

Surviving Ground Zero: Pace University and 9/11

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On September 11, 2001, Americans watched smoke billowing from the World Trade Center in New York City. These buildings were the symbol of financial power and American ingenuity. With the total destruction of the WTC, this generation of Americans was forced to realize that we are vulnerable to attack on our soil. More important than the physical destruction of the Twin Towers, the financial peril of many of the small businesses in lower Manhattan, and the dislocation of hundreds of families from their homes and security is the fact that more than 2,000 people lost their lives and will no longer be members of their families, their communities, or their country.

Like many other universities and colleges in the metropolitan area and around the country, Pace University was deeply touched by the 9/11 tragedy. We are a multi-campus school with more than 16,000 students, but the New York City campus was most directly affected by the terrorist attack. Located at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge and directly across the street from City Hall, it is the closest university to Ground Zero, a mere two blocks away. Pace also operated its World Trade Institute program from the 55th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center, the second tower to collapse. Four Pace students and forty alumni lost their lives as a result of 9/11.

September 11 began as a usual morning in a routine day; security staff had a shift change at 7:30 a.m., but the incoming officers, unbeknownst to them, would be on duty for the next twenty-four hours. The first airplane, American Airlines Flight 11, plowed into the North Tower at 8:45 a.m., raising fears in general, but Pace students were already dealing with hardships. Those living in Maria's Tower witnessed people jumping from the burning structure, and those residing in the Williams Street and West Street dorms were suddenly homeless. At 9:03 a.m., when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the South Tower, everyone knew Americans—and not just any Americans, but those we knew—were in the midst of a terrorist attack.

The First Day

Some Pace students who were walking towards their jobs at WTC saw the first plane crash into one of the Twin Towers and became very distraught. They immediately began calling friends and relatives who worked in the building. As these phone warnings went through, other students alerted people in the immediate area, many of whom refused to believe the news of the crash. Shortly thereafter, the second plane exploded into the other tower, this time with many more witnesses. Faculty, students, and staff were coming up from the subways and getting off the ferries when they became aware of the chaos around the Twin Towers. All were aware that a monumental event had occurred.

Pace University's upper administrators were at a meeting in the Midtown Center, and, upon receiving news of the atrocity, they converted the building into a contact center that maintained open communication with all Pace campuses. One of the first directives was to cancel all the university's classes. The vice president, whose office is in charge of security, returned to One Pace Plaza so there would be an administrator on site.

The Federal Aviation Administration locked down New York City at 9:17 a.m.; all airports, bridges, and tunnels were closed. By 9:40 a.m., all airports nationwide were also shut down. At 10:05 a.m., eighty minutes after the first collision, the South Tower collapsed. Huge plumes of smoke enveloped the area, and Pace students had to wear air filtration masks. The city's EMT set up a triage center in the Admissions Lobby of One Pace Plaza, where dozens with less severe injuries received attention. At 10:28 a.m., the North Tower crashed to the earth, releasing more smoke and debris into the area, injuring more people. At 10:30 a.m., Pace University President David Caputo returned to Pace Plaza by special police transport. At 10:57 a.m., Governor George Pataki ordered all state government offices closed, and at 11:02 a.m., Mayor Rudolf Giuliani ordered an evacuation of Manhattan south of Canal Street.

Without the aid of mass transportation, many Pace students were forced to travel a great distance to get home. Most resorted to walking in order to reach the other boroughs of New York; it took one student twelve hours to reach her front door. While they slowly made their way home over crowded roads and bridges, many gave encouragement and reassurance to total strangers and received the same. As people broke down and were completely overcome with grief and worry, others rallied around them and supported the ones in need. Students stated that they had never felt such a sense of unity before that tragic day.

At 2:00 p.m., following rumors of a gas leak, Pace students were evacuated from Maria's Tower. At 2:49 p.m., subway and bus services were restored to the city. At 4:00 p.m., President Caputo published his first emergency message of the day, stating that One Pace Plaza and its students were safe; there were three updates by 11:30 p.m. At 4:30 p.m., Maria's Tower residents were allowed back into their dorm rooms when no gas leak was found. At 5:30 p.m., Seven World Trade Center collapsed from fire stress; this cut off the gas and electricity to several local business offices as well as the Pace Campus. Without these essential utilities, the triage center was temporarily removed from Pace's lobby. At this time, President Caputo and his wife made the decision to stay overnight in the dorms with our students. His calm manner served to replenish some of the hope in the distraught young people.

At 7:45 p.m., the New York Police Department reported seventy-eight officers missing in the disaster area, and up to 200 firefighters possibly killed when the towers collapsed. Late that night, at 11:30, a large electrical generator was supplied to serve as a power source to Pace until regular services were restored.

While Pace New York was in the middle of the disaster, the rest of the Pace University community, consisting of campuses in Pleasantville and White Plains, in Westchester, was making ready to absorb the influx of displaced students from its New York City site. Faculty and staff also met in Pleasantville to form a phonathon to call and check on the well-being of all of the university's students. Many of them had left everything in the abandoned residence halls and faced the immediate future without a change of clothes or other necessities. An information line was also set up so that any faculty, staff, or student could call in and receive daily information on the status of Pace, regardless of campus.

Picking Up Our Lives

On September 12, after assessing the circumstances, and under the guidance of President Caputo, Pace University started its response to the emergency situation. Classes on all campuses remained cancelled and the university closed. New York City students who had lived in the Williams Street and West Street residences were relocated to temporary housing in Battery Park

City or Maria's Tower or Pace Westchester. Despite our own difficulties, we tried to respond to larger needs. The most immediate problem was the shortage of blood in the New York City hospitals; all of Pace's campuses ran successful blood drives, with more than 200 students donating.

Pace officials also voiced concerns over the damage done to downtown New York's environment. Water contamination, waste disposal, and eventual redevelopment were deemed long-term challenges; students, staff, and faculty were particularly concerned with the quality of air, both indoors and out. Portable air filtering machines were installed at Pace New York as a temporary solution. A later conference was held to discuss these environmental issues and their effect on the impending reconstruction of lower Manhattan.

Reconstruction of campus life—both outward and inward—became our chief concern. Things changed. And external changes remain in place more than a year later. Everyone entering any campus of Pace University now has to wear an identification tag. Visitors are issued temporary IDs by security. Security itself has been beefed up; more officers have been added and they have greater visibility. All entrances and exits are guarded, unauthorized vehicles are prohibited from entering the grounds, and, in general, security has become a more important aspect of campus life.

Our president discussed the "long road ahead" at the Board of Trustees meeting, held in late September 2001. He described the emotional and physical duress of the students, staff, and faculty immediately following the 9/11 attacks. President Caputo cautioned that the weeks and months ahead would be even more difficult because of poor air quality and the incomplete city transportation grid. The empty space where the World Trade Center once stood served as a daily reminder of the attack, making emotional recovery even more difficult. At the end of the meeting, President Caputo reminded the trustees that, "Pace, like the rest of New York and the United States, will adjust to the changed realities, but the nature of that adjustment remains unclear."

Fatigue had set into the entire community, so it was necessary to find ways to rejuvenate those on campus who had been working so hard. Community meetings were conducted, "thank you" receptions were held, and each faculty and staff member received a "thank you letter." Memorial services took place in New York and Pleasantville, and a letter was sent to the alumni about the loss of life, expressing condolence when appropriate.

Recognizing the trauma of such circumstances, Pace's Counseling Center set up sessions for any Pace community member in need of emotional and psychological assistance. The Center went into various phases to meet the needs of individuals seeking support. The initial phase, the first thirty hours, consisted of staff members caring for traumatized individuals and remaining overnight with the approximately 200 students. The next phase, September 13-18, consisted of staff members coordinating services for the Pace community. The University arranged for a consulting group, Crisis International, which would be available to run debriefing sessions and consult one-on-one with community members. The third phase, September 19-December 21, provided re-entry services to the community. Staff participated in community meetings, saw students in individual counseling, and ran structured skills-based groups designed to help participants move forward in their recovery. It was also necessary to help students with disabilities and to provide temporary academic accommodations for students suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms. For days, students could see the fires burning, and the sight greatly affected their emotional well-being. Finally, phase four—January 2, 2002, to the

present—consists of the Center’s outreach to the Pace community through mental health screening days and various group programs.

The doctoral clinical psychology program and the Pace University Counseling Center received funding from JP Morgan Chase to provide intense counseling to those who experienced personal loss in the World Trade Center disaster. The \$200,000 grant is making treatment available to people who might not be able to afford it. The funds also support the study of the effectiveness of counseling. Pace is the project’s lead institution.

In addition to organizations, individuals took initiative to help. For example, History Professors Bill Offutt and Nancy Reagin created a Yahoo! list serve and bulletin board for students after Pace lost communication. From home, the two began by e-mailing their own students who had accounts outside of Pace. Eventually, the list serve membership swelled to about 875. The professors encouraged the students to post their personal stories on the bulletin board to share with others, thus supplying another form of therapy.

Student leaders, not wanting to remain idle during this time of need, met to brainstorm for ideas and events that Pace University could undertake as a commemorative to the World Trade Center attack. Some of these included scholarships for victims’ families, a holiday toy drive for those orphaned by the attack, programs to help Pace students who lost property in the disaster, a national remembrance quilt, regularly scheduled blood drives, and a Brooklyn Bridge peace march, to name a few.

Several of these ideas came to fruition. On September 26, 2001, Pace University held a service entitled “Of Remembrance and Gratitude”; this was Pace’s first official response to the terrorist attack of 9/11. A representative from each segment of the Pace community spoke briefly in memory of those who were lost and thanked all of those who had unselfishly put themselves at great risk to help and protect others. More tangibly, a scholarship fund was established at Pace University for spouses and children of the 9/11 terrorist attack, which, in effect, will give the recipient a four-year tuition-free scholarship. Current Pace University students have the ability to receive grants up to \$1,000. Pace has also made a financial contribution of \$25,000 each to the New York Police and Fire Widows and Children’s Benefit Fund, the United Way-9/11 Fund, and the American Red Cross. Immediately after 9/11, Pace families, faculty, staff, and students contributed more than \$23,000 to assist current students who were displaced, suffered a loss of employment, or lost a family member.

The Remembrance Quilt proved to be the most striking way for Pace students to express their feelings about the tragedy and thus allow them to move forward in their lives. The quilt was put on display at One Pace Plaza, the same location designated for a permanent memorial site that will recognize members of the Pace community who lost their lives in the attack. Also, on November 14, the Pace family gathered for a walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. At the midpoint, red, white, and blue balloons were released into the air. The theme of the walk was “Pace—We come back stronger than ever.”

Existing Pace community outreach programs like the Small Business Institute and the Center for Community Outreach were enhanced to meet the intense needs of lower Manhattan. The Small Business Institute helped more than 100 lower Manhattan merchants file for disaster recovery loans. The Center for Community Outreach was the primary source of volunteer activity after 9/11. During this period, more than 1,000 students on both campuses have aided those in need.

More than 200 law students, led by Professor Vanessa Merton, provided free legal assistance to victims of the attacks. This effort to help re-establish businesses earned a civic

award for Merton's group. The Disaster Assistance Program set up an information booth to help those affected by the attacks identify their needs and secure representation. Several of the students who served at the booth at 80 Centre Street from October 8-21 were bilingual, speaking Spanish, Russian, Cantonese, and Japanese, thus being able to help a wide spectrum of New York citizens.

The Center for Downtown New York (CDNY) was also developed as a result of the 9/11 tragedy. President Caputo stated, "Through the Center we hope to draw upon the university's vast human and intellectual collaborative research and its numerous projects, and to further civic competence in downtown New York during this critical time for its recovery." To accomplish these goals, CDNY sought to supply academic and research leadership, provide an important link with the city's educational and cultural resources, and encourage collaborative projects and research. Currently, the Center is working to place volunteers in small businesses south of Canal Street. This project is funded by an Americorp grant.

Under the auspices of CDNY, Pace sponsored a series of conferences regarding the 9/11 attacks. The first conference was entitled "Disaster Planning for Universities: Lessons Learned from 9/11"; this two-and-a-half day meeting offered a chance for administrators to discuss how to prepare and respond to unforeseen catastrophes. A second conference held by Pace, with the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Domestic Preparedness, focused on using potential public and private partnerships to address critical incidents. A third and unique gathering was held at Pace University for three days commencing on March 18, 2002. This meeting brought together students from Pace and from the University of Central Oklahoma and Western Oklahoma State to try to answer questions about terrorism from a student's perspective. The latest conference, held on August 26, 2002, was entitled "Building Memories: The Future of 9/11." In this day-long conference, co-sponsored by Pace University and The Legacy Project, the panelists reflected on the one-year anniversary and their traumatic experiences.

Pace has re-emphasized its commitment to remaining in downtown New York City. It is one of fourteen organizations pledging to remain in lower Manhattan for at least nine years. This commitment resulted in a \$600,000 grant, intended to assist selected businesses located south of Canal Street. The grants were based on criteria such as proximity to the World Trade Center site, economic impact, early commitment, number of jobs retained, and number of jobs created.

The tragedy of 9/11 brought about changes in Pace University's curriculum as well. More than fifty courses were taught online in an effort to reach displaced students. This flexibility gives students the opportunity to continue their studies regardless of location. New courses related to 9/11 were also offered, including "Terrorism and Society," "New Strategies for American Law Enforcement in the Aftermath of September 11, 2001," "Propaganda," and "Global Marketing Strategy." Teach-ins were conducted in both Pleasantville and New York to inform students about the Middle East, its people, its history, and its way of life.

Pace University conducted an exit poll to show the effects of 9/11 on the future plans of the class of 2002. A majority of students said they

- were more inclined to be involved with public service activities,
- were more tolerant of religions, races, and nationalities,
- were more loyal to New York City,
- felt closer to their families, their friends, and their mates/spouses.

What has the Pace community learned from the tragedy of 9/11 and its aftermath? As an institution, we have learned that security is necessary to our new way of life. As an academic institution, we have learned to diversify our teaching approach to meet the circumstances. As a

community, we learned that although we are vulnerable, we are also resilient and can depend upon each other for support. As academics, we learned to meet the challenge of 9/11 to understand terrorism and how to deal with it. As students, we learned how to express our feelings by reaching out to the communities in need and by trying to fill the void of those we lost.

The days since the attack have been both terrible and remarkable. As one of our students said, our efforts, endeavors, and conferences are “about Pace, our unbreakable will to overcome difficulties, our tenacity, unity, great spirit, sense of community, and togetherness.”