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# 'A burning bush experience'

## Those who lived or helped in N.Y. say their lives are changed

By **MIKE NORTON**  
Record-Eagle staff writer

**T**RAVERSE CITY — Christine Smith was already thinking about leaving New York and moving back to northern Michigan when the first plane rammed the World Trade Center on the morning of Sept. 11. Everything that happened afterward simply strengthened her resolve.

But it wasn't an easy decision. Not by any means.

"I felt really bad about leaving when it was time to go home, like I was deserting everybody," said Smith, 32, who moved back home in December. "After what happened, there were several of us who sort of clung together and formed this strong bond. Students from the karate school I taught who'd lost loved ones. One student, he was an Algerian, lost his girlfriend, and she was the only person he had."

Although the return to northern Michigan has been comforting — being with family and friends and old schoolmates — she still doesn't know how to deal with the trauma, or the emotional aftershocks that still affect her when she sees pictures or scenes of the fallen towers.

"At first I was obsessed with every news blurb, but then it was just the opposite," she said. "I turned on the TV the other day and there they were, and I got just hysterical. My brother has forbidden me to look at that stuff. I don't know what to do with it. There are times when I'll be talking to somebody and I'll just start crying."

Other northern Michigan natives who witnessed the Sept. 11 attacks and their aftermath tell similar stories. One way or another, they say, they were all permanently affected by what they saw and heard. Even a year afterward, they speak and act like people who have awakened from a terrible dream and still aren't certain they're fully awake.

"In many ways, I haven't dealt with it yet," said Smith. "There were people who went down to the WTC site all the time just to look, because they needed to. I couldn't do that. I just couldn't admit the buildings were gone. 'I'd walked by them every day, I'd eaten lunch there, I'd used them to navigate with. I just refused to accept that they were gone. My eyes would tear up every time I looked in that direction and didn't see them.'"

A 1988 graduate of the Interlochen Arts Academy, Smith went to New York to pursue a career in acting. She'd landed some good work as a stand-in and stunt double on TV series like "The Sopranos" and "Law & Order," but her career seemed to be going nowhere and she wasn't getting any roles for her own. She took a "sanity job" at a Wall Street investment bank — but that, too, got less and less sane.

Then came Sept. 11, and a phone call from her mother that probably saved her life.

Unaware of what was happening, Smith was just leaving her home in Brooklyn Heights to take the subway to work in Manhattan when her mother called from Bellaire. That subway line passed directly under the World Trade Center, and if her mother hadn't persuaded her to stay home and turn on the television, she probably would have been under the towers when they collapsed.

Since she couldn't get into Manhattan (and had no job to go to anyway) Smith spent the next several weeks acting as a go-between for people who were trying to find missing friends and relatives, "picking up strays," as she called it, and making calls to connect people with sources of food and clothing.

"I found out that most of my friends had gotten out all right, and at first it was OK," she said. "But then it would sort of trickle in that this person is missing or that person is missing, and by the end there were 49 people I knew who died. I spent the next three months doing nothing but going to memorial services."

Even when the initial shock died away, the destruction and the misery were impossible to

ignore. Smith's home was just over the river from Ground Zero, downwind from the site of the twin towers, and every day the air was filled with the smell of burning. The fires weren't really out until just before she left, and every day she could taste them.

"Going downtown was even worse," she said. "At first, Grand Central would have a bomb threat every day, and everything would just shut down. The subways would crawl through at a snail's pace, and it was really creepy."

"You were reminded all the time. You'd see these families three months afterward, still going around asking, 'Have you seen this person?' And you felt bad because they couldn't let it go, even when everybody knew there was nobody left in there"

Now that she's back in Traverse City, her family's home since 1983, Smith is trying to stay busy studying martial arts and working with youngsters in her classes who need extra help.

"I seem to have developed this need to help others and make myself useful," she said. "I guess it's helping me deal with my own problems."

L. Stephen Michaels thinks a lot about Sept. 11, because he spent 11 days helping to search for survivors in the rubble of Ground Zero. But he isn't coming back to Traverse City.

Michaels, 22, had been in New York City less than a week and a half when the attack came. A 1998 graduate of Traverse City West High School, (back when his name was Steve Henderson) he'd gone East to study photography at the prestigious Parsons School of Design. He says the tragedy and its aftermath have left profound physical and psychological marks on him, but they've also led him to explore some original and potentially profitable techniques in his art.

Michaels was living in an apartment near Union Square when he was awakened by news of the attack on the World Trade Center. He was able to take pictures of the burning towers from his building, but quickly headed for the site to see if he could help. An Eagle Scout who was on the staff at Camp Greilick near Traverse City for several summers, he thought his first aid and CPR training might be of use.

For the next 11 nights, he worked in the pile of debris at

Ground Zero, arriving at 11 p.m. and working until 8 a.m., taking a few hours off to sleep and heading for classes during the day. It was a grueling schedule, and the exertion and lack of sleep made it seem even more nightmarish and unreal.

"We were working like robots, not really thinking about anything but what we were doing," he said. "But anytime the dogs would get a scent we'd all have to get off the pile and stand there, absolutely silent."

"And that's when it hit you. You'd look around in the darkness, and all the buildings all around us were gutted, and it was like something out of a horror movie. And then it would turn out the dogs hadn't found anybody alive, and we'd all get back on the pile again and go back to work."

He worked a little too hard, as it turned out. By Sept. 22, he'd developed pain and paralysis in his left arm that became noticeable to his fellow volunteers, and was sent to the hospital. It turned out that he'd suffered severe nerve and muscle damage somehow while moving through the debris. After almost a year of tests and treatments he's still not back to normal, and the doctors say he may never be.

"It's something I'll be dealing with for the rest of my life," he said. "A constant reminder of Sept. 11. Psychologically, I pushed so much of what I was seeing and hearing out of my head, so I could go forward and do what I needed to do, that it's very hard for me to remember a lot of it, except what comes back to me now as flashbacks."

His camera work hasn't suffered. Quite the opposite. Trying to make sense of what he'd witnessed, he began recording the scenes around him. Soon he was creating multiple exposures — layering an entirely natural scene over a horrific image from the Trade Center cleanup — in an attempt to convey his own sense of confusion and dislocation.

His instructors at Parsons were so excited by the results that they pulled him away from all his other work to concentrate on developing his technique and waived all his sophomore credits. Now several galleries are interested in exhibiting the pictures.

"I hate to say it, but what happened on Sept. 11 really helped me clarify a lot of things for

myself," he said. "I wasn't even there to study photography, really; I was going into the performing arts. Everything's just sort of worked out for me."

Sept. 11 also changed life's course for John "Ance" Damoose and his family. They decided to leave Traverse City and relocate their evangelical Christian organization, Freedom Ministries of America, to Ann Arbor.

"For us, it was almost a burning bush experience," he said. "From a spiritual perspective, it was this wake-up call — but we still haven't figured out what it means or why."

Damoose is vice president of Freedom Ministries, an international evangelism and communications organization founded by his father, former Chrysler marketing director John Damoose Sr.

On the morning of Sept. 11, father and son were in Washington, D.C., for a meeting at the Pentagon, and were just going into the building when they overheard someone talking about a terrorist attack in New York.

Damoose reached for his cell phone and called his wife, Margo, at their home in Old Mission to ask her what was going on.

"She told me about the World Trade Center because she was watching the whole thing on TV, and when she heard I was at the Pentagon she said, 'You'd better get out of there because there's another plane that's not accounted for.' I thought, 'Nah, it's the Pentagon, it's the strongest building in the world,' and I hung up. And not six minutes later, the plane hit."

The hijacked airliner that plowed into the building struck close to the room where Damoose and his father were waiting — so close that they could feel the impact of the crash. At first the men didn't know whether to leave the building or stay where they were, but when they finally rushed outside, they could see the plane's tail section protruding from the wall; pieces of the wreckage were strewn along Fort Meyer Drive as they made their way from the impact area.

For a man who believes that there are no random events in life — that everything is directed by God for a specific purpose — it was a powerful but

Sept. 11 was a scary day. I was at school. When I found out, I felt sick.

It was hard to go to bed not knowing what could or would happen next. Also, it was hard not to know if anybody you knew got hurt or killed.

Also, it was hard to believe anybody would want to do such a thing to America and hurt us all. Sept. 11 was not a good day for anybody.

Ashley Birgy  
Fifth grade  
Crystal Lake Elementary  
Benzonia

I was sitting at home enjoying my breakfast and watching the news. As the events started to take place, suddenly my stomach felt weak and tears were pouring down my face.

The first plane seemed like an unfortunate accident, but I knew after the second plane hit that it was an awful act of terror.

You see I will never forget that day for many reasons. The simple shock of it alone is enough to make us all remember, but for me it was my 23rd birthday. I couldn't celebrate with my friends, I couldn't enjoy my birthday cake and I couldn't open birthday gifts that day. It just didn't seem right. I don't remember very many things about my past birthdays but this one I will never forget.

Since that day I have joked with friends that I wanted to adopt a new birthday. For the rest of my life, my birthday will be associated with one of our nation's biggest tragedies.

I have since decided that I like my birthday. As the daughter of two volunteer firefighters I have learned that you have to pick up the pieces and move on. I think our country has done a good job of doing that.

I will still have a hard time celebrating my birthday this year, but instead of thinking of Sept. 11 as a day of tragedy, I will think of it as the day our nation came together and started redefining our freedom.

Heather Sharrow  
Kalkaska

On the morning of Sept. 11 I had just finished writing to my grandson and his wife, both of whom are serving in Special Services in the U.S. Air Force. Chris was stationed at the Pentagon, his wife Rachael at Edwards Air Force Base in Washington, D.C.

A gentleman friend I had been dating called about the initial attack on the World Trade Center and said to turn on the television. He joined me at my home a short time later.

He too had a grandson in the Air Force, stationed in Korea, and both of us spent many fearful hours worried about the safety and welfare of these three loved ones. As the events and news of the day unfolded we felt a need for prayer and decided to spend time at the chapel at St. Francis Church.

Later that evening my friend said to me, "You know, even though we worry about our children and their spouses, they have each other and their families. We have only each other, and we should be together during these uncertain times."

A few days later he formally asked me to marry him, and six weeks later we celebrated our wedding at the Carmelite Monastery in the presence of our 17 children.

In spite of the horror and the aftermath of that terrible day, Sept. 11 will always remain a special one in our lives since it brought us together in love and companionship.

Mrs. Louis Kohler  
Traverse City



Record-Eagle/  
John L. Russell  
**Christine Smith, black belt, moved back to her hometown of Traverse City after the Sept. 11 attack on New York's World Trade Center.**

My friend Abby and I were seniors in high school and I don't think we really understood the importance of what had happened that day.

We had a class together and of course the television was on, but I guess not even the teachers realized, because although we discussed it, we went on with the day's activities.

After school, Abby and I went to a gym to work out, and CNN was on every one of the six televisions in the gym. When we left the gym we both called our families. It was comforting to hear their voices; I suppose just because it was something familiar, which everyone needed at the time, not knowing who did this or if anything else was going to happen.

Now at college, Abby and I wonder if anything will happen, small or big. Hopefully, this year there will be nothing new to see on CNN.

Kara Duwe  
Traverse City

My husband and I were in the Upper Peninsula and were about to leave our Munising motel when we saw the first tower hit. With a mother's intuition, I immediately called our daughter, who fortunately was late in taking her son a few blocks to the Trinity Church Daycare.

She said she had heard a loud bang, and she would check and call us right back. Most communication was out in the area and six long hours later she called from New Jersey, where they had been evacuated on a tug boat.

Family and friends helped out a month later; she moved back to her apartment in Battery Park City. National Guard checkpoints were everywhere when we visited.

We were very fortunate, and our grandson, now age 3, can still look out his window and wave to "The Lady" (Statue of Liberty).

Ann Somerville  
Maple City

I teach at an elementary school just south of Muskegon and have a second home in Traverse City. I was walking near the office in the hallway when I heard Cheryl, one of our secretaries, whisper to me.

"Randy," she exclaimed quietly, in a conspiratorial tone, "come here!" I walked into the office and saw the replay on CNN.

It took several replays for me to register anything. I asked Cheryl if this was happening for real. I asked if we had e-mailed all of the teachers to keep the TVs off in the rooms, and the office staff went into action.

This is the kind of thing that little children did not need to experience. It would be difficult to explain.

Then, the second plane hit! NOT AN ACCIDENT, and my daughter Crystal worked near the centers.

It registered like an internal avalanche. I felt the beginning of something like a complete denial of the fear creeping into my stomach. Something ugly had grabbed my stomach from inside and kept squeezing. I dared not let the worst thoughts get in. "She could not be down there this early," I convinced myself.

I fumbled through my wallet to find her number and called from the office. "All circuits are busy; Please try your call again later," was the only reply.

I knew she would be fine. She had to be. This felt too surreal. An hour later, as I sat in the staff lounge, something I rarely do, Cheryl came in. "Crystal's OK," she told me, as she handed me the note.

My drought ended with a torrential rain. Crystal relayed the message through a few people from cell phone to cell phone to finally a friend on a working telephone. She was OK.

I went into my office and cried for all of us, but mostly for what might have been.

Randy DeBoise  
Hudsonville