



Terri Tobin
Anniversary Digital Learning Experience
Transcript

TERRI TOBIN: I read the names of the NYPD folks, and, you know, you just know the story behind each one of them and what they left behind. And how many of them had their children following their footsteps. It's amazing. Absolutely amazing.

On 9/11, 2001, I was a lieutenant in the Public Information office. I joined the NYPD in July of 1983, and I think at that time, approximately 3% of the department was women. When people ask me why I joined the NYPD, I joke and say, "it's in my genes." I'm the youngest of five children, and four out of the five of us followed my dad's footsteps into law enforcement, and he let my sister off the hook because she married one. Probably my dad was the best advertisement that the NYPD could have had. He never came home complaining about work. He never complained going into work. And you could just see from the way he interacted with the community that it was an enjoyable and fulfilling job. And for me, that's exactly what it panned out to be.

The beginning of that day, I had gotten up early to-- to vote when the polling sites opened in my neighborhood, and I voted and decided instead of going back home, even though it was early, I would go straight in. So I arrived at one Police Plaza at headquarters. I had been assigned to the Public Information Office since January of 2001, and it was a beautiful day. I recall that, and working a fellow sergeant came over and said, "Listen, I just got a call from a member of the media who said a plane went into the World Trade Center." The commanding officer of the Public Information Division, Chief Tom Fahey, called and said that he wanted a lieutenant at the scene and to call him when I got there. I asked another sergeant, Sergeant Jerry Falcon, to come with me, and we were able to get through the Battery Park underpass and park before the second plane went in.

It was a huge boom, and just an explosion of fire. Right away, went into rescue mode, because we were clearly there to help people get out of the building. I ran in to our First Deputy Commissioner, Joe Dunne, who instructed me to get on an Emergency Service truck and get a Kevlar helmet. So I followed his instructions and retrieved a helmet for both myself and my sergeant. And I went to the South Tower, and we were going into the building, and it was surprisingly very calm for the people that were evacuating. It was very orderly.

There was a press photographer taking photos of people as they walked down the escalator. So I said to him, "I understand that you have to get your shots, but I'm going to have the back of your jacket. I need to walk you out of this area. It's a frozen zone, but keep clicking." And when we got to the outside, there was a uniformed police officer, and I asked him to escort him beyond the frozen zone. And I remember thinking, oh, I'm really close to where we parked the car. I should go, I have a pair of sneakers in the trunk because it's going to be a long day.

And as I was walking towards the car, all of a sudden, people were running towards me, because I heard a rumbling and people were running saying, "Get out of here. It's coming down, it's coming down." And I started to run. The force of that building coming down, pancaking down, was such a force that it created a vacuum. And I was blown across West Street, and I landed on a patch of grass outside of the World Financial Center and just started getting pelted with debris. And it got really, really dark.

My helmet was hit so hard, and all of a sudden it just split off the top of my head. Not far from me, there was a firefighter. He screamed over to me. He said, you know, I'm FDNY. I said, I'm NYPD. And he said, take your shirt and cover your mouth and your nose. We connected then with several EMS officers, and so we started digging around, and we were able to pull several people out. And at this point, I felt very vulnerable, had been blown out of my shoes. There was a chunk of cement lodged in the back of my head, and they couldn't get it out, but they just wrapped my head in a turban to secure it.

People were running towards us again, telling us to go-- that the North Tower was coming down. And then I turned around, and I think everyone is familiar with the footage from 9/11. This rolling cloud just coming towards me, and there was a building and I was able to open the door of the building and go in. I wanted to get away from the glass, and I walked in towards the elevators and slowly the smoke started to come in through the elevator shafts. So I opened up the stairwell, and to my great surprise, it was lined with people in all various forms of dress, like people that look like they were on their way to work. Someone that just finished working out. There was a mother and a really small infant, but I knew that we had to get them out. I said who I was, I instructed them to stay put in the stairwell.

As the smoke began to clear, I walked out the front door, and I saw the back of two guys with-- in PD shirts, and on the back of it was T-A-R-U. It stands for our Technical Assistance Response Unit. And I called out, I said "TARU" and one of them I knew, Pete Moog. I said, "Listen, you know, I have this building and the staircase is full of people. We need to get them out." He said to me, "You know, maybe, Terry, you should just head down to the Marina yourself." And I said, "Oh, I know about my head. You know, the EMS wrapped it, they can't pull it out." And he said, "No, I'm talking about your back. There's a piece of glass that's straight through the back of your shirt, and it's sticking out six inches." The EMS folks were great, you know, they cut off the shirt, they pulled the shard of glass out and very efficiently and quickly wrapped the wound.

And then I went on to the harbor launch and looking across and just seeing the billowing smoke rising up from-- from here, from Ground Zero, it was-- it was surreal.

So in the aftermath of 9/11, I was asked the question a lot because I was within a year and a half of retiring from the NYPD, and if anything, I think 9/11 made the decision to stay with the NYPD that much easier. I don't think I should have been doing anything other than I was doing that day. I was where I was meant to be, to help where I could. And I think the biggest lesson I learned that day and continue to carry with me, is that not one of us suffers without all of us suffering. And I think 9/11 made that abundantly clear.