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Alumni War Stories

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The events of Sept. 11, 2001, have left an indelible mark on us all. For some UB Law School alumni, though, the terrorist attacks and their aftermath were felt more deeply because they were so immediate. UB Law Forum spoke with four alumni — two in New York City, two in Washington, D.C. — about their experiences of Sept. 11 and beyond, the impact of the attacks on their lives in the year that has passed, and how their work in the legal system was affected. Their stories are poignant, inspirational and heartfelt; their message is one of resilience and strength in the face of great tragedy.
"What you come away with is the sense that life really is changed forever. I wonder if our children will ever know the sense of freedom and security that we grew up with."

'I watched the whole thing unfold'
Hon. Elena Cacavas Schietinger '85 serves as an administrative law judge for New York State's Public Employment Relations Board. Her office is in Brooklyn, within sight of the World Trade Center location. She lives with her family in the town of Manhasset, N.Y., a half-hour train ride from the city.

"Probably the most dramatic impact," Cacavas says, "was that so many people from Manhasset were killed in the attacks. I heard that the town suffered more losses from that one day than in all the wars combined. They were neighbors, friends, acquaintances. I can remember people going to the train station to see whose cars were still there, because then they knew that those people did not make it home. The fathers of my children's friends were killed; coaches were killed.

"I watched the whole thing unfold. I probably saw it from the closest safe distance. I was driving in to work when it happened. I thought there was an earthquake or something — I do not know whether I felt the impact or heard it.

"The air was full of black smoke, sirens were abundant, police cars were all over the street — and that was in Brooklyn.

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with. But I also now have a profound sense of how lucky we are, how lucky we have been as a nation — how extraordinary the ordinary days are. There has been a real reshuffling of values and priorities.

"In the aftermath, there was such an overall sense of kindness and concern and sensitivity in this whole downstate area. I still see its remnants. I know people whose lives have been affected — oddly enough, positively — because of the perspective it brought to them.

"I gained a new sense of respect for New Yorkers. I was very moved as I watched television and saw that two days after the attacks, people were back on the subways, back in the tunnels, back on the bridges, and carrying on as we needed to do as a nation.

The experience of New Yorkers, she said, was different from that of the rest of the nation. "The whole nation wept, the whole world wept, but being in the epicenter of things had a much more dramatic impact on us than it did on friends and family in Buffalo," she says. "It struck me that when we watch footage of an earthquake in another country, we feel for them and it is moving, but then we go on to other things. That is what struck me about this."

Even with a year's distance, Cavacas says, "I think about Sept. 11 all the time. I do not think I will ever be able to put it out of my mind.

"I think about it when I see the children who have lost a parent. And I see them every day."

"I still get calls from some of the victims. We have now placed close to 113 families with pro bono lawyers throughout the country. We have about 70 estate lawyers, firm-wide, who have rolled up their sleeves."

"We slept on the floor"

Craig D. Bell '83 had a professional role in the aftermath of Sept. 11 in Washington. A tax attorney for the Richmond, Va., law firm McGuireWoods, Bell also heads a team of six tax attorneys for his unit of the Army Reserve, where he serves as a lieutenant colonel and tax advisor to the Army's judge advocate general.

After a hijacked airliner plowed into the Pentagon, his unit went into action to provide legal assistance to the families of the 189 people who died there.

"Some things you will not forget," Bell says. "It was radically different from my usual law practice, sitting here looking over the James River, doing my little tax stuff."

When his unit was mobilized, they set up shop at a Sheraton Hotel about four blocks from the Pentagon, part of the hastily assembled Department of Defense Family Assistance Center. "When we got there, it was going to be just for a day," he says. "We had no changes of clothes. I had no shaving cream. The Red Cross gave us clothes and shaving cream. We slept on the floor. We had two cell phones that had died, no chargers, and no computers."

Despite the hardships, they managed to counsel dozens of family members on estate issues, probate procedures, powers of attorney and death certificates. For families whose lives had been turned upside down, speed was of the essence. "We would get someone from the right states to review it and establish a trust in 48 hours.

We were getting judges to come into the hotel where we were living to do guardianship hearings and hear custody disputes. When you sit down and talk with these victims and their families about getting their personal belongings back — their burned pictures and diplomas — it is a very moving thing.

"I still get calls from some of the victims. We have now placed close to 113 families with pro bono lawyers throughout the country. We have about 70 estate lawyers, firm-wide, who have rolled up their sleeves.

"When I look back at what I have done in 23 years in military service, I have tried practically every imaginable type of case: espionage, murder, drugs. I have done estate plans for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the chairman of the Army. But this was the first time in my career I thought that, as a JAG, I made a difference."

Bell points to one happy event in his own family that came about, indirectly, because of his post-Sept. 11 experiences. Exhausted from dealing with 300 e-mails a day, sitting in a hotel room at 2 a.m., he picked up a book: a history of the 94th Infantry Division, his father's unit in World War II. In the back of the book was a list of decorations awarded to members of the unit, and in the list of Silver Stars awarded there was his father's name: Bell, Thomas L., Sgt.

"I did not know my dad had a Silver Star," Craig Bell says. He called his father the next morning. It turned out the star, and several other decorations, had never been awarded. Bell called Sen. John Warner and arranged for the medals — seven in all — to be presented to his father at last. It never would have happened, Bell said, if he had not sought relief from the overload in a book.

And as for the disaster-relief work: "As a practicing lawyer, I view it as one of the most satisfying events in my entire career. The volume of work, the incredible conditions we were working under, the fragile nature of the people we were dealing with, make that event so unique. When I look back at it now, it worked."
"Trying to stay ahead of the curve"

As principal deputy in the Justice Department's Terrorism and Violent Crime Section, Ronnie L. Edelman '75 found her work shifting into overdrive after the terrorist attacks. The Justice Department, of course, has led the investigation into the attacks, and the department's efforts quickly gained attention and spread throughout the country.

"We have responsibility for certain crisis response functions," Edelman says. "Since this was the largest nationwide investigation the FBI has ever conducted, it had a very significant impact on our office. We went into a seven-days-a-week, around-the-clock mode. That lasted for a couple of months."

One of the things to keep in mind is that while we are responding to what is the most significant terrorist event on American soil, we also have the regular flow of our office — cases pending, investigations under way that need to continue to move along on their own track — and we need to continue to staff those. One of my responsibilities is to make sure these things are staffed.

The department drew on volunteers from U.S. attorney's offices across the country. Most of them have gone home now, Edelman says, yet "the work flow is still above what it was before Sept. 11. We are in the process of hiring additional permanent resources. As with the work of the department as a whole and the FBI, more of our focus is on terrorism and especially on international terrorism. We are also working more on terrorism matters with U.S. attorney's offices around the country. We have regional coordinators who work with all the terrorism coordinators in the U.S. attorney's offices.

"It is more of a constant thing than just reacting to an individual case. It is more of a constant monitoring, trying to stay ahead of the curve ... trying to be more in a preventative mode."

The emotional component of the work — the real human tragedies that her section's staff is trying to prevent — did not much come into play during the aftermath, Edelman says. "We were in such a reactive mode, and so much occupied with the ongoing and unfolding events, that you almost did not have time to think about it," she says. The exception was the death of the wife of the solicitor general, whose phone call to her husband from one of the hijacked planes was played repeatedly by the media: "That really hit home."

For her, the legacy of Sept. 11 is the nation's new attention on terrorism as a real possibility in American life. "Everybody is much more focused on terrorism," she says. "It is very much in the forefront for everyone in the Justice Department."

"It is a huge emotional challenge"

Manhattan trial lawyer Joseph Belluck '94 has been back to the Law School a couple of times since graduation to teach "bridge" courses. Last spring, the course he taught dealt with compensating victims of mass disasters, with a focus on the Sept. 11 victims compensation process.

Belluck, whose firm is Belluck & Fox, is heavily involved with Trial Lawyers Care, or TLC, a project of the New York State Trial Lawyers Association to give free legal representation to World Trade Center victims and their families. "It has been an amazing experience on a lot of different levels," he says. "So far we have matched up 1,000 volunteer attorneys from around the country with 1,000 families who either lost a relative in the Sept. 11 attacks or had someone who was injured in the attacks.

"Obviously many of the people who died and many of the people who were injured suffered huge economic loss to their households. The New York State Trial Lawyers Association and the American Trial Lawyers Association offered to provide free representation to any individual or family who wanted to make a claim against the Victim Compensation Plan." Individual claimants, he says, are required to submit evidence of damages. Belluck says he also has been working on five to 10 claims himself as an individual attorney.

Through the volunteer effort, he says, "basically we make sure that these families are helped financially. Nothing can deal with the emotional trauma, but at least they will not have any financial stresses on them. Particularly the children will get the care and the schooling they need so that their trauma will be reduced."

The whole experience, he says, has brought home to him the idea of the obligation that lawyers have to serve their clients, and "the difference you can make in someone's life. It is a huge emotional challenge to be dealing with hundreds and hundreds of victims of a disaster like this, getting to know them and realizing that each of them has a unique story that is completely individual."

Finally, Belluck says, "I feel that the legal education and training that I got at Buffalo, which in many ways teaches you why you want to be a lawyer, served me very well in the last six or eight months."

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