

The Evening Tribune

LOCAL

'All we have is each other.' What Hornell saw, said, and felt on 9/11



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Key Points

The 9/11 terrorist attacks claimed 2,977 lives and sickened thousands of first responders.

Hornell-area residents reflect on where they were and how they reacted on that day.

Many recall the initial shock and confusion, followed by a period of national unity.

The attacks inspired some to join the military, including a local Marine who later died in service.

The Sept. 11, 2001 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, along with a foiled terrorist plot that had targeted the U.S. Capitol, claimed the lives of 2,977 people and left tens of thousands of survivors and first responders sickened with 9/11-related health issues.

The terror came from the sky, with hijacked commercial airplanes intentionally crashed into the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan and the U.S. Defense Department's sprawling headquarters in Arlington County, Virginia.

In the aftermath of the terrorists attacks, artists and musicians reflected the nation's shock and sadness in images and song lyrics. One song, "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" by Alan Jackson captured the reactions of average Americans.

Jackson asked, "Where were you when the world stopped turnin'/That September day?/Teachin' a class full of innocent children/Or drivin' down some cold interstate?"

As the 25th anniversary of 9/11 approaches, Hornell-area residents reflect on where they were, how they reacted and what they were thinking on "that September day."

Dr. Uzma Mehr: 'We were fearful that if this attack was done by a Muslim, all Muslims were going to be labeled.'

Hornell pediatrician Dr. Uzma Mehr grew up in Jersey City, New Jersey, fewer than ten miles from the World Trade Center. On Sept. 11, 2001, Mehr was in her third year of a pediatric residency doing an internship in Rochester. Mehr's reflections include memories of an earlier attack at the World Trade Center that a family member experienced first-hand.

This is her Sept. 11 story:

"I grew up looking at the World Trade Center and the Statue of Liberty every day. I visited the towers frequently and I did a summer internship there in my senior year of high school.

My dad was in the World Trade Center on Feb. 26, 1993 (when terrorists set off explosives in the public parking garage underneath the North Tower, killing six people). He worked a few floors above the basement that was bombed and came home covered in soot.

"On 9/11, we heard the news in between seeing patients. I believe we closed the clinic and went home. At home we were glued to the television watching the news, and on the phone checking on family.

"My cousin took the WTC/PATH train from New Jersey to New York City. She was stuck on the train for most of the day.

"My uncle, a pharmacist, also worked in New York City, taking the Lincoln tunnel. He didn't get home until very late, past 10 p.m. We received no word until he got home.

"We were worried about our family and fearful that if this attack was done by a Muslim, all Muslims were going to be labeled and unfortunately, that is exactly what happened.

"After 9/11 a lot of things changed. There were some who were so kind and supportive but others who showed a change ... likely unsure if we were trustworthy and patriotic.

"Thankfully, my parents had lived in the neighborhood for over 25 years and they weren't targeted. However, there was a shift in the tolerance of American citizens from different cultures who weren't white or shared the nationalistic ideology.

"Loving your country and agreeing with the political policies is not synonymous. You can love your child unconditionally but you're not going to agree with them ALL THE TIME!"

Penny Smith: 'It took that horror to unite us. Isn't it a shame?'

Penny Smith was at a crossroads in the summer of 2001. Smith's mother had died in May and after a long successful career in radio, she hung up her microphone and enrolled at Alfred University to pursue a career in elementary education. The Hornell native would go on to teach in the Hornell City School District for more than two decades.

This is her Sept. 11 story.

"Sept. 11 started off quietly. I headed off to AU for a 9 a.m. class. While waiting in a stairwell, I overheard other students talking about a plane crashing into the World Trade Center. I thought they were talking about a sightseeing plane. I had no idea of the scope of this disaster or what was to come.

"I took my seat, my professor entered and he was shaking. He simply said, 'Go home. Write about this day because after today, things will never be the same.'

"I still wasn't sure what was happening, but I had heard that news coverage was on the screen in Nevins Theater in the Powell Campus Center.

"There were kids everywhere! Some were crying, worried about loved ones in the city. Others, like me, just quietly took a seat, too shocked by the imagery to speak. We were trying to wrap our heads around it.

"I sat there for hours, unable to tear myself away from the broadcast. I saw both towers fall. The shock and horror was palpable. Kids crying and screaming for friends and family members who worked in the towers. I saw video of people, covered in dust, running for their lives. The rest is a blur, faded from memory by time and despair.

"At some point, I drove home to Hornell. I don't remember anything but being glued to the television for the next few days. Watching the footage over and over again from New York City, Washington, Shanksville Pennsylvania, hoping for survivors. Watching exhausted rescue workers combing the rubble for any sign of life. Waiting for new information and listening to the stories of families torn apart. I heard of many of our local first responders going to help. It's been said before but the world really did stand still.

"A number of years later, I was chaperoning the Hornell Vocal Music Program's competition trip to New York City where we visited the 9/11 Memorial. The space has an incredible spirit and a strong sense of melancholy. I felt it in my bones. I had tears streaming down my face the entire time.

"I went back a while ago and toured the museum. It is amazing and a must see for every American.

"The period after the disaster was unreal! The country was united in a way that I had never seen before. Patriotism was at an all time high. People were kinder and

more loving toward each other. It took that horror to unite us. Isn't it a shame?"

Mike Brewer: 'An appalling act that shouldn't happen anywhere'

Because it was a day off for another manager, Mike Brewer of Arkport was the acting store manager at the Hornell Wegmans on Sept. 11, 2001. Brewer and the Wegmans staff would feel the tremors from 9/11 nine years later.

This is his Sept. 11 story:

"The main reason I remember it, is some of our employees were glued to the television.

"I had one person saying that there is a lot of people in the break room, and they're basically not doing anything, so of course I had to go check it out. Once you realized what was happening, I didn't even have employees that day. It was such a crazy thing that was going on.

"I was sitting there watching it myself. It was jaw-dropping. I couldn't believe that this was happening, that this was real.

"I'm like, 'This is historical.' You've got to go back to Pearl Harbor. I didn't want to tell people they couldn't watch it.

"There were a lot of unknowns, but once the second tower was hit, it was clear in everyone's mind what was happening. People started talking about it in the store, and then it spread like wildfire, and everyone was like 'Hey, this is happening right now.'

"Watching people jump from buildings. You couldn't believe it. Was that a person? Then the plumes of dust. When that tower came down, just engulfing the people. And then all of a sudden, just covered in dust, and that's the vision in your mind that you still see today.

“Later, you felt the whole country coming together, even from other countries, you knew you were getting support because this was just an appalling act that shouldn’t happen anywhere.

“The only other day I could compare it to was when [\(Hornell Marine\) Zach Smith died \(on Jan. 24, 2010\)](#). That’s how profound it was because obviously, Zach worked for us. The news we got that day was shocking because a lot of the employees knew Zach.

“What’s odd is how the two events were combined. (The 9/11 attacks) were actually Zach’s inspiration to join the Marines. It was kind of intertwined. It’s crazy to hear, but those were two of the most profound events in my lifetime.”

Shawn Hogan: 'Hold your family close, be good, do good and love one another'

Shawn Hogan served eight terms and 32 years as Hornell mayor. On Sept. 11, 2001, Hogan was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania attending an Economic Development Conference sponsored by the International Economic Development Council.

This is his 9/11 story:

"The participants were gathering for our first morning session, when we learned of the terrorist attacks in New York City.

"My hotel room was on the 37th floor. We were instructed to retrieve our bags and personal belongings and bring them to the lobby. This was a precautionary measure as no one was sure if there were to be any more attacks, particularly because of the historic significance of Philadelphia.

"I was due to fly home the next day, but all air traffic was restricted due to the unknown threats. My group rented a car and had to drive south out of Philadelphia and then up through rural Pennsylvania to get back to Hornell.

"We arrived in Hornell well after midnight. It was a surreal feeling, really not comprehending what just happened and what we were facing as a community, nation and world.

"By the grace of God, I was back at my desk in Hornell City Hall the next day. We would soon learn of the horrific events that had impacted thousands of innocent victims of these terrorist attacks in NYC, Washington, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

"This attack deeply affected every American and all citizens of this world. It disrupted the economy, travel, our sense of security. These effects are still felt today. These events led to a 20-year war and upheaval in our world we still live with to this day. It cost this nation our young people, many of them have grown up not knowing peace and security.

"In Hornell we had many go into service. My neighbor, Zach Smith, gave the last full measure of devotion in service to our country.

"I remember when the nation and the world came together as one to reject terrorism and joined in the fight against terrorism. We hardly recognize that America that was so united after 9/11. How soon we have forgotten the unity that was America, the world had our back. This is what impacts me the most, how have we fallen so far from the American spirit that existed after 9/11. Our NATO allies came to our defense. Today our government is vilifying these same allies.

"Go figure.

"After these events that so disrupted our people's lives, livelihoods, the loss of loved ones, what lessons have we learned? I have learned to count my blessings, never take anything for granted. I learned to appreciate people and kindness. As in the end, all we have is each other. Hold your family close, be good, do good and love one another. Remember the Gates of Heaven are everywhere."

Mark Zupan: 'Even though we were living in the Southwest, it was striking how tied we were to the tragedy that unfolded on 9/11.'

Mark Zupan is the 14th president of Alfred University, a position he has held since 2016. On Sept. 11, 2001, he was living in Tucson, Arizona, serving as the dean of the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona.

This is his 9/11 story:

"I had just dropped off my youngest son at school when the news started filtering in from the East Coast about what first looked to be a plane crash into the World Trade Center and then we came to realize was a significant terrorist attack. The week before I had just flown to the NYC area for some meetings with alums and landed on a day as bright and crystal clear as 9/11 later proved to be.

"Even though we were living in the Southwest, it was striking how tied we were to the tragedy that unfolded on 9/11.

"For example, our school had a young graduate who perished while working for Sandler O'Neill on one of the top floors of the WTC. Another alum was on one of the hijacked flights. For several months after 9/11, we didn't hear from a gentleman who was helping process a bequest gift from an alumna and then we learned that he had been working in the WTC and had passed away.

"A faculty member who was giving a talk at the Marriott hotel located in between the WTC Towers managed to escape on foot to Upper Manhattan and then had to find his way back to the Southwest through a combination of bus and rental car transportation. A former student from my first faculty job at USC had been working in the WTC and survived the attack but then we found out, when reading the individual obituaries in the New York Times in the months following 9/11, that her husband, who we hadn't known also worked in the WTC, had perished.

"I have been to visit the moving memorials in New York City as well as

Shanksville, Pennsylvania, to the individuals who lost their lives on 9/11. The visit to Shanksville was in the early months of COVID. Learning more about what a heroic group of passengers on United Flight 93 were able to do on 9/11 in such a short period of time to keep the plane from crashing into the Capitol or White House provided immense inspiration. It made the challenges that we were facing at Alfred University in dealing with the pandemic pale by comparison.

"Notwithstanding the horrific losses, I have found ongoing solace and inspiration through the extent to which 9/11 served to unite our nation and the desire to remember each of the individuals whose lives came to an end on that day due to the terrorists."

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