

‘All of Us Have Confronted the Fragility of Human Life’

The Rev. John P. Schlegel, SJ, 2001

9/11 25 YEARS LATER

BY GLENN ANTONUCCI

AT 8:46 A.M. ON SEPT. 11, 2001, the first hijacked airliner struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City.

From that moment on, the world would be forever changed.

A quarter century has passed since al-Qaeda’s brazen attacks on the United States killed thousands, shaking America to its core and awakening a patriotism that would unite the nation – and, ultimately, help commit it to a far-flung war on terror.

In this 250th anniversary year of the United States of America, the events of 9/11 mark a seminal moment in American history. While the majority of today’s undergraduate students were not born yet, 9/11 remains a defining date in our national psyche.

For those who witnessed the horror of that day, there is a collective memory yearning to be passed down to future generations.

At Creighton University, as it was across the country, that fateful day fused shock, confusion, fear, sadness, anger and deep anxiety. And yet, on a day forever marked by a vicious and evil act that remains the deadliest terrorist attack in history, and in the days that followed, acts of kindness and compassion abounded.

Creighton remembers 9/11 in all of these ways, and more.



The Rev. John P. Schlegel, SJ, Creighton president from 2000 to 2011, at a campus gathering outside of St. John’s Church after the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001.

‘A LOT OF TEARS’

KURTIS MORRISON, BA’02, REMEMBERS watching events unfold on TVs in the Skutt Student Center, the bewilderment, the tears — “a lot of tears” — and the sight of Air Force One cruising high above the Creighton mall on its way to Offutt Air Force Base. He remembers parents, worried about the possibility of a forthcoming military draft, calling the school, too.

He would spend part of his day directing counselors to grieving students. There was worry for international students. Would the U.S. government send them home? Morrison, then the Creighton Students Union president, joined administrators in an impromptu gathering in a lecture hall to try to ease their fears.

Confusion was rampant. Students cried. “A lot were freshmen and sophomores in particular, many from small towns who hadn’t been to a bigger city before.” Did they need to stay away from big cities, they wondered?

“We didn’t know at the time what or who had caused it,” he recalls. “The uncertainty in the first few hours was absolutely wide open.”

He does not remember division.

“I can remember only one or two instances

of people lashing out and pointing fingers,” says Morrison, now a deputy attorney general in Colorado. “By and large, the University was incredibly welcoming and supportive.”

‘IT WAS ALL SO UNBELIEVABLE’

LYNN SAFRANEK, BA’02, REMEMBERS a succession of horrors.

“One tragedy after another unfolded, and you had no idea what might be next,” she says. “While we watched live news coverage of the towers, news would come in about Pennsylvania and D.C. There was concern Omaha would be a target because of Offutt Air Force Base.”

“It’s hard to describe the sense of unknown about that day and the ones that followed. It was all so unbelievable.”

Then the editor-in-chief of the *Creightonian*, Safraneck and her newspaper staff set off to report on campus reactions. It gave them a way to channel their nervous energy.

“We had a purpose,” she recalls.

Rereading the coverage 25 years later — she now runs a communications consultancy in Chicago — she is reminded of how the outreach

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Creighton quickly extended to students “provided that outlet for the whole community.”

She says she remains particularly impressed by the University’s collective efforts to meet students “where they were.” Among those efforts were “the Jesuits who simply made themselves present on the mall, in the student center and in residence halls to engage with students and be there for them.”

‘SEARED ON OUR MEMORIES’

CREIGHTON PRESIDENT THE REV. DANIEL S. HENDRICKSON, SJ, PHD, REMEMBERS Sept. 11, 2001, beginning with breakfast among colleagues in the private dining room of the Jesuit community. A philosophy professor at the time — he had two classes scheduled that day — Fr. Hendrickson was the first to leave the dining table and walked by a TV at the front entrance of Creighton Hall, near the Jesuit elevator. It was airing the news of the first tower being hit.

Like so many others, he thought it was an accident; a small aircraft.

“We came to see it was not,” he says, “and then the second tower was hit.”

The next memory is of a campus announcement, urging business as usual and relaying a decision to proceed with classes, a decision made in part to prevent students from isolating themselves in their residence hall rooms.

He remembers then-President the Rev. John P. Schlegel, SJ, leading the noon Mass at a packed St. John’s Church, foretelling that the events of the day would be “seared on our memories for the remainder of our lives.” He also recalls a multifaith prayer service later that evening that drew hundreds to gather around the front steps of the church.

The University, Fr. Hendrickson remembers, “responded in a very mission-focused way.” Foremost was the task to immediately care for students. Second, “to come together in our faith commitment, for each other and the world.”

“How Creighton responded was so instructive,” he says. “To come together as the largest possible community. Don’t fracture. Don’t isolate. Come together even across differences. Express feelings. Ask questions.”

Beyond campus, he says, 9/11 also was a realization of geopolitical realities: adversaries celebrating what had been achieved; America’s enemies executing an unprecedented, large-scale attack on the U.S. mainland. The triggering of a new era for our country’s sense of security. And, how our government’s reaction led to increased surveillance — and war.

‘END OF AN AGE OF INNOCENCE’

JOHN CALVERT, PHD, REMEMBERS leaving the house with his son and hearing the initial news reports on the car radio. The Jihadism expert and Creighton faculty member soon would be taking calls from national and international media.

He was careful with reporters not to rush to judgment, but he knew that morning al-Qaeda surely was responsible. He’d been following Osama bin Laden’s career for some time, aware that America was increasingly reviled by such extremists — “a slow and steady buildup of hatred toward this country.”

The 9/11 attacks were a wake-up call for Americans and a turning point in history, Calvert says. “There’s before 9/11 and after 9/11. We don’t live in the same world as before the event.”

Life certainly would not be the same for the history professor. He participated in a panel discussion on campus days after the tragedy, one of several question-and-answer sessions the University would hold, and would spend the next few years trying to explain, in media interviews, articles and widely acclaimed books, the origins and sociopolitical dynamics of radical Islamism. He worked for a time with the U.S. Army at Fort Leavenworth, educating military officers about Islamic extremism.

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RET. COL. MASON SMITH, BA’66, MA’75

He remembers national solidarity in the wake of the attacks; a solidarity on campus, too. He remembers Muslim students traumatized and afraid they’d be targeted. While 9/11 did give rise to some Islamophobia in America, he says, it did not manifest at Creighton.

“We can talk about the security state, surveillance,” Calvert says, considering the legacy of 9/11, “but more generally, it was the end of an age of innocence. Never had America been attacked in its homeland. Pearl Harbor is put up as a comparison, but that was far away. This was right in New York City.”

‘I MISS HIM TERRIBLY’

RET. COL. MASON SMITH, BA’66, MA’75, REMEMBERS the initial uncertainty of the day. Then, disbelief. Then devastation.

His brother and fellow Creighton alumnus, Ret. Lt. Col. Gary Smith, BA’68, whose office was in Alexandria, Virginia — little more than a stone’s throw from the Pentagon — was unaccounted for.

Gary, then chief of U.S. Army Retirement Services, wasn’t supposed to be in that building on Sept. 11. When news of the terrorist attacks surfaced, his family made repeated calls to his office, eventually discovering that a Pentagon meeting had indeed been called, and he had been summoned.

“Still, you hold out hope,” Mason says.

Mason’s son called from Providence College seeking reassurance Gary wasn’t in danger. Mason said it was highly unlikely he was.

“Then seeing the images at the Pentagon, we knew there’d be a lot of casualties,” Mason says. “Boy, did I have to eat my words.”

Gary’s meeting, just minutes underway

when American Airlines Flight 77 punched a fiery hole in the Pentagon’s west wall, was in the direct path of the airliner. Though the 22-year Army veteran remained officially missing for months, in time it was confirmed that none of the meeting’s attendees survived.

“We were devastated,” Mason says. “So many things cross your mind. You hope it was instant, that adrenaline had kicked in and that he died before he knew what happened.

“We all missed him from that very moment. I miss him terribly.”

Mason and his wife, Judy Carroll, ARTS’67, remain in touch with Gary’s wife, Ann. They regularly reminisce about Gary. “We’ll talk, and his name will come up some way or another. We always remember his great sense of humor. He always had a joke,” he says. “We all shared so much together. It never gets easy, but you tend to remember the fun stuff as opposed to the tragedy.”

Mason — formerly Creighton’s Alumni Relations director — remembers, too, the outpouring of sympathy and support from many connected to the University. Those gestures said a great deal about the Creighton community, he says.

Now approaching the 25-year anniversary of 9/11, Mason and Judy are considering traveling to the commemoration planned in Washington, D.C. Now in their 80s, though, it’s harder to get around.

“We have gone in the past,” he says. “Those memorials are very important. We have to remember these things. It’s an important part of the values of this country, part of the glue that holds us together.

“We can’t forget about what happened. Any more than we can forget about Pearl Harbor or D-Day,” he adds. “We have a tendency to forget. We get busy, we get distracted, we lose our focus. And we kind of forget about the things that people have given up so that we can have what we have.”

© The Creighton community participated in one of many religious services held across the country as part of the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance on Sept. 14, 2001. The large gathering outside St. John’s Church prayed for the victims of the attacks and for world peace.