

A Tintype of CFD's Interrupted Primary Day, 2001: Where Members Were That Fateful Morning

by Joan Paylo, District Leader, Community Free Democrats

After 9/11/01, I worked at FDNY headquarters in downtown Brooklyn, writing obits and eulogies for the 343 FDNY members who had died that day. The faces of the personnel who worked there in the executive offices were ashen. To step into the elevator and see the all-consuming sadness in Commissioner Tom Von Essen's eyes was to have your heart drop to the basement and make your lips forget how to smile.

As fall days shortened with winter's approach, Fire Department execs who had survived spent much of their day at funerals, wakes and memorial services. When they returned, they closed their doors. You could hear them sobbing at their desks. They had lost their beloved Chaplain Father Mychal Judge, their four top ranking leaders and many more whom they knew as brothers. Yet I had to slip each obit and eulogy under their locked doors for review.

Like so many New Yorkers who were doing what they could to help in that tragic time, I believed that writing for FDNY was a way I could contribute to our City's rebuilding efforts and help those who were in deep mourning. In the course of that work, I interviewed scores of loved ones of those firefighters – wives, mothers, fiancées, roommates and co-workers. The friend sitting next to me once pointed out that tears were running down my face as they poured out their grief and I took notes. It was a life-changing experience, one that shrouds my world to this day. But how could anyone have been prepared for that horrific day of murder and grief?

My story at the Fire Department will be left for another day. This is what happened to a group of friends at the Upper West Side political club Community Free Democrats. When an evil crime and tragedy of Biblical proportions was occurring 10 miles south of us, we held our little corner of the world together as best we could.

I have included the memories of CFD members who responded to my request for reflections. Some declined, finding it still too painful. All the people mentioned were Westsiders at the time, and I've left out their addresses for privacy's sake.

Just about everyone began by mentioning the color of the sky.

LAST HOURS OF INNOCENCE

September 11, 2001, was a long-anticipated Primary Election Day.

Assemblymember Scott Stringer, favorite son of Community Free Democrats (CFD), was running for Public Advocate in a five-candidate field, and many of us club members had willingly sacrificed our free time that summer to push Scott over the top. He had

been endorsed by the Democratic organizations of Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, and all we had to do collectively was propel him into the expected runoff election.

Before dawn, at 5:45 a.m., I hopped out of a taxi and unlocked our storefront door at 90th and Amsterdam, really pumped for the task ahead. After storms Monday, Tuesday's air was fresh. The sky, literally pulsating with signs of sunrise, was a shade of pure, blooming wisteria, a gentle purplish blue.

To this day, I keep thinking of the chilling video of two terrorists, dressed like freshly-showered computer geeks, checking in at the Portland, Maine airport at about the same time we were preparing to open the polls that morning. They were Boston-bound to commandeer a fateful flight. Who could have imagined that these madmen were just as eager to slaughter thousands of innocent people and create a living hell for so many more? Who could dream that this magnificent weather might make their task easier?

The strategy on every election day is to get our volunteers up and out on the street corners near poll sites to distribute lit and make one final pitch to voters. Stringer stalwarts were assigned throughout the boroughs on that brilliant morning.

District Leader Larry Hirsch was assigned to get out the vote in Brooklyn. When he boarded the #1 Train at 103rd and Broadway that morning, he knew that his pregnant wife Alice would be driving, as usual, to her job in New Jersey.

CFD Recording Secretary Jean Kim loved her assignment. She had taken the day off from her job at a downtown financial services PR firm to volunteer in Queens with first-time City Council candidate John Liu's campaign.

A new young guy on the scene with the indomitable personality of a motivational speaker had set up his City Council campaign HQ at the Beacon Hotel. Jason Haber was a fresh face in a crowd that included CFD-endorsed candidate Gale Brewer and CFD District Leader Anna Lewis. Jason was trying to convince his friend Josh Mirsky to stay and work the streets, but Josh had to be in his posh offices in that sun-kissed sky on the 72nd floor of the World Trade Center by 9 a.m.

Just as our members do today, many of them were working inside pollsites to help the Board of Elections process voters. Already the volume was healthy in EDs that could bode well for Scott.

KEPT IN THE DARK

As CFD president, it was my job to handle the phones and dispatch folks that morning. VP Gina Stahlnecker was by my side. Campaign manager Betsey Ball was with Scott. The Manhattan operation, run out of our clubhouse, was masterminded by a not-yet 20-year-old, who had taken a sabbatical from his first or second year in college. He hadn't shed his adolescent skin yet. He's a rising DC lawyer now, but it took me a long time to forgive him for what he did that day at 9 a.m.

Our clubhouse had few windows. It was a winding collection of small rooms that had been an accounting firm and before that, legend has it, a massage salon. It was a drabber-than-beige place where fluorescent lights flickered and doors didn't lock, but slammed and jammed, along with the printers. A hefty, inky smell emanated from piles and boxes of fresh campaign literature that filled the rooms and lined the hallways, overpowering the hint of mold that lurked in corners and beneath the carpeting from an episode with a broken pipe and occasional toilet overflows. Campaigns are never glamorous.

I stepped out around 7 to get an egg and cheese on poppy seed at Tal Bagels. You couldn't help but look up in awe. The sky was luminescent, deep, almost sapphire. My last time out before the world shook was to deliver some lit to Bernadette Evangelist at PS 166, around 7:30. She was still upset that the club hadn't endorsed anyone for Mayor. Mark Green was her candidate and we had some of his lit in the club, so I carried it down the street to her as a friendly gesture.

The club had a TV, an ancient black and white holdover that had shown the RFK assassination to my sorority sisters in my college dorm, hooked up to cable in the foyer. We could hear The Today Show from the other room. Suddenly, Katie and Matt said that what appeared to be a small plane had hit the World Trade Center. Maybe the pilot had had a heart attack. Gina and I ran to the TV, worrying that the small but unusual crash might monopolize the headlines on the noon news, taking coverage away from our candidates. I had worked in the Trade Center for the Cuomo administration and had grooved on being one of the thousands of people rushing through the concourse and soaring into the sky on those huge, sparkling elevators the size of amusement park rides. I believed the building was indestructible.

The Kid barked at us to get back to the phones. When we didn't, he impetuously pulled the cable from the TV.

So we were in the dark about the second crash, and the actual size of the weaponized planes. In those pre-Twitter, pre-smart phone days, we didn't know people were dying rather than voting.

TURN ON THE TV!

Joyce Miller was in a hotel room near the Watergate, running her hair dryer. Although she rarely went to DC with husband Congressman Jerry Nadler, she had gone down to attend a morning conference and then return to vote in New York. Jerry called to her: "Joyce, come here. Look at TV." She continued drying her hair. "Joyce, the World Trade Center is on fire. Come here." They sat, transfixed, on the edge of the bed. "It must be a movie," she said. "What channel are you on?" "I think it's really the Today Show," Jerry said. He watched events unfold in his district 200 miles away.

They saw the second plane hit, leaving little doubt of an orchestrated terror attack. Jerry feared there could be a dirty bomb. He had to get back home. By the time the 757 plunged into the Pentagon, Jerry and Joyce were in Union Station, boarding the last Amtrak train for New York. The usual three-hour Metroliner trip would take them nine surreal hours. Every day since, Jerry would champion the cause of those affected by this attack.

"Primary Day," Jan Levy remembers. "I am at my table, ED 40/AD 67, in Project Find Senior Center, 111 W. 71 St. A sunny, quiet, late summer morning. Suddenly, shortly after 9 a.m., people are running in. 'Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV!' I am shocked by this disruption of our electoral process, and outraged by this disrespect for our basic civic right. We all soon realize that our eyes and ears do not deceive us. This is real, this catastrophe. I am in tears at this profanation of our democratic process. I am frightened by this vicious attack, unsure of its significance, and afraid to speculate on what might happen next."

Political consultant Jerry Skurnick was in his Prime NY offices in Times Square early. The new public campaign financing laws had resulted in a crush of City Council candidates, so Jerry had decided to focus on providing reliable voter lists for multiple races rather than advising particular campaigns. The phone rang. It ID'd his friend Councilman John Sabini, so Jerry answered with a wisecrack. "Jerry, don't you know what's going on?" Sabini asked. Jerry called his partner Stu Osnow who was driving down the West Side and told him to turn around and go back home to Westchester. Then he emailed their colleague in Hawaii: "Don't worry. Stu and I are safe. We're okay." Waking up a few hours later on Oahu, the colleague had no idea what the cryptic message meant until he turned on his TV.

Then I, myself, said all the wrong things to Itzhak Epstein's sweet teenaged daughter. She adored Scott and had been assigned to a poll site near 14th and Seventh for her very first Primary Day. She called me from a pay phone. She was screaming. She told me that there was something terribly wrong, that a stream of police cars and fire engines were racing down the street and people were panicking on the sidewalks. I assumed she was overreacting because she was a newbie. I told her to go back to her assigned post and continue to hand out palm cards. I'm sorry.

CFD Corresponding Secretary Marian Schuman, one of the brightest folks down at the Board of Elections, called the club. She said they were watching the fire from the Board's south-facing windows when a second plane had hit. She said it seemed intentional and the election might be cancelled.

Concurrently, a CFD member was managing a clothing store on the Trade Center concourse. As the fire alarms sounded, she sent her employees away, closed the

register, pulled down the security gate to the store and made sure it was locked. Once out on the street, she looked up and realized she was running for her life.

SHOULD WE CLOSE THE POLLS?

At the Marseilles senior housing pollsite on 103rd and Broadway, Alan Flacks and several other poll inspectors stood mesmerized in front of a small TV in the security office. Neither TV anchors nor viewers could figure out what was happening. Pollsite coordinator Tammy Zucker left for her son's school.

I couldn't touch base with my husband at Bloomberg News on 59th Street; cell phones were useless. Gina was frantic until she got through to her son Jason Jung. She assumed he was finished handing out lit on 75th Street and might be at his job in the Sixth Avenue Time-Life building. She told him to head north toward CFD. On the way, she said, stop at the cash machine and withdraw as much cash as possible. My husband was at his desk, trying to manage and calm one of his field reporters who was witnessing bodies falling in front of him. But I didn't know that.

Suzanne Jacobson finished handing out palm cards at a school near her home on West 75th. She boarded the shuttle bus that took her to work at St. Luke's on 114th Street, where she was a Board of Ed teacher for children who were long-term in-patients. She knew that a plane, probably a small one, had hit the Trade Center. Entering the hospital, she took a few moments to realize an emergency was in effect. Non-critical patients were being discharged, wards were being consolidated and surgeons and ambulances stood at the ready. "I wanted to be of some help, so I told the nurses I would get them coffee," she remembers. "There was an impossibly long line at Starbucks on Broadway, out the door, so I went up to the cashier and said that I needed to bring coffee to the nurses at St. Luke's. They gave it to me."

Hilda Classon had a clear view of the Twin Towers from her West 86th Street penthouse. She was getting ready to go downtown to hand out Mark Green literature when she noticed smoke coming from the buildings. She watched. The slow-motion picture of the building disintegrating floor-by-floor is etched in her mind. She went to the street where she felt "empathic pain," which she carries to this day, over the mutual shock and grief in the eyes of each person who passed her.

Marion called CFD to announce an official decision to close the polls immediately. When the first building fell, she added, one of her co-workers had fainted at the window. In school cafeterias, church basements and community rooms throughout the city, poll workers were throwing enrollment books and voting materials into the back of the old lever machines.

After passing out lit on 74th Street, Marty Algaze stopped back at his nearby apartment for one last cup of coffee before heading to his job near City Hall. He switched on the

TV, saw he wouldn't be going to work and went to the Pioneer on Columbus Avenue. He describes the scene: "People were like locusts, stripping the shelves of beer and potato chips and junk food, as if they'd all starve to death in the middle of Manhattan and Doritos could save them. I remember there were two guys behind me, buying one item, and they had no idea what was going on downtown."

DESPERATE TO KNOW

After the polls closed, CFD members and others sought refuge and companionship at the clubhouse. Whoever called, I told them to come to the club, that it wasn't good to be alone at such a time. Some, like Susan Gwertzman, brought their dogs along. With fighter jets and helicopters roaring overhead, no one wanted to sit in their apartments. Later that day it would be reported that a staggering 12,000 might be dead. But in the early hours after the attack, we were in shock that terrorists had stolen our Primary Day, the exercise of patriotism and democracy that we all believed in and worked so hard for.

By 11 a.m., many of us hadn't really seen TV. We reconnected our set to the cable. There sat a producer, covered in gray dust, looking like a mime in papier-mâché, talking to Chuck Scarborough in the studio. She wasn't making a lot of sense. We didn't understand why she looked that way, or that she must have been in shock. Then I saw the video of the pancaking collapse for the first time. That huge antenna, which I'd stood beside a few times on the building's roof, was the last thing to fall, in slow motion, like in a movie, the giant sword of a great knight fallen in battle. My knees crumpled and I cried out, like so many others that day.

They showed people running helter-skelter at the Washington Mall, responding to various bomb and aircraft rumors. We felt as confused as they were. Had a plane crashed into the Pentagon? Was one heading for the Capitol? Where was our friend Jerry Nadler?

Joyce Miller can only describe their macabre rail journey north as a scene from a classic movie genre, where strangers are confined together in a disaster, closed off from the outside world. Most of the other passengers in their railcar were reporters for DC media outlets who were told to get up to NYC. As the train moved slowly forward, from limited cell phone conversations, the reporters and Jerry and Joyce tried to piece together what was happening. The train stopped in Baltimore and was evacuated. The reporters, learning that the Pentagon had been hit, were directed to return to Washington.

"The stationmaster took us into her office and let us watch her small TV," Joyce remembers. "It was unreal, incredible. And all the while she was trying to decide how to manage all the trains that were supposed to pass through her station. She said that railroad workers had to actually walk and inspect all the tracks for hundreds of miles before the trains could roll again. She ordered in Chinese food for us and her staff, which was a comforting act of normalcy on a far-from-normal day." Most important,

Joyce was finally able to reach the parent of one of son Michael's Ramaz School classmates to let him know they were safe.

District Leader Marc Landis, new father of six-month-old Rachel, was going pollsite to make sure everyone knew to vacate the premises. "We didn't know whether we would continue the election from where we left off, or start over another day," he explains.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

After making sure all his sites were closed and secured, Marc arrived at the clubhouse with Frank Hoare, who, besides being on the Assembly staff and a leader in the state Democratic party, was also a Lieutenant Colonel the US Army Reserves. (He later served in Iraq.) By then, hundreds of exhausted people, some marked with dust or dirt, were streaming up Amsterdam Avenue. Subways weren't running. Buses were rare. Marc raided the dozens of water bottles we'd stashed for volunteers and he and other members handed them out in front of the club.

Marc and Frank recruited CFD members to give blood. "We all went to the Red Cross building on Amsterdam Avenue, only to find that there were hundreds lined up already. No one yet realized that donating blood wasn't going to save a single life," he laments.

Back at Haber HQ, "We holed up there for hours. I was worried. Worried about Josh, worried about the future of our country. I looked outside onto Broadway and saw a flood of people walking north. They were eerily silent, they walked in a daze. At about 11:30, we got a phone call from a working pay phone. It was Josh. He had made it out. We all exhaled. The worry for Josh was over. The worry about our country was just beginning."

As the afternoon wore on, newscasts began to sort out the scope of what had transpired. While loved ones of those who had been working at Ground Zero in the Trade Center began their search for the missing, life continued on the Upper West Side. After being welcomed into a campaigner's home for a while, Larry Hirsch somehow caught a subway to Manhattan and was able to reach Alice by phone. She would stay the night in New Jersey rather than try a bridge or tunnel. Jean Kim and others were invited to John Liu's home where they gathered around the TV, trying to make sense of the chaos. John emptied his fridge for his volunteers and barbequed.

At 6 p.m., many of us attended an interfaith service at the space-sharing St. Paul and St. Andrew's church and the B'nai Jeshurun congregation on 86th and West End. Some in the pews were covered in dust. As they shook and sobbed unceasingly, we began to get a sense of what had happened downtown. After saying goodnight to a Japanese Columbia student who had never been in an American church before, I bought a bottle of wine at the liquor store in Hilda's building on West 86th.

A cop at the #1 station on Broadway smiled at me. "Rides are free," he said. I went down, the train pulled in. I sat in a near-empty car. It occurred to me that throughout the

day, I'd never worried for my own safety. Weird. It felt really good to hear the subway rattle along again.

A 'NEW NORMAL' SETTLES IN

Joyce and Jerry's train was finally crossing the Meadowlands. From the direction of Manhattan, two flat, black trails of smoke drifted into the sky. As they neared New York, they saw the skyline with a hole in it.

"I can't describe how unbelievable it was, like a bad dream, like a movie. Something that should be there wasn't there. And all the people who had been in them.... I couldn't put my mind around it," Joyce recalls. "I knew the buildings had fallen, but it was implausible. They just weren't there and I couldn't understand it." Feeling abject sorrow, like all New Yorkers, the Nadlers slowly made their way past commuters playing cards or sleeping on their briefcases in Penn Station, stumbled out onto a deserted Eighth Avenue and made it home to Michael.

Some 2,753 people (plus ten terrorists) died in the Trade Center attacks. Among them was Helen Rosenthal's brother, Josh Rosenthal, who was on the 97th Floor of the South Tower. The corner of 72nd and Columbus is named in his honor. Sareve Sukat, high school sweetheart and wife of CFD member Joel Shapiro, also was lost in the catastrophe. A sign at 85th and West End Avenue marks her memory.

According to Rob Gottheim, first thing the next morning Jerry and his Congressional staff, which included Linda Rosenthal, went to Ground Zero. Their main concern was getting food and medicine to people affected by the conflagration. Before noon, says Rob, they had begun to form the coalition of public officials that has worked on our city's recovery ever since.

The delayed impact experienced by many is illustrated by Jean Kim:

"In the following days, I slowly discovered that the nearly 3,000 people who had perished included people I knew. My day job was working at a financial services PR agency, and when the 88th floor of Tower 1 came toppling down, the numerous research analysts and the administrative staff at our client, the investment firm of Keefe, Bruyette and Woods (KBW) became victims of that day, 67 people in all. As we helped them manage this extreme tragedy, I remember standing in a makeshift conference room in Midtown where they had temporarily relocated; it was filled with Post-its, marked with the names and funeral dates of employees who had not been able to escape the horrors and fires of that day.

"The impact of 9/11 still reverberates," she continues. "So much of how we think and behave was reframed on that day, like tighter airport security, subway bag searches, and the omnipresence of security cameras."

OUR BETTER ANGELS

Writes Jan Levy: "This day changed all of our lives and brought new perspectives to our former understanding of how our country related to the rest of the world. More significantly, it was a day that brought out the better angels of our nature, and gave rise to the singular and remarkable American tradition of neighbor helping neighbor. Rampant good will carried the day, enabling us to feel better about ourselves and our national spirit."

Oh. The Primary? It was held two weeks later. Scott didn't make it. He and CFD endorsed Betsy Gotbaum who won the run-off and the November general election. Mark Green lost to "billionaire media tycoon" Michael Bloomberg by a slim margin.

In mid-2002, there was a CFD baby boomlet – Olivia for the Hirsches; Elena for District Leader Beth Berns and husband Larry Bressler. They are growing up in a world permanently changed by the terrorists' deeds on 9/11/2001.

And most of us, including Scott...and later Linda...went on to win, or at least to strive to carry on with hope and vigor, albeit with an invisible hole in our hearts like the hole in the sky downtown.

This piece was first published on the Community Free Democrats web site in September, 2011.

Addendum: After 51 years as a progressive club on the Upper West Side, Community Free Democrats merged in 2020 with two other historic local clubs, Ansonia Independent Democrats and Park River Independent Democrat. Jerry Nadler remains our US Representative.