

WHEN CRISIS HITS HOME: A DISASTER VOLUNTEER'S RESPONSE

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In this narrative the author shares her experiences working double-duty as a school social worker and a Red Cross volunteer. For her students, the September 11 tragedy was compounded by the crash of Flight 587 in November.

September 11, 2001, began like any other Tuesday in a suburban junior-senior high school of 1500 students. The start of another school year was freshly upon us and found me at the beginning of my third year as the building social worker. While I have always loved my work as a school professional, this is a very special place for me, as it is my own alma mater. At 8:00 am, I began the day with a parent conference, conducting a psychosocial history for special education assessment. At 8:45, I attended the "Welcome Back" assembly for the 9th grade and addressed the class regarding how they may get to know me through extra-curricular activities. At 9:00, I planned to join a case conference involving the parent of a 7th grader concerned about her daughter's adjustment to a new educational environment. Here is where it suddenly was not like any other Tuesday. On my way to the case conference, a security guard told me a plane hit one of the Twin Towers. I thought for sure that some Cessna must have been caught in jet wash and accidentally hit the tower. I did not think about it again. About halfway through the case conference, the building principal calmly entered the room and informed the twelve faculty and the parent that two jumbo jets had crashed into the Twin Towers and at this point, it did not appear to be accidental. The room was silent. The looks on the faces ranged from blank to total disbelief. I could barely comprehend what she had just said.

The principal was very proactive. She met immediately with the two assistant principals,

the school psychologist, and me. We discussed enacting the crisis management plan. For today, that would mean all of the Pupil Personnel Services staff would station themselves around the building, looking for students and/or staff who might require our assistance. We broke from the meeting, and I returned to my office to take five minutes to try to make sense of what was happening. It was then that it hit me, like that icy blast of wind on a cold New York morning, that both my aunt and my cousin were at their jobs in the city. A sense of panic rushed over me as I had to grapple with the fact that I knew so little about the geographic layout of Manhattan and had no clue how close they might be. I tried to phone my cousin but her building, unbeknownst to me, had already been evacuated. I left a voicemail. I had to hurry and start my building rounds. I tried not to think the worst and actually, it was not that difficult because I had still not seen any of the devastating television footage now rolling in. As I began to circle the building, the principal called me in to her office. She told me very quietly, eyes unwavering from her thirteen-inch screen, that a third jet had hit the Pentagon. Then she directed me to assist a teacher frantically trying to locate his wife.

As I went about the day, I heard bits and pieces of the events. I will never forget the look on my former business teacher's face as she passed me in the hallway and said, "One of the towers has just collapsed." Then, some custodians stopped me to talk about Flight 93 that had just been reported down in Penn-

sylvania. I even heard a report from one of the assistant principals that students on the second floor of our building, southwest side, could see the black smoke coming from the intense fire. No matter what people were telling me, I was determined not to go to the faculty room where I knew everyone was gathered around the large television. I just kept telling myself that rule one of crisis work was not to expose myself to the trauma or I would never be able to help my clients. In between rounds where I spent time with staff and students waiting for word on loved ones, I would return to my office. By early afternoon, I had a message that my cousin had called – she and my aunt had met up and, among thousands of others, had walked to safety over the 59th Street Bridge. I also spoke briefly with my husband, who works for Long Island's major power company. He stated they were all fine and were on very high security alert.

The school building had been orderly and calm throughout the day. As she received new information, the principal got on the public address system and kept us all informed. Less than 100 parents came to take their children home. Our final casualty numbers were not yet in. But when 3:00 pm rolled around, I knew my real work was just beginning.

By day, I am a school social worker. At night, on weekends, and at any other free time, I am a Disaster Mental Health Services Coordinator with the American Red Cross in Nassau County. In July 1996 when TWA 800 crashed, I was a bright, young social worker with a brand new degree in a shiny frame on the wall – I was also unemployed. The plane crash gnawed at me and I knew there must be something I could do to help. I was right. Through his e-mail at work, my husband received notification that the American Red Cross needed volunteers. I called and was immediately assigned to the crash site. After days of working with recovery personnel, I knew this was the kind of work I always

wanted to be involved with. I experienced a sense of personal fulfillment every time I gleaned a smile from one of those recovery personnel that I never had with any of my other clients during internships. This was meeting people just where they were – this was real social work. And despite my years of experience and crisis intervention training following TWA, I never expected to have to try to apply my skills to a disaster of this unthinkable magnitude.

On September 11th, I had arrived at the Chapter at 6:00 pm. I left at 12:30am. That was an early night. When I arrived home, my husband was already asleep. My beloved retriever was at the door to greet me. I, nowhere near the point of sleep, laid down on the couch to finally see what the rest of the world had been watching all day. No matter where I had been there were televisions all around but I had no time – or desire – to take it in. With the dog next to me on the floor, at 2:00 am, the full impact hit me. I felt my face twist in terror as I watched the footage of the second plane hitting the south tower – head on. At 2:00 am, alone in the dark, I realized the depth of the horror the country would face. I was angry, saddened, and afraid, but these feelings would motivate me through my work. For the next 14 days, I counseled victims' families, airline personnel, and those who lost jobs. Additionally, I coordinated staff and mediated staff disputes. One of our roles as Disaster Mental Health Workers is as conflict mediators. The core staff of disaster volunteers are skilled, experienced individuals who typically have good relationships. But the trauma, long hours, close quarters, and lack of sleep and regular meals were starting to wear us all thin. Tempers were flaring and needed to be quelled if we were to do any good for the community. In a short sit-down, I could usually get two volunteers to move past their differences and get back to the business of helping. On top of this, I was also charged with overseeing the processing of

more than 300 new Disaster Mental Health volunteers. As applications came in, I would call the licensed mental health professionals to determine their availability for assignments – assignments that were scattered all over, from the airports, to home visits, to the chapter office, and to a local hotel that donated space so we could set up a drop-in counseling center. What impressed me the most throughout all of this was the volume of work in Nassau County – some 30 miles away from Ground Zero.

Some of the crisis work we did with the American Red Cross that had the most personal impact on me was that with the airline personnel, victims in their own right, but in such a different way: trapped thousands of miles from home with no planes flying for days, unsure about how to get in the air again, about the status of their jobs, being victimized repeatedly by hotel bomb threats and by broken promises of getting home. And just like the rest of us, they were trying to process this outrageous tragedy. Listening to and watching them tell their story was incredibly profound and illustrated the diversity of ways we are affected by disaster. I recall the two “rookies” from the group who expressed concern about whether or not they had chosen the right career. There was the middle-aged head flight attendant who seemed to be the “mother” of the group, looking after all those on her crew and being their liaison with the higher-ups. And then there was the crew member we never met, a woman who after 30 years on the job, elected to retire, rented a car, and drove cross country to head back home. When the others reported to us that this woman had left, I felt that fleeting sense of failure; if only we had arrived sooner, maybe we could have helped her work through some of her concerns. But there was no time to dwell at that place – there were others who were looking for help and that was where my attention re-focused.

In the months that followed, the Ameri-

can Red Cross continued to provide emotional support for all of the victims – no matter how this unfortunate role has found them. On a regular basis, I coordinate five on-call teams of mental health volunteers; one team is my own. Since 9/11, my responsibilities now include taking periodic calls for mental health services related to the disaster. When clients phone the Chapter, the operator forwards the call to me and I then set up an appointment with the client for a one-time assessment, where the goals are crisis reduction, and referrals to long-term counseling. Volunteering in this function has truly taken on a whole new meaning, not just in the quantity and delivery of the service, but in the basic practice principles. As a professional helper, I know the rules have changed. Working in the community of my upbringing and currently living in one of the hardest hit communities of human loss, my avoiding exposure to trauma was simply not an option. But reaching out for help was. I surrounded myself with my family every free moment I had. I took time out during the day to sit and talk with close colleagues about the volunteer work I was doing all night. My partner in clinical crime, the school psychologist, came by every morning to ask how I was holding up. As a social work doctoral student, I found that one of my professors has been a constant source of emotional, professional, and academic support, and even allowed me to use my class assignments to reflect upon my experience with this disaster. Although it was difficult to admit that I needed to mobilize my own support networks, I did so because it allowed me to continue with the task ahead, a task of helping that we estimate will continue for many years to come.

At school, we console families and allay the fears of concerned students. Other staff, knowing of my American Red Cross work, came in for advice regarding their young children and for referrals for family members who witnessed the horror of the collapse, some

narrowly escaping with their lives. As the dust settled, the total loss was in. The lost family count included one parent and a grouping of cousins, aunts, and uncles. A former graduate and prominent young man in the local volunteer fire department was also lost. I dealt with that loss on two levels, one for my students and one for my family – that young man was a friend of my cousin, the very same young lady who had escaped Manhattan on foot via the bridge. These losses showed the tremendous resolve of our school community to band together and quash defeat. Our students made ribbons and buttons of red, white and blue that read “God Bless America.” They donated the proceeds – about \$20,000 – to relief efforts. Our staff rallied around the students – especially those who suffered loss – and donated money, supplies, and their athletic talents to a charity volleyball tournament that raised money to support losses within the community. I, myself, was part of the Pupil Personnel Service Team that was unanimously awarded the honor of “Teachers of the Month” for September 2001 in recognition of the emotional support we provided to students and staff alike. This was an honor I will always cherish, but considering the circumstances under which I earned it, I feel as though it was one I could have lived without.

On a final note, November 12th brought yet more tragedy to our area. School was closed that day in observance of Veteran’s Day. As I began my day around 10:00 am and clicked on the TV, it was horror yet again. I felt an eerie sickness as I lay in bed and thought, “Oh God, no.” This can’t be happening again. I was ready to mobilize for the Red Cross once again when American Airlines 587 went down just a short distance away in Belle Harbor, Queens. But upon calling in for instructions, I was told we were on standby. At 7:30 that night, I got the call that our chapter volunteers would not be needed. Part of me was disappointed; after my TWA experience, I seemed to have this cathartic

need to be at the crash site. But I learned shortly after our stand-down call that my strength would be needed within my school community to help face loss once again. One of our students lost her mother on the plane. Our Pupil Personnel Services Chairperson lost his boyhood friend on the ground. I comforted weary, emotionally beaten youngsters and reached out to my supervisor, battered himself after losing many friends to 9/11.

As a school community, we try to recover one day at a time. Being a member of that community, I have two roles: to help others recover and to recover myself. Being with my students is tremendously therapeutic for me. I think unbeknownst to them, their very presence is a comfort to me as much as I try to provide the same for them. The irony in all this stands in the fact that the very office we work in – my office – sits just in front of the backdrop of that crystal blue sky that was the stage for the carnage that was 9/11. And as I sit in my office in this small village on the border of the New York City limits, the familiar roar of the jumbo jets on their final approach to John F. Kennedy Airport is just a little more daunting, and the sight is one I will never view in the same way again.

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