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Asking Millennials Where They Were On 9/11 Shows How Powerful These Memories Are

BY **LILLI PETERSEN** | 2 WEEKS AGO |

If you want to ask a millennial where they were on 9/11, everyone has a story. No matter where you were, if you or your family were personally affected or not, everyone

On Sept. 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four planes in a coordinated attack. Two planes were flown into New York City's World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon, and one crash landed in Pennsylvania, killing nearly 3,000 people combined. For many American millennials, who were children or in their teens when 9/11 changed the landscape, it was our first experience with a national tragedy and first exposure to terrorism. "[A traumatic event like 9/11] shatters young people's feeling of safety and security," Dr. Janice Cohn, a psychotherapist who specializes in children's grief and worked with 9/11 widows, tells me in an interview with Elite Daily. "There was no way of anticipating it, of protecting oneself from even the possibility that something like this would happen. And then it does happen, and depending on the age the questions are, 'why did it happen, how did it happen.'"

I talked to five young women, both those who were in New York and those who were far away, about what they remember and what they think the legacy of 9/11 is for the millennial generation. Here's what they told me.

Warning: some of the stories that follow may be upsetting.

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"I remember [waking] up, and it was the most beautiful, crystal clear, deep blue sky," says Kathy Zhang, who was 15 on 9/11. A sophomore at Stuyvesant High School in lower Manhattan, her school was less than half a mile away from Ground Zero — so close that when the second plane hit the tower people at the school could feel the heat of the explosion. Classmates in her homeroom saw people jumping from the burning building. She was still in homeroom when the towers collapsed. "It was a mini-earthquake, but the loudest thunder you could even imagine," she remembers. "I can't quite explain it."

For Iman Hariri-kia, who was 8 years old and in a first grade classroom on New York's Upper East Side when the planes hit, a big part of her memories are that she doesn't know what she actually remembers versus what she's filled in from what she's learned

what had really happened was when she sat with her grandparents, who had picked her up from school, and watched the news footage of the attack "for hours" while her grandparents spoke over her head in Farsi.

I REMEMBER THINKING IT LOOKED REALLY QUIET AND PEACEFUL.

"All I remember is how scared they looked," she says. "I understood something bad had happened with a plane, but I just could not make the connection between a plane had crashed into a building and the fact this had happened to New York."

A number of the women in or near New York spoke vividly about the beauty of the day, and the contrast of the horror that they were seeing, or described walking through the empty city after the towers' collapse as beautiful. "The atmosphere had been completely diluted and it looked purple, and kind of like a perpetual sunset, a very smoky sunset," Hariri-kia recalls. "I remember thinking it looked really quiet and peaceful."

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Zhang too recalls the strange stillness of the day. "The city was so still and quiet. Almost post-apocalyptic, but in a beautiful, sunny fall day." She remembers, she says, certain details very vividly — when the first plane hit, she was in the guidance office arguing her way out of a class she didn't want to take, and she can still remember the teacher's name. However, she can't remember anything of the weeks after. "Honestly, I don't even know what classes I took sophomore year of high school," she says. "I can't even tell you that."

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According to Cohn, strange effects on memory — what stands out clearly, what's been forgotten — aren't abnormal for children and teens after a traumatic event.

"We all have, to a degree, selective memory," Cohn says. She describes a phenomenon which can occur with children and teens after terrible trauma. "That can have two effects," she says. "It can mean that they cannot process the emotions that they feel because they are so frightening or upsetting, so they just shut down. And the same thing is with memory," she says, noting that as Zhang describes, nearly every

much less young people, to process thousands of people dead."

For many millennials, 9/11 was our generation's first exposure to the concept of terrorism, and many of the women said that although they might not have grasped the nuance of the political impact, it was the first time they felt their own home lives threatened. Many people in then-13-year-old Brianne Doherty's commuter town on Long Island worked in Manhattan, and she remembers the way her world was shaken. "I always felt safe in America," she says. "It was probably like the first time when I was like, 'Oh my God. Something like this can happen here.'" She remembers her dad taking her outside that evening and asking her if she could smell the smoke from the collapsed towers.

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Jackie Reitz, who was 14 at the time, agrees. "I think that was the first time we even talked about terrorism, in any way. I had no idea that that was a thing that could even happen," she says. Living in a suburb of Chicago and well-removed from the violence happening on the East Coast, like many Americans, she was at first afraid the attacks would continue. "The rumors were that Chicago was going to get hit," she recalls. In her school, TVs on rolling carts played footage of the attack throughout the day. "We were just waiting to see a plane fly into the Sears Tower. Everyone was convinced that would happen." But she looks at the rumors of an attack on Chicago as a way for

"I think it's a little immature to focus it on yourself," she says.

Pool/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Some of the women note that thinking back on 9/11, there's an element of guilt for feeling so affected by it, since none of their families were directly touched by the tragedy. "I sometimes wonder if part of the grief that I'm experiencing is the loss of this said 'innocence,' but it seems too selfish of me to do so," says Zhang. "I mean, considering everything that was lost on that day, my innocence or the potential loss of my innocence is really nothing."

Cohn isn't surprised that there are complex feelings from those who were teens. "For those young people who had parents who came home, or who had classmates with parents that did not come home, it's very hard then to think, 'how can I think about my soccer game when my best friend's father just died?'" she questions, adding that these are the normal concerns of adolescence, and what teens should be thinking about. "After the backdrop of 9/11 normal adolescent concerns became — one feels like one shouldn't be worried about these things."

IF 9/11 HADN'T HAPPENED, WOULD I HAVE BEEN AS COGNIZANT OF THE WORLD?

happened. Heinz says she coped with the aftermath by learning as much as she could about the attack, devouring the news. "I remember reading everything I could about it," she says. She found an emotional defense in becoming informed on the news and politics. "That's kind of what started getting me to understand how important it is to understand what's going on in the world, and be up-to-date on things like our foreign policy and what people in charge of the country are doing," she says.

She's not alone. Zhang and Hariri-kia also say that they, as adults, have found it important to be politically aware, which they think comes in part from 9/11. "I think it made me more of a informed person nowadays," says Zhang. "If 9/11 hadn't happened, would I have been as cognizant of the world and potential misinformation, particularly in this day and age?" she asks rhetorically.

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hate crimes against Muslims spiked from 28 in 2000 to a whopping 481 in 2001. "I remember a girl I went to school with ... repeatedly asking me to pick a side, what side I was on, on the playground," she recalls. "She's now a really good friend of mine, she doesn't even remember it. But it's something that I always come back to."

YOU SAW A LOT OF PEOPLE HELPING EACH OTHER OUT.

But the one bright point that came out of the horror, the women agree, was how all of their communities came together. For then-12-year-old Emily Carter in Austin, Texas, it was the first time she recalls feeling extremely patriotic. After the fear of further attacks subsided — in Austin, the rumors were that terrorists would attack structural dams — she recalls the community banding together. "I felt like people were really [proud] of standing behind New York, and standing behind our country," she says. "I definitely noticed my community change in that way." She remembers local events and donations supporting first responders in New York.

"You saw a lot of people helping each other out," Doherty says. She remembers seeing her father, who worked what she calls a "suit and tie" job, put on a hard hat and volunteer to help clean up at Ground Zero. She herself participated in funeral services for the husband of a teacher.

As for the lasting political effect on millennials, Reitz can count off any number of major consequences. "The Iraq War was people, later, that were our age," she says. "I had classmates that have direct family members, or even themselves that joined the army and went overseas. That had a direct impact on our generation."