

From Austr...

HOME

Article by Alice Hansen

Coming to America in the dawn of 1999 as a UNC Charlotte student athlete, I was a steadfastly proud Australian. Yet, on Sept. 11, 2001, nearly three years later, I felt more American than I ever would have imagined.

The United States has always been viewed as the great "Land of Opportunity," a haven where people of all walks of life may come to achieve their aspirations and strive for greater opportunity.

America has opened its wide arms and welcomed just about anyone who longed for a better life, a safe retreat, or perhaps just an overseas experience. As a child growing up in the land down under, what we knew of America was that dreams came true there, movie stars were made and people did things beyond the realm of human capacity.

Years later, I was accepted to attend college in the States and experience the expanse of American culture for myself. Hence, when America came under attack, it felt like an attack on my very own country.

On that day and those that followed, I sat before CNN like every other person across the country, fearful of what may come next and still in shock at the events that had passed.

Feeling helpless in an apartment in Charlotte, hundreds of miles away from the still smoking New York skyline, my roommate and I decided that we could sit no longer. We had no clue of exactly how we could act but knew that there must be something we could do.

I still recall standing in my pajamas in front of the television Friday morning, three days after the attack, discussing how frustrating it was just to watch it all evolve on television.

By 5 p.m. that afternoon, three Charlotte students, including myself, were on the road and bound to do our part to help out in New York.

Around midnight, we rolled into Washington D.C. where we made a slight detour to visit the Pentagon site. Standing aloft the hill overlooking a midnight display of that gaping hole where the plane had penetrated, still

Standing there amongst countless makeshift memorials and prayer banners, the scene below seemed like a movie set. From the far off screeching of cranes and earth moving equipment, to the tiny flickering candles scattered by our feet, I felt like an extra in the latest movie about the end of the world.

And as part of our New York adventure that I will never forget, the opportunity to write my prayers on the banner that night and sign not only my name, but my country's name, was a moment that touched and will always remain with me.

We drove on through the night, pushing ahead and making the long haul right through to New York. It was the early hours of the morning when we caught first glimpse of the New York skyline, still smoking heavily through the hazy dawn.

Having never been to New York before, the skyline itself was a spectacle to behold. I had never seen a city of that scale and the buildings seemed to span a distance large enough for five cities. Yet with the billowing smoke creating an eerie effect in the morning light, the city took on a whole new personality.

Feelings of anxiety, apprehension and pure adrenaline flooded through my system as we came closer to the heart of the city and began to see the faces of real New York people.

It was then when the entire tragedy struck me hardest. Driving by signs plastered to poles with faces of the missing, and capturing glances of distraught people clearly looking for loved ones, made my heart sink, and reality set in.

I have no doubt that New York is a bustling city at any time of the day or night, but that day we drove along Canal Street, the closest you could drive to Ground Zero, the traffic and people were racing to the sound of a whole different drum beat.

From the expressions on the faces, to the sheer urgency and speed of the emergency vehicles that rumbled by on any side of the road, it was impossible not to sense the fear in the air.

We walked several blocks that day before finding a Salvation Army station down near Ground Zero. For the entire afternoon, we assisted with the distribution of food to the fire fighters and other volunteer workers who had swarmed from across the country to lend their kind hands.

Another moment that touched me too deeply to explain occurred when a weary, dusty fire fighter approached my makeshift table. Holding his battered hat by his side, having just walked up from Ground Zero, his worn out expression told a story that words could not.

Just to hand him a warm meal and receive a tired, "Thank you" in reply was enough for me to know that they were the true heroes. I almost felt inadequate receiving a "Thank you" from someone so brave and so deserving of a thousand thanks over.

After we left the Salvation Army station, having had conversations with many brave individuals, one of whom was in charge of identifying the bodies when they came up from Ground Zero, it was time for us to call it a day. Scott Wolfe, a nearby neighbor had also come to lend a hand and offer his

services at the station. Leaving the team felt like leaving a family, despite having been there just a few hours. For some, however, their day would never end, it would stretch over months to follow.

After leaving the scene, we stopped off at St. Paul's Cathedral to offer our thanks for the safety of our travels and our time in the city.

Stepping foot into that enormous house of God took the breath from all of us.

It was like stepping into another world. From the chaos and anxiety rattling the streets, to the silence and humble safety of those giant walls, it was a haven that breathed security over us all.

For a brief moment in time, everything felt like it was going to be OK. We sat there for quite some time, taking in the serenity and reflecting on what had scarred our memories from the horrific scene that lay just blocks away. Somehow, the fear seeped away and we were rejuvenated with new hope.

Lucky for us, we had God on our side. As we wandered back outside, there stood several police men outside our car with very serious faces as their flashlights navigated the interior of the vehicle.

Apparently we had parked in the Cardinals parking place, the bomb squad was only minutes from being called and we were moments from having the car ripped into shreds. Evidently, we were the latest suspected terrorists of New York. Naively, we just thought we had found a great place to park.

The thousands of volunteers that swarmed that city, the restaurant owners that delivered food for the firefighters, the droves of trucks that brought supplies from across the country and the hundreds of thousands nation wide who offered their full support gave new meaning to the capabilities of the human spirit.

I am a firm believer that while this event proved so tragic, good things came from it. To be in New York at that time is an experience my memory will never let go.

The way that all of America came together like the grandest family on Earth is a credit to this nation, and an act of loyalty for one's country beyond all comprehension.

Even the way other nations from around the world rallied behind the hurting United States makes me realize the immensity of human love and compassion.

I returned from New York as a changed person. When I left I knew I was heading in the direction of something huge, something world changing, but never comprehended the effect it would have on me.

I had never found respect and love for this country as my own. I felt a part of America. I felt her pain, and the anguish of her people. I felt the heartbeat of America, but most of all, I felt the unwavering courage that pulsed through the crowded streets of New York and more largely the country, that



Love this nation, always.