



9/11 Remembered by an Italian American Firefighter

Natasha Lardera (September 09, 2011)



It is the most common question when talking about September 11, 2001. Where were you that day? Richard Roccabruna was at Ground Zero as one of the first responders looking for his fellow coworkers and possible survivors.

On his father's side, his family is from Fornace, a comune (municipality) in Trentino Alto-Adige, on his mother's they are from Sicily, but he does not remember the name of the town. He is proud of his origins but he speaks no Italian. Richard Roccabruna, has been a firefighter with the FDNY for 12 years and he has many stories to tell. We are interested in one story.

On September 11, 2001 he was only 31 years old and had been working for the FDNY for only one year.



"The morning of September 11 I was done with work. I had worked 24 hours straight. As any other day I drove back home to Greenville, NY. I needed some peace and quiet so I kept both the radio and the cell phone off. An hour and a half later, when I finally got home I had 20 messages. I had no idea what had happened but realized it must have been serious. I turned the TV on and took it all in. There was a mandatory citywide recall for firefighters to go back to the city. So I had to drive back. I waited for hours to be dispatched, so I did not actually get to Ground Zero before the end of the afternoon. There were too many people there, and they had to get things organized."

"There were areas where we were not allowed. They used the cameras that were set up on buildings to look for movement or other. If they caught anything we would go digging. I ended up staying there for days, I could not really tell when one day started and one ended... it felt like one extremely long one... I would take small breaks of one or two hours at the most. In a week we went from 'Search and Rescue,' to 'Recovery,' basically we went from looking for survivors to digging out dead bodies."

"I didn't really watch TV or how the news were covering the events. I had no time to do that. The little I saw was pretty close to what we were experiencing firsthand. One thing I noticed is that on TV they showed pieces of furniture and even recognizable objects. I did not see anything, big or that was still recognizable, all I saw was rubble, everything had been crushed to dust."

"I can't recall anything vividly, every day is branded into the next one. I remember people coming to me to thank me for my help or to offer donations or help of some sort... water, food, words of encouragement. What impressed me the most was driving down the West Side Highway. It was crowded with people lined up to show their support with signs of support, clapping and cheering."

"I remember that for days afterward I was always nervous when I had to drive over bridges. I would always look up at the sky for planes as I heard there were threats of attacks to the bridges. I never had problems sleeping or anything like it, everybody deals with things their own way. I had a one year old son, and my wife was eight months pregnant. I focused on my family and taking care of my children. I did not want to get upset but just take care of them."

"You get numb after dozens and dozens of funerals. The funerals started right away, I disconnected myself and tried to keep going. You got to do what you got to do."

"The celebrations of the first anniversary were held at Madison Square Garden. It was organized by the City and it was open to all firefighters. Every year after that we organized something ourselves, and this year it is not going to be any different. First we all meet for breakfast at the firehouse, then we go to a Memorial Mass at St. Francis of Assisi church on 31st street. The first couple of years some of the family members of the coworkers we lost that day were participating but there is nobody left now. One family moved to Florida right after, another firefighter was single and at the time his mother was already elderly, some of the older guys with the department have retired, nobody really comes along anymore."

In response to a controversial report posted by the New York Daily News on August 13th that stated that "First responders will not be invited to this year's 9/11 ceremony at Ground Zero. That's the word from city officials who say there isn't enough room for the tens of thousands of firefighters, police and other rescue workers. According to the Daily News report, security issues and making sure that all of the victims' families will be able to participate in the 10th anniversary of 9/11 contributed to first responders not being invited to the ceremony," Richard has to say, "We were not told not to go but we also did not receive an invitation, so we just will do our usual thing. Nothing really changes for us."



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