

NSA Remembers 9/11

((Music))

Denise: It was a Tuesday morning. My roommate's TV turned on because that's how she set her alarm, and the first thing I saw was the Twin Towers - the first tower on fire. And I thought it was just some random, terrible b-movie that showed up on like Sci-Fi channel. And then when the second plane hit, that's when we knew it was real and watching the people fall from the buildings was what really set us off that day.

Alejandro: I was in New York City at home in my apartment in the Bronx with my mother. I had stayed home from school that day because I was sick. She had the TV on and the news came on and "Terrorist Attack" was the headline on there. My first question when I saw "Terrorist Attack" was, "Mom, what is that?" She explained to me, the bad guys are coming to to attack us, so, kind of the simplest form she could put it for me.

John: I was a member of the NSA Police Department. At the SOC office, we had three big screen TVs that were up. Looked at one TV - were we imagining this? What an accident. Within a few minutes, there was the other plane. It just was crazy after that.

Blake: I was, you know, in class. We finished saying the Pledge of Allegiance, 20 minutes passed by and one of the other teachers comes into the room and says "hey, turn on the TV, something's going on." They were reporting airplanes that are flying into the World Trade Center. At that point in time, you know, I was able to mentally understand the magnitude of what was going on. As I walked, you know, out of class and parents were picking them up, you see the parents crying or the adults, they were kind of shaken up by everything.

Tom: I'd just gotten into a hotel for temporary housing, turned the news on and saw the first tower get hit. You've heard people say their, kind of their heart sinking? It really did hit me pretty hard.

Jenny: One of my branch chiefs was late because he'd been watching on television the first plane. At the time we weren't really taking it as though the country were under attack or anything, but then when we heard all the commotion in our common area, where most of the workforce was gathered around the television, then we suddenly knew something was going on.

Ryan: I was in art class when the first plane struck the north tower. And they told us to file over to the library. So when we got over there, they turned on the TV and just about that time is when the second plane struck the Twin Towers, and it was just dead quiet. Generally when you're a kid and you look at an adult and they look scared, that makes you feel much worse.

Ann: I was actually holding that day an operations meeting and we were waiting for the guests to arrive. My key contact was sitting there and she received a phone call, and I could see by the look on her face that she was getting frantic and uncomfortable, and so she started saying, "We got to turn on the TV. We got to turn on the TV." So we plugged in the TV, and um, and saw what was going on. And, I mean, both of us just speechless, just speechless.

Nathaniel: The only thing I remember now, you know, 15 years later, is a roommate coming to me and saying, "Nathaniel, they've just taken out the Pentagon." And I was kind of rushing out the door for this appointment, and I jumped in my car and as soon as I showed up, from their TV screen, we watched the towers fall and I proceeded to spend most of the next three days in front of the screen.

Kelly: I was actually driving into work and I heard it on the radio. It was quite disturbing. They didn't know the identity of the airplane. They didn't know, of course, why. And once the second plane hit, it's just terrifying, because you don't know what's going on. No one knew what was going on.

((Music changes))

John: At one point I took a call from our head person at the Pentagon, and I remember just the terrible fright in her voice. And she says, "John," she says, "I don't know what happened here, something happened here at the Pentagon, we gotta, we're being told we gotta leave." And I said, "Marie, just be safe, just leave and be safe, that's all there is to it." I know when it came time to leave, we were tired, we were exhausted, but then I didn't want to leave. Did I do everything that I could do? Is there more I can do?

Ann: It's like the world came to a stop. You just didn't know what to do. We were helpless for the people that were going through this and actually direct targets. And I have a strong faith and I just prayed and prayed for the people and the families that were affected directly by what happened. I actually thought that we were headed towards the end. Um, just with everything that happened, I thought this, "How could they even stop there? There's got to be more."

Kelly: I was trying to get on with my work for the day, but I just, I could not focus. The last I'd heard, his plane had been diverted, um, so I was very anxious to learn what the flight numbers were. I just wanted to hug my kids and I wanted to hear from my husband. It was a day from hell, really - um, it was probably one of the worst days of my life, that's for sure.

Tom: I knew that I needed to get in here. I knew that we had to spin up real quick. When I thought about the work ahead, the organization I was going to run, that we were going to have to make kind of really a supreme effort to do what needed to be done to continue to protect our country - both in terms of going after the bad guy and then protecting our forces, communications, lives.

Jenny: We didn't really know how to react - were we under attack as well? Quite a few of my employees actually went out into the parking lot because they were scared. Was someone going to bomb us? Were there more airplanes in the air? But what I noticed as I looked up over the coming hours, more and more people were coming back to work. It was just really great to see everyone doing what we needed to do to keep America safe and to help figure out what was going on and feed the organizations that we work with. So when I finally did call my family, it was actually very emotional for me and I just burst into tears because I'd been so mission-focused, but when I was finally back in the mom mode, and able to talk to my kids and just say, "I'm going to miss bed time tonight-" sorry. It's just then you remember what you're fighting for and really what it was all about.

((Music change))

John: I did not think that I would see something like that in my lifetime. I'm proud that I was on the NSA Police Department. I'm proud that I work here at the Agency. I'm proud that I did what I had to do that day. I think we all learned and uh, we're all better for it.

Jenny: I'd like to think that one of the biggest lessons learned that I've had is to make sure I'm looking up and around me within the Intelligence Community. You hear the phrase, early on, "connecting the dots," and I think that's morphed into "intelligence integration." So now, as I've moved up into a senior leadership position, I think that's my goal - just to make sure that we as NSA are integrated with our Intelligence Community partners and colleagues, just to make sure that something like this doesn't happen again, for us, for our allies, for our families, for anyone.

Tom: I just said we need to uh, you know, do what we need to do. We want our kids to be safe. We want our grandkids to grow up when they grew up to have to same freedoms we do. And uh, you know, that's what it's all about, what we're here for.

Ryan: In all of my interviews, when I was interviewing trying to get into the military, specifically a military academy, they asked me why and I always told them the same thing: "I watched the towers fall and that motivated me to get into the service to serve our country and try to defend against future attacks. Now that I've worked at the Agency for some time and understand how it works and what it does, I've realized how much more of an impact I can make in the military. Even though the majority of the people will never know or understand it, it is extremely validating to what I've done.

Alejandro: Between 9/11 happening, and, you know, as a kid you tell yourself you want to stop, you want to stop those bad guys from coming. You know, and my father, my entire family in the military, and those events occurring - between all of that, that's pretty much what, what kind of was the motivating factor for joining the military. Fifteen years later, after seeing what I saw as a seven-year-old, it kind of sealed the deal for me. This is what I want to do when it comes to, to the mission here.

Blake: I majored in business administration and I saw that NSA, and I just, you know, figured that that would be something that interests me, due to the fact that, you know, even though I'm not on the front lines, I still have a chance to impact the nation as a whole.

Kelly: As soon as we all came back to work, we were focused on the terrorism target. We needed to come up with new tools, new analysis. And so many folks were very motivated based on their patriotism.

Denise: The fear of 9/11 and the later impacts, not knowing who would want to do something like that - and later, coming out who actually facilitated the attack, definitely changed my perception of the world. Nine-eleven played a huge factor into all of the different positions I've held here. Um, I've switched from accounting to a different field, and the mission that we have is my passion. I love what this Agency stands for. I love the people that we protect and why we're here and understanding the importance of everything that we do.

Ann: In that, I don't want to say moment, but in that timeframe, that I said, you know, I want to do what I can to fight this enemy. I loved my country so much at that point, I just wanted to be a part of it and a part of the mission.

Nathaniel: A lot of the images captured of people actually jumping from the towers made it, maybe, more real than seeing the towers themselves fall. When you're seeing people um, ending their lives because of what they were facing, that i think is what really captured my attention. Nine-eleven caused a shift in my mentality about what I wanted to do for a living and what would be most meaningful to me and this country that I love. This was a timeless event that, in terms of the threat has absolutely not decreased in 15 years, and in fact, I think most people would agree it has increased. Our response needs to therefore always be in the making and we as National Security Agency employees are an integral part of that response.