

SAVED BY EACH OTHER

By Denise Germain Rabinowitz, Vice President, Fiduciary Trust Company International

The following narrative describes the random events that allowed the author and two of her colleagues to escape from World Trade Tower 2 only minutes before it collapsed.

I arrived at my office at Fiduciary Trust Company International on the 90th floor of Tower 2 of the World Trade Center on September 11th at about 8:20 A.M., my usual time. A 75-year-old colleague, who had worked at the Trust Company for 40 years and now worked only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, was there. He and I went to the 96th floor cafeteria for coffee. On the way back, we stopped at the 90th floor reception area where I picked up a package from a law firm.

Returning to my office, I turned on my computer and was about to access my voice mail when there was an extremely loud "sonic boom" that sounded strangely muffled—like dynamite from far away—that caused Tower 2 to shake slightly. When I looked out my window which faced southeast with a view of Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Bridge, and Queens, I saw thousands of swirling, glittering pieces of paper that looked like a snowstorm or a weird Wall Street promotional event with large amounts of paper being dropped from the sky. I learned the next day that the glitter was actually blown out glass from Tower 1.

Not being able to comprehend what this loud, unusual noise and this glittering, swirling paper were, I ran to another lawyer's office that faced north from where the noise seemed to be coming. Looking out her window, I saw a huge ball of fire exploding out from Tower 1 and, about parallel to where I was, a line of intense fire—like looking into a ceramic kiln—going across one side of Tower 1 to the other. I also smelled a strong odor of gasoline (later learning that it was jet fuel).

Upon seeing the fireball, I believe I went into shock, thinking that a bomb had somehow been detonated inside Tower 1 and trying to process what I was seeing, hearing, and smelling. I heard the secretary, whose desk was in front of my office, yelling "I'm getting out of here, I'm getting out of here" as I ran back to my office to call my husband. I remember thinking his recorded greeting was interminably long and that I should just leave the building. I left a message saying, "Hi, Jon. It's 8:45. Building 1 in the World Trade Center just blew up. Everyone is ok here. I'm just going downstairs now. Bye." When I listened to this message about a month later, I had no idea that I had said Building 1 had blown up and could not believe the terror in my voice. Tragically, many people who reached loved ones when the plane hit Tower 1 stayed on the telephone, not knowing that would cost them their lives.

I stood in my office another 15-20 seconds looking in disbelief out my window and deciding whether or not to take a bag with my work shoes, cell phone, sunglasses, newspaper, etc. I left the bag there thinking it would be a hindrance if I had to walk down 90 flights of stairs. I left my office as my colleague was coming out of his office. The secretary was gone and I assumed she was on her way out of the building. We checked the office in between my colleague's and mine and saw no one in the trust and estates area or in the corporate area of the Legal Department as we went out to the main corridor on the 90th floor. Unknown to us, 6 employees out of the 18 in the Trust Company's Legal Department were there that morning and 3 of

them, all in the corporate area, died. Apparently, the secretary who died went to find a friend in an interior, windowless office who also died, as did the corporate General Counsel who was in a meeting on the 94th floor at that time.

It was now two minutes after the plane hit Tower I. There were about 40 to 50 people in the main corridor, but I only remember seven of them. I was quite aware of the two people on my left and the two people on my right, all of whom were from the Tax Department and my colleague behind me. I also remember seeing the young Tax Department employee who had volunteered to be the 90th floor fire marshal, the head of the Trust Administration Department, and the head of Human Resources. I learned the next day that all of them, together with approximately 25 other employees on the 90th floor, perished. Although I knew most of the other people, I do not remember who they were as my mind seemed to be blocking out much of what was going on around me. I felt quite puzzled and anxious about what was happening but not afraid, and I focused on listening for instructions from the Port Authority Command Center as fire drills had instructed us to do.

There was no panic or yelling as people waited for information to come from the fire alarm box. Many people felt that the people in Tower I were in great danger but that "fortunately" they were in Tower 2 and could wait 5, 10, 15 minutes for an assessment of the situation before deciding to evacuate or return to their offices, not knowing that they had only 2 or 3 minutes to make telephone calls, find friends or wait in a corridor—that is, do anything other than leave the building. About one minute later, the head of Human Resources, seeing that the local elevators were already filled with many people waiting to get on, said that if people wanted to take the stairs to the 78th floor, she thought the express elevators were still working. The 78th floor was a "sky lobby" where people taking express

elevators from the ground floor to 78 walked across a "hotel-like" lobby to the local bank of elevators that took people to offices located on the 79th through 104th floors. The remaining floors contained air conditioning and heating units, and elevator shafts, for the building.

My colleague and I happened to be standing opposite one of only two stairwells for the building and immediately decided to take the stairs. I assumed that at least the four people standing with us would do the same. When I learned late the next day that they were missing and presumed dead, I could not believe it. I had assumed that if my colleague and I, who had "wasted" several precious minutes, had escaped, everyone at the Trust Company had as well. In the next several days, learning that 95 friends and colleagues had died, I felt the attack was a bad nightmare from which I would awaken and be back in my office with everyone there. I still cannot completely believe that 10 of the 12 people I saw that morning died and that I will never see these 95 people again.

I often feel guilty that I did not urge the people around me to take the stairs. Unfortunately, everyone was acting in a total vacuum of information or on misinformation after seeing and hearing things that made no sense and were completely out of the realm of anyone's prior experience. I think in many instances the decision to stay or leave was a group decision (even if the group was two people) revolving around the people with whom you worked who were there that morning. My colleague and I had immediately formed our own "group." Although we did not talk about it at the time, each of us had independently determined, and continued to reinforce that determination, that the fire in Tower 1 was a significant threat to people in Tower 2, that we had to get out of the building as quickly as possible, and that we were not going to wait for official instructions about what to do. Nevertheless, I feel it was still

random luck, timing, and whether your office had a view and, if so, what view it had, that enabled me to escape when 95 out of approximately 175 employees there that morning did not. I was shocked to see how dark and narrow the stairs were. There was room for only two people at a time to descend the stairs and, except for knowing my colleague was in back of me, I had no idea who was in front or in back of me.

It was about 8:57 A.M. when we got to the 78th floor sky lobby where 200 to 300 people were coming out of the local elevators, talking about what to do, or waiting for one of the express elevators to take them to the Concourse (ground) level. Again, there was concern and confusion but no panic, yell-

ing, or pushing onto elevators. Fortuitously, the stairwell my colleague and I had been in opened near the bank of express elevators rather than on the other side of the sky lobby where we would have been behind many people. The only person I saw on the 78th floor from Fiduciary was from the Tax Department. He had left his office as soon as he heard the "sonic boom." Shortly before we arrived on 78, he had offered money to the corporate general counsel who had left her purse in her 90th floor office which was next to mine, and suggested they go to the Concourse to discuss what to do. She decided to go back and, of course, perished. Several times a week I still wonder if I could have changed her mind if my colleague and I had



Photo courtesy of ABC News

gotten to 78 before she left.

There were approximately eight express elevators going across one side of the sky lobby. The Tax Department employee suggested that the three of us continue taking the stairs to the Concourse since it made no sense to take an elevator, if one should happen to come, with Tower 1 on fire. He also felt that too many people would get on, causing the elevator to get stuck or the door not to close. My colleague said he could not go down 78 more flights. Less than a minute later, as we were trying to decide what to do, an elevator near where we were standing opened. Consciously or unconsciously, my colleague and I had decided to stay together that morning. Without further discussion, the three of us got on the elevator, which turned out to be a life-saving decision that 5 minutes later would have been a life-ending decision. Again, the total randomness of living or dying that day, based on decisions being made in a total vacuum, is something for which there are no answers that I think about every day. Had we taken the stairs, which was the "smart" thing to do given the information we had at the time, my colleague would have needed to rest at least every three or four flights and we would have been in the stairwell when Tower 2 collapsed at 9:59 A.M.

I saw no other Trust Company employees on this elevator, which had about 25 people in it. At least 10 more people could have gotten on this elevator but I think many were taking a "wait and see" attitude, possibly having heard the Port Authority message over the public address system—which for some reason neither my colleague nor I heard—to the effect that Tower 2 was secure and that people should go back to their offices and wait for further instructions. I am certain that many people who were trying to decide whether to leave or stay a while longer decided to stay in reliance on this official message. It is infuriating and incomprehensible to me that this message was sent from the Port

Authority Command Center, when so many "lay persons," seeing and hearing the events that morning knew they had to leave as quickly as possible. In the elevator I was fixated on the door, thinking the two-to-three minute descent was taking forever. Again, no one seemed panicked, just tense and concerned. Ironically, not knowing the life-threatening danger all of us were in was a great help to people who could focus their minds on getting out and a fatal hindrance to those who decided to stay or were ambivalent about leaving.

We got to the ground floor about 9 A.M., probably one of the last two or three elevators to get to the Concourse before the plane hit the 78th floor, which would have either severed the elevator cables or caused burning jet fuel to pour down the elevator shafts killing people still in the express elevators. The closest exits leading out to Liberty Street (on the south side of Tower 2) had all been blocked off. Looking out the glass revolving doors and floor-to-ceiling windows, I saw many cars on fire and chunks of concrete and other debris falling and on the ground from Tower I. As I had twelve minutes earlier, I tried to process what I was seeing without being able to do so. For the first time that morning, however, I felt in imminent danger in a surreal, unbelievable situation. The police, many of whom probably died that morning, told us to go through the Concourse to Building 4, a small building connected to Tower 2 that faced Church Street. Hundreds of people were running in many directions and in the confusion, my colleague and I got separated from the Tax Department employee, who went through the lobby of Tower I and made it to safety.

Holding on to each other, we began walking fast as others ran by us since my colleague could not run. About three minutes later, as we got to the top of an escalator and were about to go out the glass revolving doors of Building 4, the plane hit Tower 2. There was

another deafening "sonic boom"; the building shook and debris came raining down on people who had just run by us and were already outside. Again, there had been a completely random combination of timing and luck. I realized the next day that, if my colleague and I had been separated after leaving the elevator, I would have run out of Building 4 and probably been hit with debris or burning jet fuel.

Completely terrorized, thinking that bombs were going to go off all over and that I could do nothing to protect myself, I felt I was going to die within minutes. It was as if, with no warning at all, my place of work had turned into a combat zone with nowhere to hide and no way to defend myself. Everyone screamed and ran down the stairs next to the escalator we had just come up. There was complete pandemonium in the Concourse with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people trying to escape. With my colleague and I gripping each other for dear life, another group of police directed us across the Concourse, past escalators leading to the Path trains, and to stairs and escalators leading to revolving doors out of Building 5 on the corner of Church and Vesey Street.

When we got out of Building 5 about 9:06 A.M., the police were yelling that this was a terrorist attack and we should leave the area immediately. Dozens of fire engines, emergency service vehicles, and police cars lined Church Street, and some injured people were being helped or waiting to be helped. It felt like being in a horror movie yet knowing the horror all around was terrifyingly real. There were thousands of people on Church Street, the side streets leading to the Trade Center, Broadway, and coming from the subway looking in disbelief and shock at these two massive buildings on fire. In contrast to all of these people, I just wanted to leave the area as quickly as possible. I suggested to my colleague that we try to take the subway at the Brooklyn Bridge stop to Grand Central.

Walking north through the crowds, I continually turned around, mesmerized by the sight of these buildings on fire yet not believing what I was seeing. As we went into the subway, we passed people coming out, and we took the train with people who had no idea what was happening, which added to the surrealness of what I had just experienced.

When we got to Grand Central about 9:45 A.M., the Met Life Building was evacuating so my colleague and I separated. He took a subway to his home in Forest Hills. Not knowing how to reach my husband, who, I learned later, thought I had probably died, I was able to call my sister from a pay phone just about the time Tower 2 collapsed. I was reunited with my husband about 30 minutes later, shortly after Tower 1 collapsed. It was only then that I learned that the two Towers had fallen and that two planes, not bombs, had hit these buildings.

What I lived through on September 11th will be with me forever. I shudder inwardly whenever I think about how close I came to dying that day. Every day I think about my friends and colleagues who died and their families, especially those ten colleagues I remember seeing or being with that morning. Every day I also think about how extraordinarily lucky I am to have survived because of a random combination of factors that particular morning, including where my office was located; my husband not being in his office; being with a colleague who confirmed my sense that we had to leave the building as soon as possible rather than being alone or with others who felt there was time to assess the situation; being near a stairwell on the 90th floor and an elevator on the 78th floor; not hearing the Port Authority message; and helping my 75-year-old colleague who could only walk, not run, when we got to the Concourse.

I hope that with the passing of time and with the support of family and friends I will be able to put my feelings about these events into a corner of my brain, so that only occasionally will I feel what I now feel everyday.

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