

A TIME TO REFLECT



Ten years after the devastating collapse of the World Trade Center in New York, we pause to remember the courage and tenacity of the captioners who tirelessly worked to provide access to all the world that day.

By Linda Smolkin

It's inevitable. Whenever a tragic event occurs, we remember exactly where we were when it happened. The more tragic the event, the easier we remember it. You could ask anyone, "Where were you on 9/11?" and they would tell you without hesitation: In a meeting. Driving to work. In line at the grocery store. At my college psychology class.

At the time, many of us remained calm, awaiting any type of news. Others waited anxiously to hear from loved ones who worked in lower Manhattan or at the Pentagon. In the hours and days that followed, we were shocked by the images on television and the reports that accompanied them.

Ten years later, we remember 9/11 all too well. We not only remember the thousands who died in the attacks, but the families and friends who lost them. Looking back, we also remember the round-the-clock efforts of captioners, who allowed the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities, as well as thousands of travelers stuck at airports, to follow the tragedy as it unfolded. It might have started as a regular reporting day for captioners already at work or on their way. Instead, they signed up for one of the longest working weeks of their careers.

COLLEAGUES IN ATLANTA

For Heidi Thomas, RDR, CRR, CBC, who works at VITAC in Atlanta, Ga., it started out pretty much like any other day. Thomas, a court reporter for more than 30 years and a CART provider/realtime captioner since 1989, was in the studio on air captioning *Live! with Regis & Kelly*.

"We came back from commercial to the sight of the first tower on fire. I called VITAC Headquarters in Pittsburgh and was told to stand by for instructions. Finally, I found out around 1 p.m. that we'd be on air for NBC from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m."

To stay on air, Thomas' studio had to set up an A/B switcher after the satellite died. They didn't want any gaps in captioning, so they wrote in two-hour periods. They even set up a room with an air mattress, so captioners could rest during their shifts. Thomas adds, "We were on air during these twelve hours for three nights, then an additional three hours on Friday morning. I was both mentally and physically exhausted. I was so overwhelmed by the amount of disturbing information that I cried through most of the *Today Show* Friday morning. The entire show was people holding up pictures of missing loved ones."

When asked if she has thought a lot about her experience over the months and years that followed, she says, "I have thought about it many times. I even developed a seminar on vicarious traumatization that I presented at various state and NCRA conventions."

What really helped Thomas was the captioning community around the country. Within hours of the event, VITAC's phone rang with captioners offering their help with coverage. And, of course, they provided emotional support. Through it all, Thomas has always kept her thoughts positive. "It was a traumatic experi-

ence but also gratifying knowing I was able to contribute somehow. So instead of feeling helpless, I was able to concentrate on my ability to help."

For Thomas' colleague at the Atlanta office, Judy Brentano, RPR (Ret.), it was a confusing situation at first. What were we witnessing? How could two planes hit the towers? Brentano adds, "Then it switched to D.C. and to Pennsylvania with the other planes. It became surreal that we were going to be involved peripherally in one of the biggest news events of our lives. And it involved terrorism."

She recalls Thomas yelling out for her, a type of yell that made her think something was horribly wrong in caption studio one. That day, Brentano held one of the most important roles — managing the situation. She provided support and meals for captioners who rotated through the many hours. When asked what she thinks about ten years later, Brentano remarks, "We have friends who were physically involved in 9/11. Those folks cannot even look at a newspaper or turn on a TV on September 11. What I think about is the 48 hours our Atlanta team hung together."

DEDICATION AND PATIENCE

To say that VITAC headquarters in Pennsylvania is busy would be an understatement. It's a 24/7 nonstop operation. But, September, 11, 2001, was no ordinary day. Kathleen (Kathy) DiLorenzo, RDR, CRR, CBC, remembers walking into work that morning and noticing most of the staff hovering over TV monitors. "The first person I saw was our CEO, Joe Karlovitis, [RDR (Ret.)]. He said to me, 'Kathy, brace yourself. This day will go down as one of the worst days in the history of our country'. I looked up to see the World Trade Center burning. By that time, both towers had been hit."

DiLorenzo adds that it wasn't your typical breaking news story. "No one — even the news bureaus and government officials — knew yet what happened and, more importantly, what would happen next. Like the rest of Americans, we watched it unfold on television, but we were doing our jobs at the same time."

Doing her job was difficult at times because of where she lived in relation to the location of the fourth plane. "Officials had tracked it [the plane] over Pittsburgh. My children's school was within a few miles of Pittsburgh International Airport. The school was in lock-down, students were assembled in the halls with books over their heads. Once it was reported that the plane had crashed in Shanksville, our children were released from school. My neighbors knew I couldn't leave the office, so they took care of picking up my children."

Though she couldn't be with her family that day, she was fortunate to be working with a dedicated team who really pulled it together both emotionally and professionally. Now, looking back, she doesn't think so much about captioning the event as much as the event itself. "I think about the lost lives, the survivors, the orphaned children, and the rebuilding of both structures and lives."

For those who lost family, friends, and loved ones on September 11, 2001, we think of you. For captioners who helped carry the news throughout our country and the world, we thank you.



Ironically and memorably, September 11, 2001, was the next-to-last event that I would ever caption, ending a 15-year active captioning career.” Her last captioning event: The one-year anniversary of 9/11.

Karen Ruud, CRI, NCRA’s Director of Education & School Development, was manager of the Realtime Captioning Department for the National Captioning Institute on that day. “I had just dropped my daughter off at school in Fairfax County and was driving to the office, listening to the radio. The first plane hitting the towers seemed like an accident. When the second one hit, I knew something big was happening.”

She immediately called NCI’s Technical Center to ask the engineers to start calling the captioners. Karen and her colleague, Darlene Parker, then began hours of rescheduling the captioners to do half-hour turns, to prevent fatigue. “We ended up going commercial-free for four straight days on multiple networks, sleeping on cots in the office when we were exhausted. The captioners around the country were amazing — calling in to offer their assistance. I think we all felt a little numb, watching this tragic video as we captioned, but everyone’s professionalism kicked in so we could do our jobs.”

When the plane crashed into the Pentagon, the children at her daughter’s elementary school were brought inside and told that there was a swarm of bees on the playground. “Some of the heroes on that day were the teachers at the area’s schools whose spouses worked at the Pentagon, who had to wait to try to contact them until all of our children were taken care of.”

NCI captioned ABC from 4 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the time, with VITAC covering 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. Just as the captioners all pulled together to support each other on that day, NCI and VITAC had a conference call to coordinate their efforts in keeping captions on the air. Says Ruud, “Since the station origination point for several of the networks was in New York City, we knew that if we dropped a phone line, we might never get connected again. We had VITAC’s captioners come through our technical center that first day, so that we wouldn’t have to disconnect the phone lines. Everyone worked together and shared a common goal.”

HEARING THE NEWS ABROAD

For one of our captioners, it was Tuesday evening when she first

heard the news. Down under in Sydney, Australia, Cynthia Liane Tomlinson, RMR, CRR, CBC, was near the end of her three-month job assignment with the Australian Caption in Sydney, Australia, when the tragic event occurred. “I stood up to leave and, suddenly, all of the studio television feeds switched to live footage of a smoldering World Trade Center. I sat back down and began captioning and captioned until about 5 a.m.”

Tomlinson, who worked a nine-hour shift just before the attack, captioned for another six. She admits the hardest part was the amount of hours she captioned straight through. And it was more difficult because of her profession. “The toughest part of this job in general is that you can’t just turn the TV off and walk away. That’s what I would have done as a viewer. It was all too much.”

When asked how Australians reacted toward her as an American, Tomlinson remarks, “When I arrived (for my assignment), I had a sense of some hostility toward America. After 9/11 there was a sincere expression of sadness and concern. It was then that I saw the original hostility I felt as more of a sibling rivalry than a true, deep-seated dislike for America or Americans.”

Even though 9/11 was shocking, Tomlinson has never thought about leaving captioning. “I’ve been in the industry for 15 years and I think it’s the accumulation of years and years of tragic events that wears on me. I do my best to balance the kind of programming I do and try to take more neutral events, such as sports, to get a break from the inundation of negativity.”

CAPTIONING FROM HOME

For some, the hardest part is separating their own emotions from doing the job. But Patty Dabbs-Nelson, who works from home in the Los Angeles, Calif., area, knew so many people were relying on captions to get the news that she wanted to do the best job she could. As a realtime captioner for VITAC, Dabbs-Nelson, who has been captioning for 16 years, got a call from work to jump on a local station in New York. At the time, she didn’t have a television in her home office, so she could only get information from the audio on her headphones. “Every break I had, I would turn on my TV to see what was happening. I was so completely sad and sick to my stomach.”

When it was time to get to work, she focused on getting information out to people. “Any tragedy has its victims, and it is just

as important to do a good job for those events as it was for 9/11. If anything, I think captioning 9/11 really made me understand how important doing a great job is for so many people who rely on captions.”

When asked how the 9/11 captioning experience is different from other tragedies, Dabbs-Nelson remarks, “9/11 felt much more personal. Most tragedies I caption, although I can empathize, are clearly happening to someone else. This felt like it was happening to every American.”

Those who captioned out of their home offices didn’t have time — or the desire — to get distracted. Holli Lea Herrin from Bondurant, Iowa, worked for the National Captioning Institute and clocked in ten hours that day. Herrin comments that the sheer volume of hours and demands for realtime captioning was the hardest part since everything was changing from moment to moment. Captioners sometimes know ahead of time news they’ll be reporting but they have to wait until they’re given the go-ahead to caption it. With this tragedy, that wasn’t the case. Herrin adds, “Most events that happen, they just keep rehashing but with this, we were finding out as much as the news people knew at the time. The pictures were more horrifying than anything I’ve seen to this day, and I’ve captioned a lot of terrible news stories over 20 years. I still find it hard to watch to this day.”

After the initial shock, Julie Layton, RPR, a realtime captioner from Mechanicsburg, Pa., knew she had a job to do. “I remember telling myself to focus now and start crying later.”

Layton was three-months pregnant when she was captioning the tragedy. Ten years later, she feels as if it was just yesterday, still in disbelief that it has been that long. “I look at my son who is now nine and in third grade and know that he was not yet born and did not witness 9/11. He will only read about it in history books in school or online. And I think of how much has changed in my life, personally and professionally, in how we caption now compared to back then. Whenever they have a story about 9/11 on the news, I try to avert my eyes just in case they show video from that day. I don’t need to see it again as it is a memory that will never go away.”

NEVER FORGOTTEN

Amy Bowlen, RDR, CRR, CBC, describes the VITAC headquarters as quiet and subdued. They were transfixed, all standing and watching the televisions. But then things got moving. “Very quickly, we had to focus on the technical aspects of getting captions on air for networks/stations that we wouldn’t have been captioning for at that time of day, maintaining the active connections we already had on air, and scheduling for 24-hour coverage for an uncertain period of time.”

Bowlen adds that she had a hard time disconnecting herself. “I captioned at work, listened to the news in the car, and watched it at home all of the time. I think I was hoping to hear something positive — a survivor found, assurance it couldn’t happen again.”

Throughout the following months and years, Bowlen hasn’t focused on herself personally or her experience captioning the event. “To me, those days were all about the people directly affected, those who died and lost loved ones, and about our country. Sometimes I felt guilty about my sadness because I hadn’t lost my loved ones.”

When asked what pulled her through this experience and helped her deal with the tragedy, Bowlen answers with one word: Time.

Time. When it comes to grief, people say time heals. Often this saying is true, that with the years following a tragedy, a person’s pain eases with the passing of time. But we also know that time can only heal so much. For those who lost family, friends, and loved ones on September 11, 2001, we think of you. For captioners who helped carry the news throughout our country and the world, we thank you. **JCR**

Linda Smolkin is NCRA’s part-time writer/editor. She can be reached at lsmolkin@ncrahq.org.



In the months after the disasters, NCRA collected stories from some of the captioners who worked on captioning the 9/11 coverage. You can view their stories at http://ncraonline.org/NCRA/archivednews/archives_2009/090911/911stories.htm.

THOUGHTS ON BIN LADEN’S DEATH

On May 2, 2011, breaking news reports announced the death of Osama bin Laden, the long-hunted leader of al-Qaeda, which claimed responsibility for hijacking the four planes on 9/11 and the ensuing devastation. A few of the captioners who reported on 9/11 also reported the news of bin Laden’s death, so we asked for their comments.

I was scheduled that night to be on standby for NBC coverage. I received a phone call at 10:15 p.m. that I needed to dial in because they could be going to breaking news at any minute. Bin Laden had been killed. I asked if we had killed him or if he had died some other way. No one knew anything at that point. After ten years and bin Laden seemingly becoming a footnote in the war on terror, I was stunned. I was waiting for about 35 minutes before NBC started their breaking news coverage and it was the longest 35 minutes! It was hard sitting at home, glued to my chair, knowing what was about to be announced to the country, and not being able to tell anyone. As I captioned the coverage and learned what happened along with the rest of America, I was proud of our country and of our president. I experienced a sense of closure that I hadn’t expected to feel.

Cynthia Liane Tomlinson

I was captioning at the time the news broke about bin Laden’s death, and it came through as breaking news. I had mixed emotions about this. I don’t think anyone’s death is to be celebrated, but there was a sense of relief that this man can never again cause harm.

Patty Dabbs-Nelson

I felt a lot of patriotism for our country that morning, and I think a small sense of closure for the families affected that day. Even though I live 1,000 miles away from the East Coast, it’s affected all of us in some way.

Holli Lea Herrin