Reflections of an American

As I ponder my life on the eve of my 55th birthday, I also am remembering that tragic day back in 2001.  Yes, those who know me well enough know that September 11th, 2001 happened on my 36th birthday.  My reflections today range from grief over those lost and ones left behind to elation that, in fact, I have made it to 55. (no small feat knowing my childhood).

September 11, 2001 is my generation’s “You remember where you were when…” event.

 I was under a TruGreen truck trying to fix a leak from a 300-gallon tank that contained liquid fertilizer.  My Administrative Assistant came running into the warehouse very emotional and after crawling out from under the truck and calming her down, I was to learn  her mother was in one of the smaller buildings next to the Twin Towers which had just been hit by a plane.  Assuring her that her mother was fine and calming her down, I crawled back under the leaking truck.  Back under the truck, with liquid fertilizer running everywhere, my oldest brother called to inform me of the second plane hitting the Twin Towers.  By this time, it was becoming clearer that this was not a random act.

I tried to call my wife, who was on her way to the Fort Myers, Va., which is next to the Pentagon.   Due to the attacks and subsequent panic, cell service was not working.  I finally reached her about two hours later, as she was stuck in traffic that Tuesday morning and had not reached the base before the plane hit the Pentagon.

I was scheduled to train in the field this day, so I got in the truck and rode from house to house treating lawns and learning of the horrific acts one stop at a time.  By the time I got home that evening, my entire family was watching the news and trying to figure out what had happened.  My 36th birthday was spent in grief and anger over the events that transpired that morning.

Now, 2 weeks later, on a Sunday evening, my middle brother calls me and says, “We need to do something….” Regarding the attacks in New York, Shanksville, and Arlington.  He tells me about how he and his wife went up to New York City to help and were the only people staying in a large hotel off Broadway.  He further went on to say how we need to show that Americans were not easily scared, and we needed to get people to go back to New York City.  His wife had mentioned a motorcycle ride, since they did a lot of riding, and I agreed with him that sounded like a good idea for the following Spring.  He did not agree.  He said, “We need to go NOW!”

While we talked about other topics, I was looking at a calendar.  I mentioned to him that if he had to go *now* on this motorcycle ride idea, to do it on a holiday so that Federal workers would have an extra day off. We concluded that Columbus day was too early to organize the event; however, Veteran’s Day that year would be good as the date was November 10 and 11th, 2001. It could give him several weeks to organize the event.  We said our goodbyes, and I never thought of it again.  Was I in for a big surprise!

The very next day, Monday afternoon, on his way home from his job, my brother called and told me had reserved the grounds of the Washington Monument for Saturday November 10th, 2001. He reserved the grounds as a staging area for the beginning of a motorcycle ride to get people to show support for New York.  I told him “have fun and enjoy.”  He reapplied, “oh, you and your wife are going too!”

“I DO NOT RIDE!” I replied.

“I know” he said, “You are the only one I know that can lift a bike into a truck without help so you are going, because we are not going to leave anyone behind if they break down.  And your wife will drive a truck with my kids to help sell T shirts and stuff.”

Without thinking of any consequences and without hesitation, I readily agreed.  That November 10th morning as over 200 bikers were registering to go on this ride, President George Bush’s helicopter, Marine One, flew overhead on its way taking the President to New York City as well.   That day, the America’s 9/11 Ride was born.

As Paul Harvey would say, “Now you know the rest of the story…”

Not in a million years would l have thought that out of those attacks 19 years ago, and subsequent motorcycle ride I would be a small part of something that has become so big.  My family has had the unique opportunity to become involved with the America’s 9/11 Foundation.  We have seen firsthand the devastation of those attacks and met family members of victims and survivors and First Responders to those events.(Several have become like my own family)  We have seen the changes over time of the memorials, especially in Shanksville, PA.  Alas, we have also witnessed the changes in attitudes.

On September 12th, 2001 everyone was an American!  It did not matter whether you were Black, White, Hispanic, Latino, Asian or any other ethnicity, you were AMERICAN!  It did not matter whether you were Southerner or Yankee, you were AMERICAN!  It did not matter if you were Republican or Democrat, you were AMERICAN.   And we had new heroes.  Ones that did not have magical powers or equipment that only billionaires could have.  Our heroes were the average everyday person who cared more about helping individuals then their own lives.  The Lewis Nacke’s of Flight 93, the Staff Sgt. Christopher Braman’s of the Pentagon, the 417 First Responders of New York City and countless others who did not hesitate to respond or act. But these and many other heroes were not just born from this tragedy.

No!

These heroes were everywhere.  In every State, City, Town, and County of America.  They were our local Firefighters (both paid and volunteers), our Emergency Medical Personnel, and our Police!  These were our new heroes! The new Red, White and Blue!  Oh, how everyone and I mean everyone loved them!

Over the course of these 19 years since the Attacks, I have witnessed a change in attitudes.  We have moved from being American to being anything but American.  We have gone from looking past differences and working together to inspecting and disparaging the minutest detail amongst ourselves.  We are no longer One.  And our heroes have fallen as well.  Why is it that a tragedy like 9/11 solves problems and erases differences when prosperity and peace promote hatred and violence?

On September 11th, 2020, the 19th anniversary of the attacks on the Pentagon, Shanksville and the Twin Towers in New York City, I urge everyone to revisit those feelings from 19 years ago.  To honor the victims.  To remember the survivors. To remember, we are greater together than separated. We are greater with God than without him. We are One. We are AMERICAN!

**“If we learn nothing else from this tragedy, we learn that life is short and there is no time for hate.”  
—**Sandy Dahl**, wife of Flight 93 pilot** Jason Dahl**, in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, in 2002**

May we **NEVER** Forget September 11th, 2001 as I know I cannot.  God Bless our Nation and our First Responders.   God Bless the RED, WHITE and BLUE!

Sincerely,

Eric V. Sjurseth,

President, America’s 9/11 Foundation.