

NEVER FORGOTTEN, ALWAYS REMEMBERED

‘SOMETHING SERIOUS’

Former Alex principal remembers trying to proceed with normal school day

BY CELESTE EDENLOFF
Alexandria Echo Press

Judy Backhaus was standing in the front entrance of Lincoln Elementary School in Alexandria on that dreadful day in September, 20 years ago.

At that time, she was the school’s principal and was greeting students as they came in as well as visiting with staff members in the hallway.

She remembers there was a TV mounted right by the entrance.

“One of our paraprofessionals came up to me and pointed to the screen,” she said. “It showed one of the towers on fire and was replaying a plane crashing into it.”

Thinking it was just a serious plane crash and thinking the students didn’t really need to be watching, they turned the channel to the school’s internal system of “student announcements.”

Soon after that, she had several staff members tell her “something serious” was going on as they were getting emails from family and friends. And then, district administrators started calling all the principals to tell them to stay inside the building until they tried to figure out what was going on. They were supposed to have their weekly Tuesday meeting, but that didn’t happen until later in the day.

Backhaus had her secretary make an announcement to all staff members that they would be getting an email that they needed to read right away.

“It basically said to leave all TVs off in the building and to proceed with classes as normal,” she remembered. “Administrators were trying to gather information and would keep staff updated as they learned more. They wanted school to proceed as a ‘normal day.’ ”

Throughout the day as she received more information, factual information from the district office, Backhaus would update her staff.

She remembers how some parents came to the school, asking to take their children home, which she said they certainly honored.

At some point, she remembers having the teachers talk to the students about some “terrible things” that were happening, that they – the students – and the rest of the people in the school were safe, and that their parents would probably explain more to them when they got home from school that day.

“I am thankful social media was not as pervasive back in 2001, so that we could control some of the conversations we were having with students,” said Backhaus.

She also said that administration met, formed some talking points and also recognized that there may be some students that would not be in attendance the next few days as parents wanted to keep them home. She said the district honored parents’ wishes for keeping their children out of school.

Administration also reviewed its own safety plans and put some additional precautions in place because of the “rumors” of more attacks. And she said the district had talking points for teachers so that everyone was on the same page while communicating with students in the coming days and weeks. The school also made counselors available.

“We also had to recognize that across our community we had people that knew people that worked in the Twin Towers, or downtown New York, or in the Pentagon, etc., so students also had those connections,” she said. “I remember it being difficult to get all the information. It was one plane crashing, then another and then others.”

She said it took some time to realize all of the connections, but that she specifically remembers the announcement on the TV that all airplanes were being grounded across the U.S. and flights from other countries were being rerouted. It was then, she said, that it hit her how serious of a situation it really was across the entire country.

“For me personally, it was hard to believe that this could happen on our own soil. As a parent, I was scared for my own kids, as this was one more thing that we needed to protect our kids from and educate them about,” Backhaus said. “I was also thankful that I was surrounded by a great, caring staff that I knew would be there for every child in our school.”

Email reporter Celeste Edenloff at cedenloff@echopress.com

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ECHO PRESS

Terror touches home

Attack on East Coast sends ripples through county; many have loved ones near ground zero

Tuesday's terrorist attack is still sending tremors throughout Douglas County. Many local residents have friends or relatives that were close to the World Trade Center buildings were struck by hijacked commercial airplanes. There are amazing stories to tell – close calls, eyewitness accounts and personal reactions to the most devastating act of terrorism in the nation's history.

Even those who have never been to the East Coast and don't know anyone living there are impacted by the attack.

News of impending high gas prices because of a possible conflict with the Mid East triggered a panic at area gas pumps.

Local schools took precautions and worked to reassure students of their safety. And local residents are looking for ways to help by giving blood and donations to the explosion victims.

Stories such as these will dominate this issue of the *Echo Press*. In addition to the front-page stories, readers can find many other local connections to the attack on pages A8 and A9. The stories include:

- District 206's safety measures.
- Investment advice in wake of the closing of the stock market.
- What parents should tell their children about the attack.
- How the hunger for news affected the Internet.
- Reaction from senior citizens. Was it worse than Pearl Harbor?
- A compelling perspective from an Alexandria graduate who is a student at New York University and works across from the trade center.

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Concerns over the effect that Tuesday's terrorist attack might have on gasoline prices sent hundreds of people to stations throughout Douglas County. Many people filled extra containers with fuel when rumors flew that prices could double or triple by Wednesday. Some stations reported selling more gasoline Tuesday night than they normally do in two to three days.

A panic at the pump

Fears over gas spark long lines

Some even brought extra containers to take even more gas with them. They were all worried about rumors of a gasoline supply shortage that would supposedly hike the price of gas to \$5 or more per gallon by the next morning. A sharp price hike was rumored because of concern that Tuesday's terrorist attacks would jeopardize oil deliveries from the Mid East.

PUMP continues on A8
Fears were unfounded

Cup of coffee may have saved pastor

By Al Edenloff
Editor

A second cup of coffee may have saved Father Jeff Ethen's life Tuesday. Ethen is a pastor at three area churches – St. Nicholas in Belle River, Sacred Heart in Urbank and St. William's in Parkers Prairie.

He was on a vacation to New York City. He arrived in the Big Apple at about 11 p.m. Monday night, about four hours later than expected because of flight delays. As his plane approached the city, he re-

members seeing the famous skyline framed by the World Trade Center's twin towers. The next morning, he and his companion, Father Peter Kirchner, a pastor in Vernadale and Wadena, enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at a cafe a few blocks from the trade center. Their itinerary was to tour the center's observation deck at 9 a.m. They thought about leaving early to get there on time, but because of the late flight, PASTOR continues on A8
Thoughts of vacation vanished

Alex man's niece shot video of plane-tower crash

Editor's note: Anamarjke Eyssellinck is the niece of Fred Bursch of Alexandria, and saw the second plane fly into the World Trade Center. Her mother provided the *Echo Press* with this description of the event.

By Hollan Lommen
Staff Reporter

Barbi Bursch-Eyssellinck got a phone call from her son in New York City Tuesday morning telling her that he and his sister were okay. Then the phone went dead.

Bursch-Eyssellinck, who lives on Lake Irene, tried to call back, but phone connections were so difficult to make, she was unsuccessful.

VIDEO continues on A8
Witness was numbed by scene

Eyewitness has Brandon connection

Editor's note: Kayla Ness of Brandon serves as a nanny for a Connecticut couple including Scott Lemone, who was an eyewitness to Tuesday's terrorist attack in New York City. This is an account of what he saw.

By Hollan Lommen
Staff Reporter

Scott Lemone was near the end of his morning commute from Connecticut to Manhattan Tuesday when he walked near the base of one of the World Trade Towers. He heard a huge explosion overhead, and the building shook. He looked up to see a show-

er of debris and glass falling from the building. Lemone and others ran away from the building, and he heard people screaming that a plane had flown into the tower. "But you couldn't see any of the plane," he said, "only smoke and fire. We thought it must have been some kind of an accident," he said, adding that people scurried away from the site to avoid all the debris that was falling.

EYEWITNESS continues on A9
"Lower Manhattan is a wasteland!"

The front of the Echo Press from Sept. 14, the first paper to come out after the Sept. 11 attacks, was filled with stories related to the terrorist attacks.

One community, one country

Alex pastor remembers people coming together after 9/11

BY CELESTE EDENLOFF
Alexandria Echo Press

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Pastor Greg Billberg had just dropped his son off at school. The Billbergs at that time were living in Wausau, Wisconsin.

He remembers turning on the radio to listen to the news as he drove to work.

“The first thing I heard was that the World Trade Center had been hit by a plane,” said Billberg, who is now the lead pastor at First Lutheran Church in Alexandria.

“I remember we also took time to pray and just be there for each other.”

PASTOR GREG BILLBERG



At the time, there weren’t many details, but he remembers sitting, stunned, in the parking lot of his son’s elementary school. Eventually, he drove to work and like everyone else that morning, he and other staff members were glued to the radio and

TV listening and watching as more information became available.

“As I try to remember back to that day, most things that could be, were put on hold,” said Billberg. “We, as a staff, were both shocked and disturbed as we watched those awful images and tried to make sense of what had just happened and what might happen next? There were so many questions and concerns.”

Later that evening, after he and the rest of his family were at home, they watched TV coverage of the day’s events. He remembers asking his son and daughter if they had any questions. He said the whole family had so many emotions – sadness for the families that had lost loved ones, fear, anger and worry for what the future would be.

He remembers telling the kids that what they were feeling was normal and that he and his wife were feeling the same things, too.

“We also talked about how we aren’t alone at such times. We reminded them that we have each other and that God is always in it with us,” he said. “I remember we also took time to pray and just be there for each other.”

Billberg said that everyone was affected by the tragedy of 9/11 and that because of that, there was a shared sense of vulnerability.

The same week that the terrorist attacks happened, Billberg said there was an outdoor, city-wide remembrance in Wausau that his family attended. He said it was an important opportunity for everyone to come together in spite of people’s differences and that it was a reminder that “we were one community and one country.”

He also said that his congregation at the time addressed the sense of loss and confusion in their worship and included prayers for healing, as well as opportunities for members of the congregation to get together and talk.

Billberg also remembers that soon after the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, country music star Alan Jackson came out with a song, “Where Were You When the World Stopped?”

“It was a powerful song that focused on bringing people together and reminding us of our core values,” he said. “Many of us felt helpless at the time and so we decided to include it in worship as a way to focus our energy and be reminded that while there was much we could not do or control, we as Christians still had the gifts of faith, hope and love to hang on to and to guide us.”

Email reporter Celeste Edenloff at cedenloff@echopress.com

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WERE, WHAT WE SAW, WHAT
WE WILL NEVER FORGET.

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