

What It Was Like To Be In New York On 9/11



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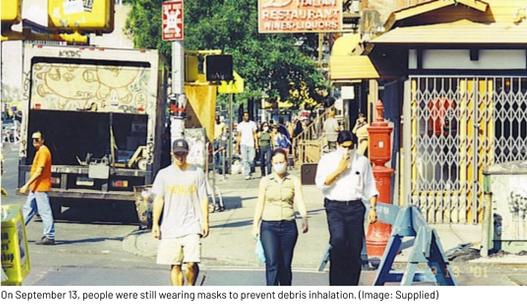
Like a lot of New Yorkers, on the morning of September 11, 2001, I was on my way to work.

I was living in the East Village, an incredibly vibrant neighbourhood with amazing dive bars and restaurants that hadn't yet been totally overtaken by rich people. There was an edge to the place. A roughness.

I lived in what was basically a tiny box that had a couple of bedrooms and a living room. My bedroom only fit my full size bed and had no windows. My roommate was lucky enough to have a window, which looked out onto one of the most depressing courtyards I've ever seen.

And it was a perfect. I was in my 20s and New York was the only place I wanted to be.

I was working as a temp for a pharmaceutical company on 42nd Street. The bus ride up 1st Avenue from 9th Street was comfortable and long and a chance to get a lot of reading done. By the time I got off the bus at 42nd Street and walked towards Lexington Avenue, I could feel that something was wrong.



On September 13, people were still wearing masks to prevent debris inhalation. (Image: Supplied)

From where I stood, at the corner of 42nd and Lex, I could see very far downtown, maybe all the way to 14th Street, where it stops. There was a dense plume of grey smoke billowing over the buildings downtown. Something had happened. Everyone was looking at it. Some sort of fire, was the consensus.

I don't remember the exact time, but it must have been soon after 8.46am, when Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower at 9.03am.

There was a small TV on a wall in the corner of the room where I worked. When I arrived, my co-workers were already gathered around it. No one knew what was happening and we were all told to go home.

Manhattan is a pretty crowded place to begin with, but the sidewalks were especially packed as I made the over 40-block walk back to my apartment downtown. By that time, the Port Authority must have known something about the nature of the attack because public transportation had been halted. They didn't want anyone on the subway. The buses had also stopped. At 9.21am they had closed all the bridges and tunnels in New York.

I can't remember the faces of the people walking, just the energy of their confused trudging. The city is a densely populated place full of people going about their business and this was no different. We had no idea what was coming.

I remember the panic of not being able to reach my parents. My mother travelled through lower Manhattan to get to work in the mornings. I couldn't reach her. The phones were dead.

At 14th Street, a blockade had been set up. I had to show a police officer some ID to get past the barricade to my apartment on 9th Street.



The police barricade at 14th Street. (Image: Supplied)

Then my roommate and I, like a lot of the country, watched CNN. We watched the plane go into the first tower and then the second tower. We watched it over and over again.

I don't remember if the footage was available at that time (the South Tower collapsed at 9.59am and the North Tower collapsed at 10.28), but I can still hear the gasps from the people watching the buildings come down.

I can hear the horror in their voices as they watched people jump. I can't look at the iconic photo of what became known as the Falling Man without feeling the pain of that day.

I remember saying, "That happened just a few blocks from here" and "It feels like a movie". I wish I had a better word than "surreal" for the experience but I can't think of one.

I had gone up to the top of the World Trade Center as a child. It was a special landmark that symbolized New York as much as the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building. Before 9/11, any movie that took place in Manhattan featured some sort of helicopter shot of the towers. When my grandparents visited from Puerto Rico, they took a photo with the towers in the background that explained they couldn't have been anywhere else on the planet.



My grandparents with the World Trade Center in the background. (Image: Supplied)

My wife's cousin worked in one of the towers. She and I hadn't met yet and I never got to know him. By all accounts, he was generous and fun and my wife loved him. I think about him in his office, how terrified he must have been. I think about the people frantically making phone calls to loved ones, the people trying desperately to get downstairs, the people accepting their fate and, perhaps most horrifyingly, seeing that their only chance was to jump. Eighteen years later, none of this has stopped being overwhelming.

My wife's cousin became one of the people that couldn't be found. His was one of the photos posted by family members desperately seeking the whereabouts of a loved one.

I was able to reach my mother eventually. She had missed her train, which would have taken her right to Ground Zero. She took the bus and was stopped from entering the city. She could have been one of those people trapped in rubble in the World Trade Center subway stop. She could have been one of those people that went to work that morning and was never seen again.

At the time, I didn't think of myself as particularly patriotic in any traditional sense. But it was impossible to be cynical about the New Yorkers cheering the first responders racing downtown while everyone else was running in the opposite direction. I was proud of their courage and how we came together on that day to try to help in the face of terror. On that day, in the response to that tragedy, I was proud to be American.



The empty East Village. (Image: Supplied)

I realise that I was lucky. That my experience could have been much worse. I also realise that there are parts of the world that have to deal with terror and horror on a much more regular basis.

But I still remember that day. I still wince when I see the photos. I'm still uncomfortable with movies that evoke September 11 for thrills. Buildings in New York City being decimated and people screaming for their lives and racing for cover is still a go-to movie for a lot of superhero movies. And I get it.

But for those of us who were in the city, as much as it may have felt like a movie, it wasn't. It was real. And it still hurts.

#terrorism #september-11

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