asking to interview us — I gave an interview that I know is played every year but that I HAVE NEVER WATCHED.

At the time, there was no way to get information period. Cell phones were useless, there were no smart phones, there were no iPads in our bags to check out what was going on — we were all "blind" in that we just did not know if or when the next thing was going to happen. We all walked looking up and we just kept walking. We tried to get hotel rooms, ha. We were way too late. There were none available. We went down by the west side because we heard there were ferries running

to go around the island but there were about tens of thousands of people there. We then went uptown by Central Park to look for lodging. Finally, one friend, Joe decided to walk over the Brooklyn Bridge. I was not sure that would get me anywhere as we were hearing all of the bridges and tunnels were closed and the ferry wasn't running either.

The fighter jets that flew overhead every few hours just added to our paranoia and fear. Me and those gorgeous heels walked the entirety of Manhattan, almost. Pat and I made it to Penn Station and his train was running to get him to New Jersey — he offered to harbor me at his house for the night with his family but I turned him down — I wanted to get home. I wanted to get back to some kind of normal that I knew already did not exist anymore.

I was 24 years old. I was scared and I was in the midst of the biggest attack on US Soil since Pearl Harbor AND I was wearing big high heels (worst decision EVER).

I began to walk south — a path I knew very well as I often walked from midtown downtown — it is an amazing way to people watch (which I love to do) and just stop in to stores and be free after a lifetime of curfews and rules… This time, I just marched alongside other stricken folks, everyone just in shock or crying or trying to be together — we were all together in this — though we did not try to document it — there were no selfies, no camera phones, no insta stories- it was just the connection in person amongst other shocked people.

I made it down to Canal Street — and the amazing first responders were there blocking off the road. I did not know it but my husband was down there — I had not even met him yet, though, but he was a first responder and was there basically all of the time for over 6-9 months. I am thankful at least that I did not have him to worry about specifically — I worried about all of the boys in blue, the firemen with their plans to rescue and the medical hospitals waiting for patients — I did not know yet that the influx of patients they expected would not come.

I found a church giving out water and sat on a pew and prayed. I prayed because I did not know what else to do when something kind of nudged me to go outside. I found a nice corner near the church and sat down out there to get some air, to think, to be alone when a bus stopped in front of me, opened the door and said, "Where do you need to go?" I said, "Staten Island." He said, "Jump in." And in that bus were the most ragtag group of souls, each of us just staring into space, absolutely unable to process what was happening. We went over the Brooklyn Bridge and we could see our missing towers, flaming smoke and silence.

I made it home that night, around 9 or 10pm and was inundated with emails, phone messages and lots of hugs. I smelled funny so I took a shower, wanted to throw out those damn heels but I kept them anyway. I responded to my messages and went to bed…

By the following Monday, 9/16, I was back in downtown NYC, back to my offices in 55 Water Street. The ferry was the only option to get there. It looked like the skyline had been demolished. The flames and smoke continued to billow. The floors all around my walk to the office were covered in thick grey ash and dirt as were the cars and the buildings. My desk was covered, too. The smell was immense and unforgettable. …

15 years later, I got cancer — first person in my family, no genetic component. I was encouraged through sharing my story on my blog by a high school friend to apply for the WTC Health Program and I did. It took over a year but just this summer, I received my official designation as a SURVIVOR of the ATTACKS. This grants me additional health coverage — things that cost me out-of-pocket with a high co-pay now should be processed through this additional insurance. And more — I have extra monitoring now and the possibility to be covered for anything that comes up later and could be attributed to the blast zone location where I worked over 10 hours a day from 9/16/2001 until I moved over to another location in 2004 …

When I got my certification letter, I wept. Sunday at mass, when the priest spoke about 9/11 in his homily and mentioned all of the names on the wall of the dead in the museum and the many who continue to die from 9/11-related illnesses, I wept. I do not want my name on any wall like that unless I am already 95 and ready to go…

Today is a hard day for me. It is the memories, the thoughts, the validation, the love, the sadness, the immense feeling of, “but I am lucky” — so many people did not make it home that day, so many people continue to not make it home and gosh darn it, I am home, I am here. For as long as I am here, I will do good with the time I have left — I will help others, I will enjoy my kids, love my husband, deal with my extended family lol and just try to be ALIVE in every moment.

What is your plans for your time you have left? Let’s make it count together!

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