

DISCOVER

"Unknown Condition At The World Trade Center": A First Responder Remembers 9/11

LILLI PETERSEN

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PHOTO: BETH A. KEISER/AP IMAGES.

Editor's note: It has been 16 years since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people. Refinery29 has chosen to share the voices of women who survived as well as those who lost loved ones so that we may never forget. This story contains details that some readers may find disturbing.

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, New York Police Department Officer Carol Paukner was on a routine assignment patrolling two subway stations in lower Manhattan. Then she got a call for help responding to an "unknown condition" at the nearby World Trade Center.

She bolted up a set of subway stairs, emerging just minutes after the first plane hit.

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"Until I actually saw the plane, [I didn't realize] the severity of the situation," she said.

As everyone else ran away, Paukner ran toward the tower. She was one of the first officers on the scene.

"I saw the first plane hanging out of Tower One, when I was running up to Tower Two," she recalled.

Along with fellow officers, Paukner helped evacuate the building. And then Tower Two collapsed — with Paukner still inside. She suffered serious injuries, but survived. In 2014, she was diagnosed with leukemia. Doctors and health officials told her the illness was related her exposure to toxic substances that day.

— “ —

A lot of people forget about 9/11. They only think about it when 9/11 comes up. All of us, we live 9/11 every day

when we get up.

— ” —

Her case is not unique. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), almost 75,000 people have filed reports of health conditions due to 9/11. More than 5,000 of them [have cancer](#).

Despite the trauma and havoc that day wreaked on her life, Paukner finds it important to talk about what happened.

“I know a lot of people who don’t really want to speak about it. They deal with it in other ways,” she said. “It’s easier for me to talk about it than to keep it inside. It helps me to talk about it.”

Paukner spoke to Refinery29 about her experience, living with the legacy of being a 9/11 first responder, and her hopes for the future of the United States.

You went to work with no idea of what was going to happen. What was a normal day like for you?

“People needing assistance, going to the hospital, you know. Minor injuries. Whatever police officers do, assisting the public. It could be, somebody got robbed in the station, like [by] gun or knife point. You never knew what to expect when you went to work.”

What did you think when you first got the call asking for help?

“They said, ‘unknown condition at the World Trade Center.’ So I answered the call, and when I was running up the road, I saw the plane and I put over, 10-85, 10-13 — that means ‘officer needs help.’ I told them I saw a plane hanging out of the building, and that I needed supervisors to respond.”

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The FBI agent said, ‘We’re under attack. It’s definitely terrorism. If you want to live, you’d better leave now. We’re probably all going to die.’ I said to him, ‘Are you effin’ kidding me?’

— ” —

What did you see when you got out of the station?

“I was running up past the church, and I saw everybody was running away from the World Trade Centers. It was hectic, it was chaos. At the time, we didn’t know it was going to go into a full-blown terror attack.

“It did not set in to me, what was going to be that day, until I was at the base of Tower Two and an FBI agent came up to about eight of us police officers there, evacuating and helping people

that were injured, and the FBI agent said, ‘We’re under attack. It’s definitely terrorism. If you want to live, you’d better leave now. We’re probably all going to die.’

“And that’s when the severity hit in. I said to him, ‘Are you effin’ kidding me?’”

But you stayed.

“I told that FBI agent, ‘I’m not leaving. This is my job, I can’t leave these people.’ I was able to assist and get as many people out of the building as possible.

“You didn’t have time to think; you just reacted. I had a guy come out of the building — his shoulder was totally separated. It was backwards. I said to him, ‘Let me take you to the ambulance, let me assist you.’ And this man, who had all this pain and was in shock, walking, he said, ‘No, you need to help the people who are really injured behind me.’”

— “ —

There was a huge rush of air. It felt like 90-mile-an-hour winds. And I was...holding on, like a cartoon character, to the doorway.

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Did people realize what was happening?

“Oh, I think so. The frantic looks on these people’s faces, I think so. Absolutely.

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“Some people were told to stay in the building, that it was safe, which was ridiculous. When you don’t know what’s going on, you see a plane hanging out of the building, I’d say, ‘We should get out of these buildings.’”

You were actually in Tower Two when it collapsed. What happened to you?

“I was blown through the mezzanine level.

“I was able to grab a door, and I held onto the doorframe when the building was pancaking down. There was a huge rush of air. It felt like 90-mile-an-hour winds. And I was...holding on, like a cartoon character, to the doorway. And people blew by me. And most people died.

“I was able to pull myself down, and there was another officer there — this guy yelling, ‘Grab my hand, grab my hand.’ And him and I huddled [together like] they taught us in school when we were kids. And then him and I crawled out of the building areas after the building came down. We saw the black, black smoke, and then everything was silent. It felt like death.

“We were able to dig ourselves out and crawl through the rubble, and we made it to a street area in front of a Millennium Hotel, and there was a woman standing there. She had her hands out and she was screaming, ‘Where’s my pocketbook? I lost my pocketbook.’ And she was looking

up in the air, and Richie [Vitale], the police officer that I was with, we grabbed her and we basically said, ‘Lady, forget your pocketbook.’ She was just in shock.

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“There were parts of people. It was really a gruesome scene, it was horrible. We were walking through this big, thick — it was black. I heard, ‘Mary, mother of God’ — you know, ‘Help us.’ And I was like, *Wow, I hear somebody talking*. But there was nobody there. It was weird. Later on, I thought it was my father, just, preaching. Like, *Keep walking*.”



PHOTO: COURTESY CAROL PAUKNER.

Carol Paukner, second from left, shortly after freeing herself from the rubble of Tower Two.

What sticks with you about that day?

“The jumpers — my heart goes out to the families. I walked around the building, where I was, and I didn’t know what the noise was. And when I saw my first jumper, I was like, *Oh my god*. I had to keep people underneath the overhang when they were walking out of the building so that they didn’t get hit by people jumping. That was really, really awful. You also have to think, *How bad was it up there that they made a choice to take their own lives and jump?*”

“I’ll never forget the smell. When we talk about it, I smell it. If I go anywhere near it, I smell it. The smell down at ground zero was like the smell of death. That powder, it was all the crushed cement; it was everything in the room you’re sitting in now; it was human remains; it was everything mixed together. Furniture, electronics, all that kind of stuff that has wreaked havoc on all of our health.”

You, like many first responders, have become sick in the intervening years. Tell me about your illness.

“I have been certified through NIOSH [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health] and the 9/11 Clinic for my 9/11 injuries. And one of them is my cancer.

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“[The [Zadroga Act](#)] is a major factor in helping all of us who are suffering from the 9/11 medical effects. Without that, just to walk into [a leading cancer treatment center] is \$15,000. One visit. So you think about all the people who have cancer from 9/11. People can’t afford that, it’s ridiculous. So this clinic is wonderful because it sets you up with medicine and doctors who you’re approved to go to for your illnesses. And you always have somebody to talk to.”

What does it mean to you to carry the legacy of being a 9/11 first responder?

“Just being a proud American.

“I’ve traveled across quite a few of the states. The National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives has a meeting every year, and I’ve done quite a few speeches on 9/11,

just to other police officers to help them and give them knowledge. A lot of people forget about 9/11. They only think about it when 9/11 comes up. All of us, we live 9/11 every day when we get up.”

What can people do if they want to help first responders?

“Pay attention to Congress. To pass these acts, and sign these bills, to [keep our health benefits](#) going.

“Have a little bit more respect for the firefighters, and the police officers. So many cops have died this year. Most people get up and they go to work, and they sit behind a desk, and they’re safe. We put a uniform on to protect all of these people. We don’t take our lives for granted when we go to work.”

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For many young people today, 9/11 is something that happened when they were children and has always been present in their lives. How do you think America has changed?

“Right after 9/11, everyone was so nice. Everybody was united. I think that unity has slowly drifted.

“Now, I think that we just have to be on the lookout for all of these things, watch our back all the time with [the Islamic State group] and stuff, but we can’t stop living. You could walk out your front door and fall down the steps and die, just a have a freak accident. We don’t know when our time is up. Fortunately for me, my time wasn’t up on 9/11.”

What are your hopes for the future of the United States? What do you want people to know?

“I want people to be happy and live life and unite. Be strong for our country. Stick together instead of all this violence. Our country is so violent right now. The mall shootings, the disco shootings. The ISIS bombings. The terror attacks in the movie theaters.

“I’m thankful every day that I’m here. [I want to] educate people, to stop this violence.”

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. It was originally published September 8, 2016.

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KEITH ARMONAITIS · 11 Sep, 2017 · *Edited*

Actually, Carol, I believe what was said to my Aunt was - "Lady forget your effin' pocketbook- we gotta get outta here." I've always wanted to know who the police officers that took care of my Aunt on that day were. Thank you and Officer Vitale for helping her.

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