



'The fear was in what this world had become'

Dr Ami Dave, one of the first physicians to attend to victims after 9/11, remembers that day.

George Joseph reports

I did my residency training in Boston, and I had moved into my apartment in New York City the last week of August 2001, to start work at Bellevue Hospital's Emergency Department.

September 10, I worked my first overnight shift at Bellevue and finished my shift at 8 am, September 11. I walked to my apartment, made some breakfast and turned on the TV — only to see the unbelievable. It didn't look real. I thought it was a TV movie and it took me a few minutes to realize that it was real. All lines to the emergency room at the hospital were busy. I immediately put my scrubs on and walked back to the hospital. There were hundreds of people on the street on their cell phones, but I still did not know exactly what was going on, until I reached the ER.

I felt totally numb. Our disaster team was immediately activated and it was amazing how many people pulled together to help. I was one of the physicians who helped pack one of the ambulances with anticipated supplies (pain medications, inhalers, etc). Normally, to order a dose of morphine, it takes a lot of written and verbal orders. That day morphine was being dispensed like candy.

When I arrived at the once so familiar site, it became unfamiliar. I could not recognize anything. Everything was quiet and white.

All I could think about was my dad. For 25 years, he had worked at the World Trade Center on the 91st floor. In 1993, I remembered receiving a call from my mom that there was a bombing in the WTC garage and my dad was in the building. At that time, I remember calling the WTC missing person line, praying. Luckily, my dad had climbed down 91 flights of stairs, and was safe. Since then, I had always wanted him to retire, and he did, just two years before 2001.

The WTC was my pride. Since I was a little girl, I was proud that my dad worked there, and I would brag about him to everyone. He had come here from India, not knowing anyone, and had achieved his own success as a first generation Indian. I was so proud of him. I would visit him all the time, surprising him in his office on various occasions, unannounced. However, things changed after 1993. Now, I had to sign in and announce myself, when I went to visit him. That was the 1st time I felt the effect of terrorism in the US.

And then, eight years later, that feeling of fear hit again. My grandmother raised me to be strong and courageous. But when I first went to Ground Zero, deep inside I truly was scared. Yet when I got there I realized there was nothing to be scared about. Instead, it was just sad. The fear was not about the site; the fear was in what this world had become.

One of the saddest things that first day was that the ambulance was filled with tons of morphine, but there was no one left to use it on. We even set up a resuscitation area, but we had no patients. We ended up treating mostly workers and firefighters at the site, for inhalation and eye-related exposures.

One part of me has always been fascinated by television coverage on medical issues. But during 9/11, I saw a side of the media that really disturbed me. When I, and the other medical personnel would leave the site, there would be a



PETER MORGAN/REUTERS

Firemen work around the World Trade Center after both towers collapsed in New York



Dr Ami Dave with her father who worked at the World Trade Center, seen here in 1999

COURTESY: DR AMI DAVE

line-up of reporters trying to get information, understandably so. However, I was already so distraught that I didn't want to talk to anyone.

What bothered me the most was what the reporters wanted to know; newspapers, TV and the public, unfortunately, are fascinated by others' tragedy.

Reporters were not interested in what help we were providing or if we saw any survivors; they wanted to know if we saw death; and they wanted it to be descriptive. Someone else's horrible loss was their financial gain.

On one of our family trips we visited the Tower of

London. I saw the Kohinoor diamond, and thought, 'Wow, this was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.' My mom told me the story of how the famous Indian diamond was seized by the British. I will always remember that story, because I felt so violated.

The WTC soared as one of America's most precious jewels, as well as my family's. Now, this was taken away from us. And I once again felt violated.

That day also changed my definition of fear. I thought that my biggest fear was going to be running the emergency department as a sole supervising doctor. That was no longer my biggest fear.

A week passed, then two, and I guess I started getting used to things.

Ten years later, I am married, and have two children. I look at what a different world my children will grow up in.

But all of the 911 experience was not negative.

It showed me and the world, how courageous we are, and how we truly are a 'United' States of America. Though I was born here, I consider myself Indian and Hindu first. That's because, as a culture and religion, I find it to be unified and welcoming. But for the first time, I saw unity, warmth, and open arms of welcoming and help in the US.

It was such an amazing force felt by all Americans, of coming together as one.

I only hope that my pager never beeps again with a Disaster Call.

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