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What I Saw and Heard on 9/11/01 in Darien

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Twenty years ago, I witnessed a few things in Darien that may be worth passing on.

(I'm not sure how much this is worth — certainly none of it is as important as what actually happened in lower Manhattan or at the Pentagon or on board Flight 93. But it shows some of what happened in this town on that day. Darienites, in different degrees, experienced the horror here in town. Six town residents died in New York that day.)

I was doing some freelance work for the Stamford Advocate and went out into town to gather reactions to the massacres that had just taken place that morning at the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

The Advocate didn't need "man-on-the-street" interviews from me, so I didn't do any. Instead, I went to three places. (I also didn't do interviews with Darien people who had lost loved ones in the attacks: If I'd been asked to do that, I'd have refused. A freelancer doesn't have to take on the worst assignments. That work needed to be done, but it didn't have to be me doing it.)

Among those who died in the attack in New York are [these six residents of Darien](#) (in one case, a young woman who had moved from town):

Chris Gardner, 36; Gary Lozier, 47; Edward Maloney, 32; William Meehan, 49; Stacey Sanders, 25; John Works, 36.

Others with close connections to Darien residents, including people who formerly lived in town, were also victims of the attack.

Let's get this out of the way: Driving from place to place, I noticed what so many people have said about that day in the New York City area — the weather was perfect. It's been said there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It's something that people tend to remember. It's completely irrelevant and unimportant but (like a smell or a taste) it's a fact so vivid that — ridiculously — sticks in the mind with the important memories like a joker in a deck of cards.

In front of Darien High School, mothers (perhaps a couple of dozen, none of them fathers) had gathered to pick up their kids, if they could. As far as I can recall, I don't think any had been let in the building, or any of their kids let out of it at that point. I don't think there was any learning going on after word of the attacks spread. I think I recall hearing (later) that students, teachers and staff inside were watching TVs, with some getting counseling.

I spoke to some parents and got quotes about why they were there. I'd been listening to the radio in the car for the latest news, of course (smart phones existed back then, but they were very primitive and not nearly as useful as a radio).

People were hearing all kinds of reports, and separating rumors from important facts was still ongoing. Some of the women had heard about concerns raised for the safety of students at a school near the World Trade Center. I told the women I'd heard that the students had been evacuated.

Never before or since have I had to cut off an interview because I was tearing up and too upset to continue. I walked away for a minute. It was the act of relating something perilous to a child that made it so immediate that I felt it like a hammer blow.

(I've watched witnesses at trials do the same thing, over and over — a lawyer asks something about a family member who might have been emotionally hurt even by hearing about some tragic event that the witness was involved in. The witness, no matter how tough a character, starts crying. It happens like clockwork. I'm certain that prosecutors and defense lawyers use those questions to encourage the jury to sympathize with the witness. It's almost never the witness's own suffering that causes the tears — it's the idea of a loved one

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suffering, even if they're only suffering emotionally from a distance, that does it. The act of making a statement about that suffering gives the knowledge of it an emotional immediacy that will reliably burst out the tears.)

The mothers in front of the school (the previous high school building — the present one hadn't been built yet) looked much less upset than I suddenly became, but maybe they'd already gone through the same process.

Whatever they had gone through, they were there in front of the building, perhaps two dozen of them, and they wanted their children home with them. Looking back, I think I should have asked the mothers to talk about that more. I think they'd have indicated that having their children with them would've made not only the children feel better, but the mothers, too — and the fathers, if they could get a telephone call through and speak to someone at home.

Another place I went to was the school district headquarters, then in the Town Hall building where Mather Community Center is today. I spoke to some administrators there to ask how the district was helping students cope with the news. I don't recall whether kids in the early grades were even told about it. I got a simple description about what was going on inside the high school, which was all I wanted that day.

I don't recall whether or not the administrators said schools were releasing children to their parents before the regular end of the school day. They did say they had professional counselors for the students, and they were confident that keeping kids in school for the full school day was the best thing to do.

I'll never forget one of the administrators saying to me and another school official something like, "This is a consequence of religion," as if snuffing out Islam or any other religion could making people avoid massacring in the cause of an idea. Stalin, Mao and Hitler didn't need religion to set off mass killings, and most Muslims are as horrified as anyone else by it. The other administrator in the room nodded in agreement with what the other one said.

I said nothing, because I had a job to do rather than argue with a source — and because it's not worth arguing with someone blurting out an offensive statement while trying to deal with a tragedy. (I'm very sure those administrators no longer work for the district.)

Also that day, I went to St. John Roman Catholic Church, because I knew they had a 12:15 p.m. daily Mass. Or I thought they still had it. They'd actually stopped having that Mass. But a small number of people showed up, and the pastor agreed that the circumstances warranted celebrating the Mass again that day.

There were perhaps a dozen of us at the service. In the back of the church, a man started blubbing and continued until it ended. Outside, he told us why: He worked for Cantor Fitzgerald in offices in both Darien, where he was that morning, and at the World Trade Center.

The company kept a live audio feed between the two offices, and staff at the Darien location could hear what the WTC office staff was going through, including messages they gave for loved ones who they thought they

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might never see again.

The pastor offered to sit down with him and talk about it, but the man said he'd be going.

The man had [heard coworkers](#), likely some friends, perhaps in the process of realizing with increasing certitude that they were about to die. At some point, the connection must have ended and the news reports would say the building was collapsing.

That's part of what happened that day in Darien.