

Making 'Never Forget' Real: A School-based 9/11 Memorial Project Grows

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If I asked you where you were on the morning of September 11, 2001, would you remember? Would you picture your surroundings, remember the people who were with you, the noise, the silence? Did you feel a tingle on your skin, experience a moment of melancholy, or shake your head at the memories that came flooding back? We may all have differing reactions, but most of us have one. We all have our stories. I think it is important that you hear mine.

One sunny Tuesday morning, as I finished up 1st period, a teacher walked past my classroom and suggested I turn on the news. He said a plane had hit one of the World Trade Center towers. I was teaching 12th grade Government. I had never been to New York City, but I knew that the World Trade Center towers were a major part of the city's skyline. Seeing the smoke come out of the tower was scary but I, as did most of my students, assumed it was an accident. As the camera panned in closer and closer, we began to notice the size of the hole and our conversation was about the possible size of the plane. A few kids expressed concerns for family members that traveled, but there was no major alarm.

At 8:55, the bell rang to dismiss the 1st period. By 9:00, most of my students were already settled in their seats. I had posted the assignment on the overhead, but everyone was looking at the TV. I told them we would leave it on if they could also get started on the assignment. At 9:03, I had just turned to the TV.

The rest is in slow motion memory. As I replay those seconds in my mind, I see the plane enter the screen, the screen rocks, and then there is an explosion. I hear "Oh, my God. Oh, my God!" and screaming. I realize that I am standing in a classroom of teens who are all pointing at the screen and looking back and forth between me and the TV, most asking, "did you see that?" It takes about 3 seconds for the entire class to realize that this was no accident. The astonished look turns to fear in most, anger in some. One female student is screaming and several kids are trying to console her. Everyone is talking. I tell everyone to be quiet, and miraculously, they do. I tell them to sit quietly while I think, but what they don't know is that my thoughts are not about them. My thoughts are about my two boys, one just across the street and the other about a mile down the road in a daycare center. And my husband? Where is he today? Why do I never listen when he says where he is going? I need a phone. I rush to the door and open it. I look down the hall and see every other teacher in that hall doing the same thing. We are all frozen and no one knows what to do.



The rest of the time at school is a complete blank to me. I remember watching the towers collapsing and openly sobbing as they fell. By this time, rumors of more planes and more targets were circulating. Parents were coming to the schools and the buses start running early to get kids home. Once we were released, I went to get my oldest son. He was nine years old, almost ten. He immediately asked me what was wrong. He said teachers were crying and seemed scared, and he could tell I was scared. I told him that some bad people did some bad things. I explained about the planes hitting the tower and the Pentagon, but I explained that it was far away from us. I told him not to talk about it in front of his little brother and he understood. He held his questions until we were home. He wanted to watch the news with me. I was so scared he would see another attack. I am not sure how long we sat there watching together. Occasionally, he would turn and ask me a question. I answered them as best I could. Where is the section in the parenting book about exposing your 10-year-old to such tragedy?

I still remember each moment above like it happened yesterday. Every year, on 9/11, I experience a range of emotions; sadness, helplessness, guilt, anger, and curiosity. I know I am not the only one. Everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing when they learned about or saw the events of that day unfolding.

Well, not everyone. That realization came to me in 2009, when meeting with my service-learning leadership class. A student who had moved in from New Jersey the year before brought up doing some type of remembrance activity for Patriot Day. Most of the other students looked perplexed. The young man explained. Although he was only 3 or 4 years old at the time, he had seen and heard things that many of the others had not.

After more conversation, it seemed that many students knew it was a tragic event in our nation's history, but many had little knowledge about the course of events. In thinking back to my own experiences of that fateful day, I recall how I protected my youngest from the news, especially the images from that horrible day. My son was a year older than these students. Sadly, the 9/11 'story' had eventually faded into the background of war in Afghanistan, then Iraq, and other subsequent military involvements, all ignited by those attacks. An event that was indelibly burned in my mind was unknown to this generation. Many of my students are from military families and some even had parents who were currently deployed. Yet, they had no knowledge of the events that precipitated their parent's deployment.

We spent a few minutes talking about what they knew, what they didn't know, what they wanted and needed to know if we were going to do a memorial project. The service, they decided, would be to honor the individual victims who died that day, since most of the students at our school may not even be aware of the sheer number of people lost on that day. They decided each victim would have a star and we would display them on our front lawn. They brainstormed many things: a pattern for the stars, where to find a list of victims, how we would stick the stars in the ground. They made a supply list that included copies of the star pattern, red and blue construction paper, colored pencils or markers, scissors, glue, and wooden skewers. Once they realized how many victims we were talking about, they knew they needed help. One student suggested that we do the project with social studies classes since it was related to history. Academic connection! I had one student prepare an email to the social studies department asking them to let their students each make two stars before Friday, September 11, and to share the PowerPoint so each student would understand the relevance. The display was beautiful, but those students found plenty of things to change and started planning for the next year right away.



The next year, the Patriot Day project was held again, only this time the stars were a little bigger and my students laid out a giant star using string in which to align them. They added geometry to their learning objectives. When it was complete, they met and reflected on the project, and decided to go bigger. Within a few weeks, the students presented an even bigger idea for the next display. And so, a tradition was born.

Each marker is now a 9x12 rectangle that contains the name of a 9/11 victim and their location that day. The markers are red, white, and blue and are laid out into the shape of an American flag. Marking the layout of the design on the front lawn was necessary to estimate the number of red, white, and blue markers they would need. We had 2,977 names to spread out on this flag. Seven red stripes, six white stripes, and a field of blue in one corner. Don't forget the fifty stars.



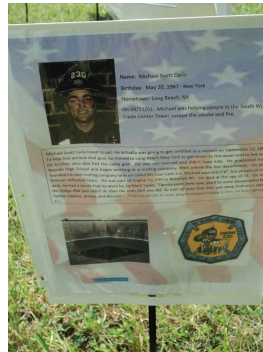
The Patriot Day project improved every year at the hands of youth leaders. In later years, it moved with me to a new school. And now, it is on the move again. It is always an amazing day. What always starts as a chaotic scene emerges into a beautiful sight. As parents arrive to collect children at the end of the day, they step out of their cars to snap photos.



Once the day ended everyone was gone, I would pull my SUV around and climb on top of it to take some pictures. I was always dehydrated and sunburned. My back hurt from stooping over. I would be utterly exhausted. I never felt better. I would stay up there for a long while looking at that field, those markers, those people. With everyone gone, it was very quiet and peaceful. I felt tears forming but never really cried. I had many feelings; pride in my student's work, love for my husband (who always helps with the flag), happiness that we finished, sadness for the people who died.



September 11, every year, must allow our youth an opportunity to remember and to serve. It is a time when students should learn about history through primary source documents, from multiple perspectives, and about the importance of diversity, tolerance, inclusion, empathy, and yes, the consequences of our failures to work together as a human race. It is part of my mission to see this memorial continue so that we can truly carry on the memories of those we lost that day and to promote youth-conceived and youth-led service in their honor.



This project has always been an amazing experience that leaves an indelible impression on students and the community as a whole. It can never be done alone. I would like to thank the wonderful social studies team that I had at Randall Middle School in Lithia, Florida and the many R.A.Y.S. students who played a leadership role over the years. This is not my project. It belongs to them. Thanks also to Franklin BPA for taking over the challenge and now Tinker K-12 as well. I must also thank the administrators who trusted me enough to let this happen.

And now, thanks to the leadership of the Veterans Approved Network (VAN), volunteers from the American Legion and The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and sponsors Toyota Tampa Bay and American Visual Brands, the display has been replicated. Please plan to join us at 1:00 P.M. on Sunday, September 10, 2023 at the University of South Florida (USF) Fowler Field Complex, for the opening dedication.

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