

Where Were They on 9/11?

Contributed by Carolyn A. Smith -- Black College Wire
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Howard students recall the still-vivid images

Nine years ago, George Chapman, a junior biology major, was sitting in a math class when 19 Al-Qaeda terrorists began crashing two hijacked jet airlines into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City.

"Announcements just started to go off," he said, recalling the dramatic attacks famously known as 9/11. "It was frantic. Teachers were running around, everyone was running around. I had no idea what was going on." Saturday, Sept. 11, 2010 marks the ninth anniversary of those attacks on that included a direct hit on the Pentagon, the nation's defense center. The death toll on both hits was 2,996, including the hijackers.

The fourth flight never made it to its intended target because the passengers of flight 93 refused to allow their deaths to be in vain.

Chapman, like many Howard University students, was 11 at the time of the attacks. He recalls exactly what he was doing when the news flashed images of the burning World Trade Center, but it would take time and research for Chapman to fully understand the impact of the attacks on him and the nation.

"I didn't understand how serious it was until days later when I went down there and saw everything," said Chapman, a Brooklyn, N.Y. native. "I saw the memorials, saw the flowers, saw the damages."

Chapman had a cousin who worked there. She went to work that morning and was actually leaving as the first plane crashed into the World Trade Center.

"So the most that happened to her was a bit of debris in her hair," he recalls. "It didn't really bother me at first; I really just didn't understand."

As Chapman grew older, he researched the effects of the 9/11 attacks. That's when he learned how traumatic the attacks were, he said.

"I just realized how many kids were left without parents. People's mothers and fathers died," he said. "I even saw how people were affected healthwise; a lot of people were left with lung diseases."

One person was ruled to have died from lung disease because of exposure to the debris from the World Trade Center, but many others live and suffer with respiratory problems resulting from exposure to the toxic debris.

Chapman remembers vividly the outpouring of grief and giving to the victims and their families.

"I donated blood, and for an 11-year-old to give blood I think that's a big deal," Chapman said. "There was always someone somewhere having a drive to donate things, clothes, and canned goods. New Yorkers gave back in a serious way."

Demetrius Gibson, a freshman from Johnstown, Penn., was in school, too, in 4th grade when news broke out. His sister was in the 5th grade at the same school.

"My mom left work and came to pick us up," Gibson said. "I really had no idea what was going on until I got home and saw it on the TV. My sister started crying; I just went outside and started riding my bike. She came outside and looked at the sky for any random planes that may be crashing."

Gibson soon learned how difficult it was to escape the harsh reality of that day.

"My mom's best friend from high school actually had a job in the World Trade Center," she said. "That's when it really hit home because my mom got really emotional, and depressed. Like that's when it start hitting me that a lot of people had lost their lives." Sadly, the Gibson's family friend did not survive the attack.

Maggie Hitt, manager of the Women's Active Department at Nordstrom, was a senior in high school in Arlington, Va. when the onslaught happened.

"Everyone was quiet, that's what I remember most," she said. "All of my teachers were in tears and no one really knew what to do but go home, so that's what I did."

Hitt's parents didn't work for the government or in the Pentagon but most of her friends' parents did.

"My parents, a few of my friends and their parents and I decided to stick it out together," Hitt recounted. "We all gathered in my house and stayed glued to the news. I swear that was the most I ever watched CNN."

Chapman, Gibson and Hitt agree that America has gone through dramatic changes since the historic attacks.

"A war started, people's whole lives changed," Gibson said. "My school amped up the security, and we studied the day more. At my school, we watched these movies that re-enacted the events over and over again."

Some of the changes Chapman noticed as a result of the attacks were racial profiling and increased security at the airports.

"But I think that's just their opportunity to just racial profile Muslims," he said.

He is also suspicious of the motives behind opposition to Muslims building a recreational center in the vicinity of the World Trade Center.

"People were protesting. I think that's ridiculous," Chapman said. "It's just their way to separate people."

For Hitt, the Patriot Act is the lasting legacy of 9/11. "It's almost as if America will forever be on its guard now. Like we're scared and just ready for any sort of attack. We'll never be able to fully relax," Hitt said.

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Carolyn A. Smith writes for The Hilltop, the Howard University student newspaper, which originally published this article.