



FOR YOUNGER AMERICANS, SEPT. 11 REMAINS DEFINING MOMENT

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Young Americans who were in high school and college during the September 11 terrorist attacks discuss their initial reactions to the event and how 9/11 continues to shape their view of the United States, the world, and their future.

Kevin Gaston had just started his freshman year at Amherst College in Massachusetts in the fall 2001. He was 18 at the time. On Sept. 9, as part of a freshmen orientation program, he and some new friends traveled to New York City, where they stood atop one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center and peered down into the canyon below, otherwise know as Manhattan.

Two days later, on Sept. 11, he was back in Amherst when two hijacked planes crashed into the twin towers. "It didn't frighten me, because I knew that my family and friends and everything were in Georgia." What frightened him, he said, were all the people from New York City at his school who were crying, frantic because phone reception was nonexistent in their small college town and the students couldn't call home.

He had a friend in New York with whom he had been instant messaging (IM) on a computer in the morning. "My friend IM'd me and asked, 'Kevin, why are there people jumping out of the World Trade Center?'" Kevin suggested she try to find answers on the Internet. Twenty minutes later, another plane slammed into the second tower, and she promptly reported this development to her friend.

Sept. 11 was a wake-up call, said Gaston. "It made paranoia when there was no paranoia beforehand."

The emotional fallout

According to one survey, many young adults age 16 to 25 suffered serious bouts of psychological distress after Sept 11. The study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine in 2003 was based on interviews with about 2,900 young people before Sept. 11 and about 4,200 after that day.

Before the disaster, about one of every 10 male respondents reported sadness at least some portion of a week, compared with roughly four in 10 for those interviewed after Sept. 11. Among women, 43 percent reported sadness before Sept. 11 and 53 percent afterward.

That same report also said young people ranked religious faith and spiritual life as more important soon after the attacks. Moreover, respondents interviewed after Sept. 11 were more likely to agree with these statements: "I trust the federal government," "I trust the state government," and "I trust local government."

Making sense of it all

"Everyone rallied around Bush," said Alden Smith, 23. "His approval ratings shot up. [Sept. 11] made people proud of their country, proud of everything that the U.S. stands for."

Like Gaston, Smith was only a week or two into his freshman year in college during the attacks. He had just returned to his dorm from class when he flipped on the TV and learned immediately what had happened.

"My first reaction when it first happened was one of total shock," Smith said. "I couldn't believe something like this could have happened, especially on that scale." There was talk about planes heading to Los Angeles, where Smith's brother lives, so that worried him as well.

Smith said even before Sept. 11, he read the news because of his interest in political science, which he majored in at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The events of Sept. 11 compelled him to read more. He wanted to know where the hate came from and why people would do this.

"And it's still something I can't understand to this day. I think a lot of people struggle in understanding radical, extreme Islam," said Smith, who now works as a legal assistant in Washington, D.C.

At the time, he scoured the Internet to learn more. He wasn't alone. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than 50 percent of 18 to 29 year olds used the Internet to get news about the attacks.

Smith said he still tracks how Sept. 11 is playing out on the global stage, including the American toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, as well as the current U.S. occupation in Iraq, which Smith said has cancelled the U.S. sense of pride in the government and in President Bush that was so palpable after Sept. 11.

False sense of security

Nineteen-year-old Julie Ackerman said she believes the protracted fighting in Iraq has actually endangered America and makes the country feel vulnerable. She remembers that day in high school when teachers and students crowded around the TV, realizing the Twin Towers were gone.

"I couldn't have said it then, but I think now, it really just makes me realize how ignorant we are," she said. "The United States has this idea that we can handle anything, that no one is better than us, that we're better than everybody. And that's just not true. Things do happen and we're not completely safe, and we need to be prepared."

Now a theater major at Whittier College in California, Ackerman said she doesn't worry about terrorism on a daily basis, only thinking about it when someone else raises the subject.

Moving forward with caution

Gaston, who now lives in Atlanta and works in the financial sector, said he isn't anxious either since he doesn't believe Atlanta is a prime target.

Smith, who works for a law firm right beside the White House, said he is not overly concerned because he believes Washington, D.C. is well-protected from terrorism. "I've got confidence in the government's ability to stop it."

Monique Cooper, 21, on the other hand, doesn't feel safe. "I'm not walking on egg shells," she said, but added that she worries racial profiling hinders the government's ability to prevent crimes of any sort.

When the attacks occurred, Cooper was a high school junior with many friends of Middle Eastern descent. "And I noticed right off the bat how they were looked at differently because of the assumption that they had something to do with it," she said.

Stereotyping Middle Easterners and Arabs as terrorists neglects society's real killers, she said, referring to the Washington, D.C. area sniper attacks of 2002. The two men subsequently convicted of murder were not Middle Eastern but black, said Cooper, who is also black.

Security measures are meant to protect the United States, "but when it comes to a point where you're offending your citizens in order to protect your nation, then you're defeating the purpose," said Cooper. "A lot of the effects that [Sept. 11] had on me had to do with how I notice that it affected other people around me."

-- *By Oliver Read, Online NewsHour*

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