

9/11 and “The Lessons of Westtown”

by Robert Kodosky, *Historical Commissioner*

The day began serenely. A cloudless blue sky. The early autumn air, chilly, felt crisp and refreshing. An ideal day for a run out to Oakbourne Park. Upon return, it became apparent that this had constituted a calm before a storm of unprecedented proportion. Beginning at 8:46am in New York City on September 11, 2001, all turned unimaginably dark. The transition proved jarring.

At Westtown School, teachers and students struggled to “get a sense of the magnitude of what had happened.” By evening, hundreds gathered at the campus meeting house. They sought to comfort one another, to make sense of the surreal images televised throughout the day. The burning buildings. The collapsed towers. The gaping hole in the Pentagon. The smoking debris in western Pennsylvania.

A student rose from the bench to address her high school community. Struggling to hold back tears, she said, “Yesterday my life was perfect. Today everything changed.” That became evident to many. “We have a life changing event here,” observed Chester County Controller Carol Aichele, “Nothing is going to be the same after this...like Kennedy’s assassination, you’re going to be asked where you were when this happened.”

Westtown Township supervisor Dick Pomerantz remembers well. On a getaway to Jupiter, Florida with his wife Bobbie, he watched his television in horror as American Airlines Flight 11 smashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center Complex. Pomerantz knew the North Tower well. Only five weeks earlier, he had attended a business meeting convened on its high upper floors.

Pomerantz recalls saying to himself, “That’s where we were.” On television, a debate ensued about the size of the plane, the cause of the crash. Bobbie then walked into the room. She asked Dick if he saw what happened. As a former investigative journalist, Pomerantz instinctually donned his old “analytical hat.” He answered, “I think we are at war.”

Whatever ambiguity remained about what had transpired dissipated seventeen minutes later. With television cameras fixed on the smoke pouring from the North Tower and news personalities speculating about the cause of the devastation, United Airlines Flight 175 slammed into the South Tower. Its co-pilot, First Officer Michael Horrocks, a retired Marine and former quarterback at West Chester University, joined the growing number of casualties.

Back in Chester County, government administrators congregated around the television in the Commissioners’ meeting room. Anxious not to miss anything, Commission Chair Colin Hanna flipped from one network to another. At 9:37 AM, five hijackers flew American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon. Twenty-six

minutes later, United Airlines Flight 93 crashed near Shanksville, PA after its passengers contested the plane’s hijacking.

During the struggle on Flight 93, the truly unfathomable happened in New York. The South Tower collapsed. Thirty minutes later, the North Tower fell. This caused the thousands watching from nearby to flee the asphyxiating dust generated by the wreckage. 2,606 people died in New York, while 2,996 individuals, including the hijackers, perished overall. Over 6,000 more were injured.

Communication grew difficult as phones, email and the internet quickly clogged. Moreover, the prospect of air travel, suddenly became impossible. Five minutes after Flight 77 hit the Pentagon, the Federal Aviation Administration instructed all aircraft to land at the nearest airport. Planes remained grounded for days as airports implemented increased security measures. Rental cars became nonexistent, snatched up by travelers anxious to get home.

Luckily for Dick and Bobbie Pomerantz, they had a car in Florida. As soon as the second plane hit the South Tower, Dick told Bobbie, “I think we should get out of here.” They soon began their long drive back to Westtown, a journey that remains “embedded” in Dick’s head, “almost like a fictional story, but it was in real life.” On every radio station, he remembers, “didn’t matter if it was AM or FM, there were these warnings” to report sightings of a “silver Toyota suspected of carrying chemical warfare.”

At the height of this anxiety, confronted by bottle neck traffic, Bobbie suggested to Dick that they get off the road and spend the night at a favorite hotel in Amelia, FL. There, they found the unexpected. Dick recalls, “the parking lot was empty, there’s nothing. It was so weird.” In the lobby, the clerk shared the breaking news that the hijackers had trained at nearby Vero Beach. She then said, “By the way...everything in the hotel is free and we’re going to give you a suite, not a room, and all food is free.” Dick looked at her like, “is there a catch?” She replied simply, “We Americans need to stand together.” Dick remembers taking a “brief introspective walk” later that evening, “trying to put together the varied, scarily eerie, surreally sad pieces of a day never to be forgotten.

Dick and Bobbie resumed their drive the next day. They made it safely home, experiencing similar hospitality along the way. Repeatedly, they heard “what was almost the same line, we Americans need to stick together, that we need to make something positive out of this.” The sentiment proved widespread. Through gestures small and large, people sought to provide one another with a sense of community.

James Diluzio led a group at the Chester County Courthouse in singing "America the Beautiful." At Westtown School, faculty advisors met with advisees, "on the lookout for students from New York and others" who needed "a different sort of space" to get "beyond the numbing effects of the news." As parents, teachers, students, and administrators gathered on the school's campus, alumni/ae/x "came together quickly...meeting in cyberspace," determined that "the lessons of [the Westtown School] be placed at the service of humankind."

The Chester County Contingent did just that. A group of five first responders from Upper Uwchlan's and Westtown-East Goshen's police departments headed to the Twin Towers in response to the

distress call issued by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. They arrived hours after the attack and joined in the search for survivors. They dug through the rubble by hand, working overnight and into the following day.

Twenty years later, in confronting contemporary challenges, the lessons provided by those who responded to the attacks of September 11, 2001, ones that emphasized the importance of service and community, remain vital.

Special thanks to Westtown Township Supervisor Richard (Dick) Pomerantz, Westtown School Archivist Mary Brooks, and Dean of Communications Anne Burns.



Westtown School Meeting House where students gathered to contemplate the 9/11 attacks