

Natalie Rose
Interview with Joanne Doroshow
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My parents woke me up the morning of September 11th, to tell me of the tragic events that had already been unfolding. One of my first concerns was the welfare of our longtime family friend and my former employer, Joanne Doroshow. Joanne is the Executive Director of the Center for Justice and Democracy, an advocacy and public interest group that researches and publishes reports on civil justice issues. Joanne works about seven blocks South of the World Trade Center, and we had no idea for about eight hours if she was OK or not. Thankfully, I learned from my mother that she was fine and I was able to talk to her on the phone myself. She emerged from the subway a short while after the second plane hit the World Trade Center. I interviewed Joanne about what she went through after the incident and the effects the attack will have on her business.

NR: So you were on the subway the morning of September 11th?

JD: Yeah, I was. I normally don't stop off there. Our post office box is right across from the World Trade Center. Normally, I pick up the mail on Wednesdays and Fridays, but I decided to stop there on Tuesday because I needed to go to Staples, which is the office supply store a block away. So I was going to go to Staples first and pick up my mail and then go into the World Trade Center to take the subway, the N/R train, which is just a couple of really short stops from my office. It's the routine I usually follow. So, I got off the subway at Park Place, which leaves you right at Park Place and Broadway. When I got out of the train, there were hoards of people on the street. I immediately asked a transit cop what happened. The transit cop told me 'Look up. There are two planes that just flew into the World Trade Center.' So apparently the planes had crashed while I was on the subway, on the way down there.

NR: Did you have any idea on the subway that anything had gone wrong?

JD: Well, the subway suddenly got really slow, and then the announcement came on: "Attention. Attention, there are no trains going to South Ferry due to the incident at the World Trade Center." People on the subway were getting really angry, and they were trying to get to work because the trains were really slow. Typical rush hour kind of behavior. So, I was actually kind of curious to get off at the stop anyway because an incident at the World Trade Center, I wondered what happened. So I did get off there, but I had no idea really what it was.

When I looked up I saw what had happened. I decided of course that I was not going to Staples or my post office box. What I did was go across the street to J&R computer store, so I could get a better look at what just happened. That's when I could really, really see it.

NR: Roughly what time of morning was this?

JD: Sometime between nine and nine thirty.

NR: So, the Towers had not collapsed yet?

JD: No. So I was out there looking at the building burning, and you could see where the planes had gone in. I wasn't nervous standing out there at first. I was just in shock. It was kind of like everyone was standing out on the street looking up. It was kind of like a Superman movie where everybody is pointing up at the sky. Everyone was just pointing up at the World Trade Center. And then all of a sudden this police van started coming up Park Row and screaming: "Go north. Go North. Leave this area." It was at that moment I realized it was really unsafe to be out here. Most people were not moving, but I just decided to move really fast. I thought about walking to my office, which was ten blocks south of there. But when I looked up I saw all the debris blowing south. So I was actually afraid to walk there. I knew that the place where I used to work at Nassau and Beekman Street, across from the New York State Trial Lawyer's Association office, was really close. I decided to walk there. I went right upstairs.

NR: What was atmosphere for the people inside the building?

JD: They had a television on and everybody was very upset. We decided to watch television for awhile. And then we looked out the window at the same time this huge roar began. And when you looked out the window you could see people running down the street screaming, and it reminded me of a Godzilla movie. I didn't know what it was at first and then quickly realized what it was because we had the news on at the same time. Then instantaneously we were engulfed in black. It was like day turned to night. The building that I was in was shaking. The windows were shaking. Dust started coming in through the window and it looked like smoke. Everybody got really scared because we didn't know what it was. We knew the tower was collapsing but was something falling close by to us? Was there a fire that was creating an explosion somewhere? We had no idea what it was. We didn't smell smoke. It just looked like smoke coming in through

the windows. And everything was black outside and we realized it was just the effects of the building collapsing. Eventually if you looked out the window, it turned a dark brown color and then a yellowish color. It was still very thick. You couldn't see anything. It was just color out the window. It was the weirdest thing.

NR: What were the people's attitudes in the building?

At that point, there were a lot of people who had run into our building. In the offices, there is a room called the classroom where they hold seminars and we had a lot of seats up there. A lot of the people who had run into the building were very upset, so we let a lot of people come up stairs to the second floor. We had water for them and cookies out and the television on, so it was sort of a refuge for them. Some people were extremely antsy about getting out of that area. Nobody wanted to be in that area, so people were trying to figure if they should leave or just stay in the building. Fortunately, everybody stayed in and soon after the second building collapsed.

NR: Was it the same impact when the second building collapsed?

JD: Yes it was the same impact. I was back opening another part of the office when I saw all the windows start to shake. Everything just turned to black. One very nervous person yelled, "There's smoke. There's smoke." Which is not the sort of thing you want to yell, so I screamed out "It's not smoke. It's dust." He was going to panic people and he said "Oh my gosh, I'm sorry." Eventually, you couldn't see for awhile and it looked like a heavy snowstorm with sunlight coming in. Nobody knew what quite to do because clearly it was still too thick to breathe outside. And that's why I'm sure there were people who smothered outside, who were not able to get inside somewhere while the buildings were collapsing. No human being could breathe out there. I'm sure there were people who suffocated outside. I was glad to be inside.

NR: When did you decide to leave the building?

JD: It was probably about quarter to eleven that we decided we needed to get out of there. We told the people that we were going to have to leave. We gave out a lot of wet paper towels for people to put up to their mouths and noses to breathe through. They were directing everybody to walk east towards the East River and then North. People were walking across the Brooklyn Bridge to go to Brooklyn, which was pretty near there. I was with about twelve people, half of whom needed to get to Brooklyn and half of

whom needed to go uptown. So we all went out and decided to stay together. There were hospital personnel down the street handing out masks. We all took masks and put them on and started walking north.

NR: About how many people were walking in the streets?

JD: There were many people out walking.

NR: And the skies were still bad?

JD: The sun was coming through, but it was still incredibly dusty. The ground was thick with it. You wouldn't want to breathe that stuff in, so we were glad to have the masks. We started walking east and then north. We passed a hospital and there were a lot of people there. In fact, we saw out the window before we left, people in stretchers being pushed down Beekman Street toward the hospital. Eventually people got on the Brooklyn Bridge and then there were about six of us that continued to try and walk uptown. After about six blocks, the dust disappeared and we took off our masks and could breathe. We knew there was no transportation running, so we were going to have to walk. There were really nice people along the way, handing out water and directing people. We passed one police station where there were a lot of cops out.

NR: How long did you walk for?

JD: We walked to alphabet city where one of the people we were with lived. We first walked there. I didn't have a cell phone with me. I knew people who knew me were going to be very concerned because there was no way anybody knew where I was. I wasn't in my office and it was impossible to get through anyway. When we stopped at this person's apartment, we had the radio and television on. I couldn't get out on the phone, but I was able to get through to my own number and check my messages. Of course, there were all these panicked phone calls. The first thing I did was get through to my brother, so he could at least alert my family to what was going on. I couldn't call many people at that point.

After about an hour, we were hungry. The trains still weren't running, but we all figured eventually there would be a train running uptown. There had to be. We just decided to take it easy and walked over to Union Square to find something that was open. We finally found an Au Bon Pain that was open so we could get something to eat. By that time, one of the cops told us that the A train was running.

NR: About what time was this?

JD: About two o'clock. I don't really remember.

NR: So its been a whole five hours since you first got off the train and saw this?

JD: Yes. So we walked over to 14th street and 8th avenue. It took a long time for a train to come. To get uptown, we had to get on the C train because the A train goes from 59th to 125th and we were in between there. A couple trains came by and were way too crowded to get on. We eventually got on a train and came uptown. There were still five of us together. By the time I got to my apartment it was about four o'clock. When I got there I kind of collapsed and knew I had to start making phone calls to people. At the time the buildings fell, I was actually particularly concerned about my office because I didn't know if the buildings were going to implode and just fall into themselves or topple over. Those were 110 story buildings and if they had toppled they would have destroyed so many buildings and so many people. I was concerned about that happening because I couldn't get in touch with my staff. I had no idea what happened to them. Later they told me they had no idea what happened to me. They didn't know I was going to Staples, but they kind of guessed. They were worried about me and everybody was just worried about everybody. There were stories played out all over the place. It took a long time to get in touch with people because the phones weren't working and nobody could get home. I started calling people back and returning emails.

NR: In the past few days here on the Upper West Side have there been any signs of what has been going on?

JD: Up here, there were a couple days where a smell came over the city and it was pretty bad.

NR: Could you smell it in your apartment?

JD: It was very bad in my apartment. I actually shut the windows and turned the air conditioner on. It's not healthy stuff: Sheetrock and cement. Even though its tiny particles it's not good for you. At least for a couple days, if you looked down Broadway or Amsterdam Avenue, you saw the huge cloud down there. It's kind of dissipated now. Everyone was home from work. This is an area where a lot of people work on Wall Street. I've seen a few "missing" posters up. But I've pretty much tried to stay in the

neighborhood and not go anywhere. I've been trying to prepare myself to go back in there on Monday.

NR: How has your office been affected by this?

JD: In some senses, we're lucky because we're near the New York Stock Exchange. There's been such a push to get Wall Street operating. I'm a little concerned about the air quality down there. We're a few a few blocks away, so I don't think there is any structural damage where we are.

It's very disruptive to our organization. We had two huge print jobs that we were about to start. The printer we were using is Fitch Graphics and they were right across the street from the World Trade Center. I would imagine that business is gone. There is a copy place we use that is right up there as well. They were already working on a big order for us. Our post office box was right across the street. Looking at news footage, you can see that building, which is an old federal building, is standing fine. There is no outward visual damage to it, but clearly it will be impossible to get into that post office even if its not damaged inside. I called the Post office yesterday, and they said they were going to start diverting mail from that post office to the main one on 33rd and 9th avenue. It's probably going to be a nightmare to try and get our mail. Little things like that have been very disruptive, and we're anticipating how we are going to handle it.