

Remembering 9/11: The day our world changed

By Nancy Blackmon

From the street corner of his New York City neighborhood, Sean Sellers watched black smoke pouring from the top third of one of the World Trade Center buildings on the morning of September 11, 2001. As he watched, he heard a second explosion and saw debris glittering in the sky around the buildings.

In the hours that followed, he recorded his feelings as he lived through a history-making tragedy. He shared those thoughts with his mother, Meg Sellers who lives in Opp, and with Star News readers.

Now five years later, he, like the city itself, lives with the scars of that September day, but both are moving forward.

"My fondness for the fall season is not eclipsed by the reality of 9/11," he said. "My memories of school, fall foliage and football precede the episode that is today September 11."

Near the end of that tragic day, Sellers wrote these words in his journal.

"From my vantage point, I was far enough away that I could not see people falling and jumping. I think if I had seen that firsthand, it would have ruined me."

While the events of 9/11 did not ruin his life, they did change it forever in ways he could not have imagined when he was putting his thoughts on paper. In the days after the attack on the World Trade Center, everything changed drastically for Sellers.

"The days following September 11, 2001 brought to my life a very new reality," he said. "I was working for a prominent hotel chain, four weeks earlier I was named Senior Project Manager of Renovations. As the dust settled, downtown from my office on 58th Street, management revoked my budget agreement."

Ten days later, Sellers was out of a job because of losses the hotel industry suffered after September 11.

"Occupancy for successful hotel operation is 60 percent occupancy; we dropped to a devastating six percent that week," he said. "I was laid off. The entire city was overwhelmed; the very foundation of this city was in shock."

It was a shock that did not end quickly, one that will perhaps never completely go away. Sellers found himself in a situation that was both frightening and frustrating. "There were few jobs to be had during the devastation," he said. "I was out of work for eight months."

Still, he realizes that his loss does not compare to what so many lost that day, not only in New York City, but also at the Pentagon in Washington D.C. and in a deserted field in Pennsylvania.

"When I take a moment and look inwardly at the last five years, I lower my eyes out of respect for the lost," he said. "I think about every aspect of everyday after 9/11. It is only in the last year or two that it is not in the forefront of my mind."

The changes in his life caused Sellers to reevaluate a great many things and look at where he wanted to go.

"The question resurfaced last year, what do I really want to do?" he said. "My professional direction changed after 9/11."

As he read online job advertisements, he saw an ad for a licensed tour guide. "With 15 years (living in New York) under my belt, I have concentrated the last eight months studying New York City, and American history," Seller said. "I passed my licensing exam." Now as a licensed tour guide, Sellers shares with visitors what he learned about the city as well as his love for the place he calls home.

"I have a wonderful job where I tell a story about the history of Radio City Music Hall," he said. "I walk visitors through the Art Deco Interior Landmark. My architectural education is on showcase as I tell the story."

Sellers, credits his mother for his storytelling ability and views his life as a tribute to her.

"Storytelling is a gift and I get this gift from my Mother," he said. "My Mother is a wonderful storyteller; I honor her doing something I enjoy."

Five years ago as he used words in a journal to try to come to terms with living in the midst of an unimaginable disaster, he knew life was not the same as it had been at the start of that sunny September day in 2001. He shared his emotions as he talked about recording the events of that day in his journal.

"My thoughts and prayers, of course, go out to everyone closer or more involved in the site than I was," he wrote. "I saw enough and my life will be forever changed."

Then he did what so many Americans did - he reached for hope and for a sense of community.

"... My desire now from all compassionate Americans is to take a moment and reflect on what has happened and ask yourselves what action do you want to see," he said. "Please do not act in vain and do not ask the United States to act in vain. Fear is a tremendous motivator, but fear can manifest itself as a reflex and can do more damage than good for the whole."

Now as the country observes the anniversary of the day that changed it perhaps forever, Sellers also remembers what none of us will forget.

"Five years ago I was unaware that I had a voice," he said. "The fear, actually the lost phone connection with my family after the towers fell made me realize so many things. How vulnerable we all are for one."

Still, he remains hopeful and his feelings for his adopted home have not changed. For him, the words he wrote about New York City on that dark day are just as true today. "The skyline has changed forever, but my heart has not. I still love New York City."

Sean Sellers grew up in Opp and graduated from Auburn University. He is the son of Meg and Lloyd Sellers who still call Opp home.