



Survivors share compelling stories of 9/11 experience

Brian Stobbie (at right) points to where he was located at the time of the 2001 terror attack on the World Trade Center. At left, retired New York Fire Department Captain William Groneman was off duty at the time of the attack, but rushed to be with his “brothers.”

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“I really believe that we must live up to the promise that we made as a nation after 9/11,” Dr. Seabrook Jones, Asst. Professor of History at Schreiner University said at the Weir and Nell Labatt Distinguished Lecture Series held on the anniversary of the terror attacks on the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. “We said we will never forget.”

Jones said the purpose of the “Voices of 9/11” event was planned to keep that promise and continue to tell the story to younger generations so that they will always remember the tragedy, the significance and the heroism of that fateful day.

“This was a day that really changed America,” Jones said, “in ways that we realized immediately and in ways we didn’t come to recognize until years to come.”

On hand to tell their respective stories of how they endured and survived after two commercial airliners crashed in to the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center were businessman Brian Stobbie, who was on the 82nd floor of the first building to be hit; and retired New York Fire Department Captain William Groneman.

Brian Stobbie

Stobbie, an engineer by trade, who was working for the New York Port Authority at the time of the attack on the World Trade Center, gave the audience of more than 200 a visual depiction of what the towers looked like.

He prefaced his talk by sharing how in February of 1993, when a car bomb exploded at the World Trade Center, an important addition was made to the stairwells, which probably saved lives in 2001.

“In 1993, when the bomb went off, killing six people, the power went off and there was no good lighting in the stairwells,” Stobbie said. “It took 10 hours to evacuate that building in 1993, because the stairwells were so bad.”

Tower 1 and Tower 2, Stobbie said, were made up of 110 stories. He said each story was as big as a football field.

“There were two towers, so that’s 220 football fields in those two towers,” Stobbie said.

He said that there was approximately 130 feet between the two buildings and that each building housed 99 elevators, which made up 15 miles of elevator shafts in the two buildings.

“The reason I wanted to share this with you is to give you some sort of physical awareness of what’s going to happen and an idea of what I experienced,” Stobbie said.

He also prefaced his recollection of his experience after the two towers were hit by saying that after the 1993 car bombing of the World Trade Center, security had tightened and lights and fluorescent paint were added to the stairwells.

“On Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, the weather was beautiful in New York,” Stobbie said.

Stobbie said he was late getting to his train on that fateful day. The driver, he said, stopped and let him in.

“I’m at my desk on the 82nd floor at about 8:30 in the morning,” Stobbie said. “At 8:35, I make a phone call from my cubical to a consultant. At 8:47, the building is blindsided.”

He described the crash as a “small explosion and long, murmuring thunder.”

Stobbie said it felt like the building had shifted 12 feet toward the south.

“Shortly thereafter, it rights itself and stops shuddering,” Stobbie said. “There was no loud explosion. It was like a few seconds of thunder.”

Stobbie said he stood up and looked out the window and could see debris floating by the windows.

At first, he said his coworkers and he thought a transformer on a floor above them had exploded, but the debris continued to float by the windows.

“The glass hit the windows and it sounded like wind chimes with no ending in site,” Stobbie said. “It cascades and just keeps coming down.”

He said there were small fires now visible on the ceiling of his floor and he and his coworkers began to evacuate using the stairwell.

“At the time, the 82nd floor was good. Lights were working and the air was clean,” Stobbie said.

He said as he entered the stairwell, it occurred to him that no one above him was coming down.

“I’m on the 82nd floor. There are 28 floors above me filled with people,” Stobbie said. “Where are these people?”

Still, at this time, no one knew what had happened, they just knew that they needed to leave.

“Within five minutes of impact, the stairs are full and we are moving at a slow, but steady pace,” Stobbie said.

When they made it to the 78th floor, he said they received word that the door to the stairwell below them was jammed and would not open.

“The building shifted so much at impact, that the doors had jammed,” Stobbie said.

They made it to the 77th floor and were stuck, so they all headed in to a room together. The air quality was good and the lights were still working, but the debris, he said continued to “cascade down.”

As they left the room, they found another stairwell, but now the air is beginning fill with smoke and there are visible fires.

“We made it to about the 59th floor and were making good progress,” Stobbie said. “It’s now about 9:12 (a.m.). World Trade 1 was hit at 9:02 (a.m.), but we did not know.”

While the parade of the hundreds of WTC employees were trying to evacuate, none of them were aware of the fact that terrorists had flown commercial jetliners in to the buildings, Stobbie said. They were just trying to evacuate the building.

The stairwells were too crowded and there was too much congestion and the evacuees came to a standstill.

“At the 54th floor, I saw the first fireman come up,” Stobbie said. “It’s the first time we saw the outside come inside.”

The average firefighter, he said, had to carry 57 pounds of equipment.

“By the time we reached the 34th floor, the sightings of firemen became much more frequent,” Stobbie said. Stobbie said he volunteered to help a firefighter with his gear.

“As I passed my coworkers, I told them not worry about me, I would be right back down,” Stobbie said.

He said he went back up five flights of stairs with the young firefighter until finally they met up with other members of NYFD.

He said when he reached the 39th floor, he saw two firefighters on their backs, with other firefighters working on them.

“It seemed to me that the ones on their backs had suffered a heart attack,” Stobbie said. “I just wasn’t sure. I asked how I could help and they asked if I could get bottles of water.”

He said he knew the cafeteria was just a few flights above them, so he ascended again and retrieved some water for the firefighters.

“I asked if there was anything else they needed. They said ‘no.’ and I told them I have three kids and I need to get out of here,” Stobbie said. “They said they would be fine and I started my descent again.”

He said the detour took about 25 minutes in total and by this time, Stobbie said, he was on his own and the stairwells were empty.

He made his way down a few floors lower and around 10 a.m., he said he heard a “loud rumble.”

“My building shudders violently,” Stobbie said. “And it’s instantaneously black. No lights. No nothing.”

He said he had approximately six inches of visibility and he was on about the 28th floor.

“The sound was like a subway going above me. The vibrations were terrifying,” Stobbie said. “There’s no more clean air. The smoke filled the stairwell and all the emergency lights are out.”

Stobbie said he still didn’t know what had happened or if he was ever going to make it out of the building.

“But for the fluorescent paint,” Stobbie said. “It was amazing. I could see all of the treads and I thought ‘Oh, my God. I got another shot’.”

At around the 16th floor, he said he heard voices. He was happy because now he was with other people and no longer alone. Stobbie joined the others and was encouraged after making it down a few more flights of stairs, until he heard that another door had jammed.

“I thought this is it,” Stobbie said. “I was not going to get out and see my family.”

He said with no visibility, a firefighter had them line up, holding onto one another. He said the firefighters had them stay up against a wall while he attempted find an exit for them.

The estimated three firefighters led them to an open stairwell and they began to make their way down.

“This was my shot and I flew down those stairs,” Stobbie said. “I get to the bottom of the stairs and I exit at the Plaza level and I’m guessing that it’s about 10:20 a.m. Every window that you saw in that lobby was broken. Everything was gray, and visibility better but not great, and there’s fires everywhere in the Plaza.”

During this time, Stobbie said he realized that it was just him, a fireman and four other people. He wondered where the thousands of people that worked in the WTC and the mall below were.

“The fireman directed us to the north exit and told us to run toward World Trade Center 6, which was across the Plaza,” Stobbie said.

He said WTC6 had a 30-foot eave to protect them from the falling debris.

“You had to get to the eaves, because it was like bombs going off,” Stobbie said of the falling debris and pieces of the building. “It was raining down bombs at the Plaza level and it was loud and it was often.”

Stobbie said it was overwhelming.

“The fireman told us to run as fast as you can and don’t look up,” Stobbie said. “You couldn’t possibly time it. Either you were going to make it or you weren’t.”

Stobbie said nothing made any sense and he didn’t understand what was going on. He said he could see the bottom of his building and “it did not look good. It looked like it was starting to bow.”

As he is running for safety, Stobbie said he heard a voice yell, “She’s coming down.”

“I turn around and see the antennae of the building I just came out of drop, and I hear an incredibly loud noise as my building starts to implode,” Stobbie said. “I thought that she might fall on me. I couldn’t believe that I made it out only to have her fall on me.”

He said he sprinted for maybe 50 yards, where he turned right.

“As I take a right, there’s a huge plume that goes by me,” Stobbie said. “It was so surreal.”

Safe and on the streets of New York City, Stobbie said he learned from emergency personnel what had happened and about the other two planes ... one had hit the Pentagon and the one that crashed.

Stobbie said in 2001 there were not many cell phones, but he found a man who had a cell phone and asked to use the man’s phone to call his wife. He was not able to get through to her. He left and tried to make his way home.

Stobbie said he finally made it to his home around 3:20 p.m., but the man had continued to call his wife until he reached her; and his wife knew he was safe.

“I believe five people from my floor died that day,” Stobbie said. “Shortly before Sept. 11, I was in a meeting with the Port Authority with 20 or so individuals. We reconvened that meeting later in the fall and beside me, there was only one other person that survived.”

Capt. William Groneman III

Groneman said he was off duty on Sept. 11, 2001 and was living on Long Island.

“I was the captain of Engine Company 308 in the borough of Queens,” Groneman said. “That morning, I decided to go to Jones Beach, which is one of my favorite places in the world.”

Groneman said he arrived at Jones Beach at 8:30 a.m. As he made his way down the boardwalk, he was recalling pleasant memories from his childhood and his children’s childhood.

“It was like a mystical experience,” Groneman said. “So I was reliving all these memories and when I look back on it, it was like I was given one look back at my life while things were normal.”

He said he was jogging a little, walking a little and relaxing a little, all while make his way west on the boardwalk.

“In other words, I’m going towards New York City,” Groneman said. “As I get to the end, I look up and see what looks like a mushroom cloud.”

He said he thought there was a large fire in Brooklyn or Queens.

“I thought to myself, I bet the brothers ... the New York City Firefighters call themselves brothers ... and I say, I bet the brothers are having some fun at that,” Groneman said. “But what I didn’t know was, I was looking at the World Trade Center.”

Groneman said he was 25-28 miles “as the crow flies” away from the WTC, so it doesn’t look like two buildings to him.

“I must have seen it within minutes, if not seconds, from the first plane hitting it, because the smoke hadn’t even started to trail off in the wind,” Groneman said.

While he wasn't sure what he had seen, Groneman said something just came over him and he had a sense of urgency about him.

"It was like someone had an iron clamp on the back of my neck," Groneman said. "Something's telling me I've been here too long today. I've got to get back. Something's not right."

He said he picked up his pace and was making his way back to his wife's SUV.

"When I got back close to my car, there was a woman sitting by the boardwalk and she had a portable radio," Groneman said.

He said he heard and remembers only five words ... "Disaster," "Mayor Giuliani," and "thousands dead."

"As soon as I heard that I sprinted to the car and turned on the radio," Groneman said. "I remember thinking this was just like Pearl Harbor and I had a sensation like a steel door had just closed behind me. Everything in the past was on the other side of that steel door."

He recalled becoming very nostalgic, recognizing that life as he knew it had changed.

"I knew what I had to do," Groneman said. "I had to get in to the firehouse and be with the guys. I thought we were under attack and all of New York City was going to be under attack all day and I had to get in to the firehouse."

Groneman said he "drove like a madman" to his house to retrieve his uniform.

"I told Kelly (his wife) I got to get the firehouse. I don't know how many days I'll be gone," Groneman said.

Groneman said he had a sentimental tradition of acknowledging the house where his father grew up as he drove to his fire station.

"I even did that today," Groneman said. "And I even said a little prayer."

Groneman said in his prayer he said he couldn't do anything about those that had already died, but he asked his late grandparents and late father to help him save "whoever was alive right now."

He said he didn't even have time to consider the danger he was going to put himself in.

"My only concern was getting in to the firehouse with the guys," Groneman said. "I got to the firehouse and found out what was going on. The first five off-duty guys that came in after me and I got them."

Groneman said he was told to take his guys and report to a staging area in a park in Queens.

"From there they took us down to lower Manhattan," Groneman said.

After hours of waiting at a command post, they were given an assignment.

"We had on our bunker gear and our helmets," Groneman said. "That's the only gear we had. There were no tools in the firehouse and we couldn't take the tools that were on the rigs, because they needed those for firefighting; and we didn't have any respiratory protection."

Groneman said they started walking down Church Street, straight towards the WTC.

"We didn't know what we were going to do," Groneman said. "We were just going to start digging with our hands if we had to."

At the corner of Church and Murray Streets, Groneman said one of his firefighters got his attention.

"He said 'Hey, Cap. Look over there.'" and there was a jet engine sitting on the corner," Groneman said.

Groneman said the engine belonged to United Airlines Flight 175, which crashed into the second tower.

As they continue toward the WTC, Groneman said they are met with police and firefighters telling them to take cover, as they feared World Trade Center 7 was going to fall.

They made their way inside the Woolworth Building.

"On the second floor of the Woolworth Building, all of a sudden I feel a feeling of vertigo," Groneman said. "I thought the smoke and dust was starting to get to me from outside."

But then another firefighter said, “Why did the whole building just move like that?” Groneman said. “That was when Building 7 came down.”

He met up with a battalion chief who instructed him and his men to relieve an engine company that had been operating since early morning. It was now after 5 p.m.

“We went down by the World Trade Center to relieve them,” Groneman said. “The conditions down there were horrible. It looked like a nightmare. You couldn’t breathe. Your throat burned. Your nose burned and your eyes burned.”

Next to where they were working, a triage center had been set up.

“We went in there to get our eyes washed out, get some water and get some breaths of fresh air,” Groneman said. “Just then I heard a voice come over the fire department radio to get all available fire extinguishers to ‘the pit’ for a rescue in progress.”

They took fire extinguishers from a nearby McDonalds and relayed them to the rubble pile, where firefighters were trying to rescue two Port Authority police officers.

“If you’ve seen the Oliver Stone movie ‘World Trade Center,’ the movie was based on this rescue,” Groneman said. “Maybe a hundred yards up on the pile, there were guys down there trying to free them.”

He described the “rubble pile” as dangerous, made up of twisted steel and wires and pipes.

“You had to watch every step,” Groneman said. “And there were voids under you, so you had to be very careful.”

He said they formed a kind of “bucket brigade” and would pass supplies or send commands up and down the chain of firefighters from the top to the bottom of the pile.

Groneman said that fires surrounded the trapped officers and firefighters were calling for firehoses.

“It was a scary transmission,” Groneman said. “So immediately, a hose line was passed all the way up. After a long time, they actually rescued these two police officers and they passed them down in Stokes Baskets. We stood in two lines, only a couple feet apart, and we passed them all the way down from the top.”

Groneman said Nicolas Cage plays one of the Port Authority officers in the movies.

“If you have seen the movie, one of the officers, I think Nicolas Cage, thanks the firefighters all the way down the pile. That actually happened,” Groneman said.

Groneman said those two officers were the last two people that “made it out alive.”

Shortly after, word came down that off-duty firefighters needed to leave the scene to report for duty the next day.

“Three of my guys had to report the next day, so I sent them on their way,” Groneman said. “That left me with two guys. At this point I was having trouble breathing and I was having trouble answering questions.”

The trio made their way back to the triage area, where a doctor informed Groneman that he had carbon monoxide poisoning.

“He told me, don’t go back on the pile,” Groneman said. “After 12 hours, we returned to the command post and a chief relieved us of duty.”

Groneman said he returned to the “pile” five more times.

He said it took a year to clean up and on the anniversary of the attacks, members of the New York Fire Department formed a circle around “the pit,” which he said was already cleared out and cleaned up.

“At 8:46 (a.m.), which was when the first plane hit, the wind picked up and a dust cloud flew out of the pit,” Groneman said. “It was really strange to see, especially at that time.”

Groneman retired in 2002 and now lives in Kerrville.