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By Cheryl Ann Wadlington | September 11, 2014

September 11, 2001, started out like any other day in New York City except it was Fashion Week — Spring Collections 2002, in Manhattan. And I was there to cover it for a national bridal magazine and my hometown newspaper. The Q subway roared past the World Trade Center and Statue of Liberty, and into Bryant Park, at 40th and Broadway, by 9 a.m. to see the Liz Lange maternity clothing line show.

Hundreds of members of the international press were standing in line, waiting to receive seating assignments for the Douglas Hanneet show, when security personnel frantically relayed that a plane had just hit the World Trade Center tower.

Twenty-five plain clothed security members began running from all over. Barricades went up in front of all park entrances. In the midst of scurrying around, a well-known fashion-insider jokingly remarked, “If I’m going out, I want to be walking on a fabulous red carpet of some event.”

But there was no fabulous event. Everything about New York had changed. We were told to get out of Bryant Park, and by the end of the day, the fashion tents that once dotted the park were rumored to have been transformed into a triage center.

When I hit the streets of 40th and Broadway, I noticed that people had poured into the streets of Manhattan. They flowed out of office buildings and stores. Folks were running, pushing and knocking each other out of the way.

I walked over to 39th Street where I heard a woman scream, “My brother!” She fainted in the street and a passerby picked her up. I turned to look up over lower Manhattan, the direction that brought such terror to her eyes, and saw thick clouds of smoke billowing from the World Trade Center.

New York had just been attacked. I stopped in my tracks as a feeling of devastation began to set in. My heart was taken by New York years ago. I went to college here at the Fashion Institute of Technology and once lived here for 10 years. Some of the best years of my life took place in New York. Now I saw people, grown men, crying covering their faces with handkerchiefs and scrambling for cell phones to call their loved ones.

One man was completely grief-stricken. I walked up to him and put my arms around him.

There were long lines of people at pay phones a block long; buses were packed to the max. I got on my cell phone and placed 50 calls to no avail. That’s when I took a deep breath, leaned on my faith and went into survival mode. You’re going to get through this, I told myself. I knew that I would, because God had to have His arms around me, guiding me safely to my destination.

I saw a man who had a radio and heard news flashes, stating that all public transportation coming in and out of New York had been halted: The Lincoln Tunnel, New Jersey Transit, Port Authority, New York subway. All bridges were briefly closed. Cabs had disappeared. No one could get in or out of the city, like it was actually under siege.

In the midst of all the commotion, I lost my eyeglasses and the street signs appeared to me in blur — never mind that I was dressed in a feminine pink-ruffled dress and stiletto mules. I stopped in front of a store, wiped off my makeup, loosened my bra, turned my purse into a backpack, and headed for Macy’s department store to buy a pair of reading glasses and sneakers.

In Macy’s, the sales girl was crying over 10 college friends who worked at the World Trade Center. She was making one call after another, trying to find out if they were dead or alive. After comforting her, I told her I had no way to get back to my friend’s residence in Brooklyn. She told me I would have to walk. We would go together. And I realized I would have to face my fear — a fear of heights. She said she did too. We could hold each other’s hand and walk together. By the time I’d purchased my new sneakers, she had left the store.

So I hit the street alone, passing Penn Station where officers with bullhorns directed people past the ambulances, police command centers, city dump truck and fire engines that had filled the streets.

Outside of St. Vincent’s Hospital, I saw a row of gurneys lining the walls, doctors lined up outside to receive the injured, nurses and paramedics running down the street. A woman with a bullhorn screamed for volunteers and blood donations. I saw people in wheel chairs outside St. Vincent’s and turned away.

I didn’t want to see the horrific pain in which they must have been.

I got to a subway station from which an A train had finally been allowed to move. It took me to Fulton Street, where I got off to see letter-sized debris falling from the sky, landing in my hair.

Free buses to Brooklyn began transporting people to their destinations. I made it back to Brooklyn.

The next day, I packed my things and headed for the first subway that would take me to Penn Station.

Lines to purchase tickets to get out of New York stretched the length of the station. I walked over to a ticket machine and hustled to catch the Amtrak to Philly. Yes, I was traumatized by the events. Post traumatic stress had not kicked in. But I knew it was coming, especially when my friends informed me that five minutes before the destruction hit, the subway train on which I'd ridden into Bryant Park on the morning of Sept. 11 had just passed the World Trade Centers — both of the towers which were now gone.

Nothing was the same about New York, or me — nor would it be ever again.

I was determined to triumph over this tragedy. This experience led me to rediscover family and friends, launch a nonprofit organization that empowers girls of color, and in particular, break my hesitance to tie the knot with the man who has loved me for the past seven years.

Yes, from this day forward, I will waste less, love more and celebrate each day as if it were my last.

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