

"I Was 11 on 9/11": An Eyewitness Account of September 11, 2001

A student from New York City tells what it was like to live through the tragic day.

By Laura Modigliani

Seeking Justice

A total of 19 terrorists hijacked four planes on September 11, 2001. All of the men were from nations in the Middle East. They belonged to a terrorist group called Al Qaeda (ahl KAY-dah), led by Osama bin Laden.

In October 2001, U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda was based. Since then, many Al Qaeda members have been captured or killed. On May 1, after years of looking for him, U.S. troops in Pakistan killed bin Laden.

"The death of bin Laden marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat Al Qaeda," said President Barack Obama.

September 11, 2001, was Emily Sussell's fourth day of sixth grade. She attended Intermediate School 89 in New York City, four blocks away from the World Trade Center. The school stood in the shadows of two 110-story skyscrapers known as the Twin Towers.

As she sat in social studies class at about 8:45 a.m., Emily heard a loud crash.

"We felt the building shake a little bit and heard a shattering boom," she says.

An airplane had flown into the north tower of the World Trade Center. Emily and her classmates quickly evacuated their school. A family friend came to pick up Emily. As they went outside, Emily looked up at the towers.

"It looked like a giant hole through the top of the tower, filled with flames," she says. "I could feel the heat of the fire on my face, even four city blocks away."

Running for Her Life

The family friend took Emily a few blocks to Public School 234, where Emily's mother worked. As they waited for instructions on what to do next, a second plane hit the south tower. Emily and her mom soon left the school — just as the south tower collapsed. They ran to escape the huge cloud of smoke and debris.

"I remember thinking that these kinds of things happen only in movies, not to me," Emily says.

At 10:28 a.m., the north tower crashed to the ground. By then, Emily and her mom were safely in another school about two miles from the World Trade Center.

A National Tragedy

Like many people, Emily first thought the crashes were an accident. That changed when she learned what had happened near Washington, D.C. A third plane had slammed into the side of the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The five-sided building is the headquarters of the U.S. military.

As news reports soon revealed, terrorists had hijacked, or taken over, the planes and flown them into the buildings on purpose. A fourth hijacked plane crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Many people believe it was headed for the White House or the U.S. Capitol.

The events of September 11, often called 9/11, stunned the nation and the world.

In just a few hours, close to 3,000 people had been killed. More than 400 of them were firefighters and police officers who were trying to rescue people in the Twin Towers.

The Aftermath

Following 9/11, the U.S. government took many steps to try to make the country safer. It tightened security at airports and in public buildings. Within a month of the attacks, the U.S. would go to war to hunt down the people who had planned the attacks.

Like many Americans, Emily recovered from the tragedy slowly. Clouds of toxic dust from the disaster hung in the air in her neighborhood. Her family couldn't return home for nearly two weeks. She and her classmates had to attend another school for almost six months.

Today, Emily, 21, is in her final year of college at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She says 9/11 is still a big part of her life.

"It was the scariest thing that's ever happened to me, and I survived it, so I think that I'm braver now," she says.

"It's definitely made me more grateful for all of the things in my life."

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