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Bowling Green residents past and present share 9/11 experiences

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Ron DeMarse, interim director for the School of Media at Western Kentucky University, looks over photos taken by WK photojournalism students and faculty members in New York in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, at a house Friday hosted by the Ridley and Hull Wealth Management Group of Stifel and the WKU School of Media at the Public East Main St. For additional photos, go to bgdailynews.com.

[Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com/](mailto:Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)



With fellow Pentagon staffers by his side, Jim Allen maneuvered his way through the crash site of American Airlines Flight 77 searching for survivors.

This area on the western side of the Pentagon was consumed by wreckage, smoke and fire on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

SLIDE SHOW: Aviation Heritage Park commemorates 20th anniversary of Sept. 11

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SLIDE SHOW: Bowling Green's Executive Fitness hosts Wounded Warrior Project Carry Forward 5K to honor 20th anniversary of Sept. 11 attacks
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SLIDE SHOW: Exhibit of photos taken by WKU students, faculty in aftermath 9/11 opens to honor 20th anniversary

The group searched amid the chaos and pandemonium before emergency crews arrived and ushered them to safety.



“There were just a lot of casualties laying around,” Allen remembered. “We were trying not to leave any man behind.”

Moments before the Pentagon was struck on that fateful day, Allen was watching coverage of the strike on the World Trade Center with co-workers.

Allen was a public affairs officer for the secretary of the Army at the time. Allen said he told another staffer while watching the news he thought the Pentagon would be a good target for a similar attack.

As fate would have it, Allen soon heard a “huge boom” and the entire building shook.

He didn't know it at the time, but the now 75-year-old Bowling Green resident was in the middle of the largest terror attack ever on U.S. soil.

After he was rushed out of the crash site, Allen spent the rest of the day trying to call his wife. But bad phone service prevented him from doing so until late that afternoon.

“Honestly, It was probably a more stressful day for her,” he said.

Altogether, 184 victims died in the crash with 125 being military and civilian personnel in the building. But Allen said the number of casualties could've been much higher if not for renovations happening at the Pentagon.

“Most people aren't aware that it (the building) was under a major renovation plan,” the retired Army colonel said. “They were doing it sections at a time. There were very few people who were in those two sections.”

Despite the memories Allen has, he says the days that followed provided some measure of hope.

“The most amazing thing to me about it all was that the next day probably about 90% of the people who worked at the Pentagon showed up to work,” Allen said. “They were determined that the terrorists would not win. Every year at 9/11 I think about how lucky I am to be celebrating another year. It’s an unfortunate, iconic day in American history. I hope it stays in history that way. I hope they teach it and talk about it. It never needs to be forgotten.”

Roughly 40 minutes before the plane struck the building, former Bowling Green resident Nancye Murphy Carter passed through the Pentagon’s tram substation on her way to work.

Carter was an intern in the office of Kentucky Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell at the time and lived temporarily in nearby Alexandria, Va.

Less than an hour after passing through the Pentagon, Carter looked out of an office window and saw an ominous, dark cloud of smoke in the distance.

“There was a lot of panic and chaos that followed,” she said. “We were evacuated very quickly after that. We really saw the best and worst of humanity that day.”

Like many other interns, Carter said she couldn’t go back home that day due to all the shutdowns.

Instead, they all congregated in restaurants and nearby homes. They would spend the following hours trying to understand what had happened not only across the Potomac River, but in New York City and in Pennsylvania as well.

“I look back 20 years later on how incredible it was to be part of the nation after that, and how proud I was of Mitch McConnell afterward,” she said. “I think we should take a minute and think about those people who lost their lives that day. We can’t forget what happened. In reflection, I am especially grateful for the brave souls that were on Flight 93. I honor their legacy and their life. They saved so many that were at the Capitol and the White House that day.”

Elsewhere, Western Kentucky University professor James Kenney had just walked into work and was immediately met by several of his photojournalism students.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, Kenney said about 20 students had no hesitation in making the decision to travel to New York City.

“All of the students felt compelled to go at the time,” he told the Daily News. “They felt like they needed to be an eyewitness and be able to do what they could do best, which was to tell stories about what happened. It wasn’t a field trip. It was a personal decision that all of us had to make.”

They made the decision to make the trip because Kenney said what had happened affected the entire nation.

Several students left on 9/11 while Kenney had to stay a few more days to teach classes. He arrived in the city the following Friday morning.

He had always wanted to visit the city, but what he saw when he entered were unforgettable scenes of sadness and desperation.

“The last thing that I imagined that would happen would be going into New York seeing the skyline still up in smoke,” Kenney said. “By the time I had got up there, you couldn’t even get close to ground zero. That wasn’t the story at that point. The story was the people the victims left behind.”

In the days that followed, Kenney and his students interviewed the families of confirmed victims and lost heroes whose bodies had not yet been found.

They visited fire stations where hundreds gathered to mourn the dead and hold out hope that maybe their loved ones would still be alive underneath the wreckage.

“There wasn’t any plan or call ahead of time. There was still a lot of pain, literally, in the streets of New York,” Kenney said. “There were stories everywhere. They wanted me to be there, and they wanted me to tell their stories. I felt a tremendous responsibility to tell their stories well.”

Nearly 20 years later, the work of Kenney and those WKU students was on display Friday in an exhibit of 28 images at the Pushin Building in downtown Bowling Green.

“These images bring back unsettling memories of the pain, suffering and uncertainty borne out of this terrible day,” he said. “But they also represent the determination of my students to do their part in providing a visual reminder so that a nation would not forget, and perhaps in some meaningful way contribute to its healing.

“In the end, even though we do have the perspective of 20 years, it’s still about those stories in those pictures,” Kenney continued. “I feel very privileged to be able to tell those stories.

We are heading to the point where there are people in my classes who weren't even alive at the time. To be able to take these photos out and share them again – that's tremendous. I didn't go up there not to share those stories. If we are able to affect others in some way, that's just another layer to the story telling."

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