



**I**t's hard to believe 10 years have passed since the world-altering day the Twin Towers fell and America fell to its knees with them.

It has been eight or nine years since retired Lexington Division of Police Chaplain John Welsh last opened his box of momentos he brought home from his service at Ground Zero. Yet, as we approach the 10-year anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, Welsh recently allowed us to go through some of his memories with him, remembering those Americans who were lost in the horrific tragedy.

Nestled in his box were a gas mask, gloves, countless photos and his Port Authority identification card, still strung on the lanyard he wore during his service there following the terrorist attacks. >>

PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

# HEALING WORDS:

Retired Lexington Division of Police Chaplain John Welsh Talks About Post-9/11 Service at Ground Zero

KELLY FOREMAN | PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

>> Some items stirred repressed emotions, like the Lexington police cap still coated with the thick layer of white dust that had covered the city. Or a single piece of unwritten letterhead, its edges burned, bearing the Fuji Bank logo with its address, 2 World Trade Center, a building that was no more.

As Welsh sat in his living room, fingering the gloves and brushing the dirt from his cap, each item brought to him a story. Memories of the people he met, the things he saw, and the tears that were shed.

One week after al-Qaida terrorists flew two jet airliners into the 110-story

buildings, Welsh, who also served Lexington as the head of its Critical Incident Stress Management Team, was asked to travel the 700-mile journey to New York to help his fellow public servants in distress. While he will tell you his service there was minimal, Welsh's reminiscing about the people he met tells otherwise. His stories about the survivors, who shared with him their wounds and how their lives had been ripped apart much like the marred steel they were there to work through, speak volumes about the roles he played.

**What were you doing when the first plane struck the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001?**

We had a rock and roll band of police officers — the DARE 911 Band — and we played at schools and stuff. We were at rehearsal that morning and Officer Debbie Wagner, who was in community services at the time, her phone rang. Her husband told her an airplane had hit the World Trade Center. And we were thinking, 'Oh, some poor guy in a Cessna got off track.' We really didn't think much more about it. We kept rehearsing, then he called her back and said another plane hit the World Trade Center. Then the room just took on a whole different feel. All units were put on alert and we all took off out of there. I remember that very distinctly.

**Was there a difference after the attacks that you noticed in your agency or co-workers?**

Absolutely. We were all on alert, because at that time we were all asking, 'Is another attack imminent? Are these going to happen all over the United States?' I remember everybody being on edge.

**How were you selected to assist at Ground Zero following the attacks?**

I got a phone call two days later asking if I would be willing to come to New York and help out. To this day I can't tell you exactly how that happened or how they knew about me. It was not because I was a chaplain, but because I was part of a critical incident stress management team. I went up on Sept. 19 and worked for a little more than two weeks. I didn't know much about anything before I got there. They just told me what to pack, what to bring — it was one short phone call. I had to get permission from the chief, then when I got up there, I literally hit the ground running.

**What was your response after getting this phone call asking you to drive to New York to help after the terrorist attacks?**

I couldn't believe it. First of all, that they had just found me. The first phone call I

† John Welsh talks about the thick dust that lingered in the air around Ground Zero, that even 10 years later still is embedded in the fibers of his Lexington Police cap.

“  
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received, they called and asked if they could put my name on a list for people to come up. I said, 'Yes.' They said they were going to be doing this for months, maybe years, so they said, 'We don't know when or if you'll get a call back, we are just looking for people who are CISM trained.' Then I got a call a few days later and they said, 'When can you come?'

**With three young children at home, how did your family react to you traveling to New York City in a time of such uncertainty?**

Once I got asked to come, there was so much, 'Hurry up, you gotta get going,' and that kind of thing more so than, 'We're going to sit around and philosophize about this thing.'

**Tell me about arriving in New York City and what you were there to do.**

When I got there, the first thing they did was make you an ID.

They had their little lamination machine there and they made my ID, and it was still warm in my hand from being out of the machine when somebody came in and said, 'We need somebody to go work at the morgue, who is our fresh meat here?' And I was it. I jumped in a cruiser with this NYPD lieutenant and he took me down to their outdoor morgue. I swear, it looked like something from the Civil War. It was just in between two buildings and it was tents next to Bellevue Hospital. He said, 'Here you go.' I opened the door to get out and realized he was still rolling, he never stopped. I just jumped out and he was gone. I didn't know how I was going to get picked up, who I called, I had nothing. At that time, we still didn't have cell phone service in that area, so it was just like, here we go. That was within 45 minutes of my arrival.

So, I was down there at the morgue and I helped tag body parts and load them into body bags then into refrigerated trucks. I never saw a complete body — I never saw anything larger than a torso. I spent four or five hours doing that, then somebody came looking for me. And, I never went back to the morgue again. I thought I was going to be there all

night long. The next day I started working at the site and I worked there most of the time.

The first thing they did with everybody there was take you on a tour so you would get your bearings and kind of know where you are, how to get out, how to get in — because there was so much rubble, there weren't clear pathways or streets anymore. On this tour, they needed you to just go ahead and let your jaw hit the ground and say, 'Oh my God.' And just stand there for awhile and take it in, rather than try to put you right to work. Because you're going to do that at some point. It just looked like some giant had stepped right in the middle of Manhattan. It changed every day because of the amount of debris that was moved out. The whole thing morphed and was just a little bit different all the time. It never just had the same look to it. They called it the pile then, it was always 40-feet high or more while I was there. When I would see it later on TV, then it became a pit, I thought, that is not even familiar to me. That's not my experience at the place.

After that, we just started working. There was a guy named Roland Kandle who was in charge of New Jersey's Critical Incident Stress Team and he was running the show. He was a super guy — highly organized, very effective. He gave everybody a nickname. My nickname was Kentucky, because they couldn't believe somebody had come from Kentucky and couldn't believe we actually had a police cruiser there. I got a whole lot of curious looks and strange comments about Lexington, Ky., because nobody recognized it.

**You had been in law enforcement for 11 years when the World Trade Center was attacked by terrorists. Was there anything in your career that you feel prepared you for what you saw at Ground Zero?**

No. It was completely different. I was only a patrolman for six years before I became chaplain. I saw a few bad fatalities, but certainly not as much as what a traffic unit would work. I was a third-shift patrolman the whole time I was on patrol, and I was downtown. There are fewer fatalities downtown than out in some of the outlying areas. I saw a few shootings. But no. The whole environment was just completely different than anything I had ever >>



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

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>> been a part of. Everything was new, no matter what it was.

**Can you explain how it was different?**

For one, an outside morgue is certainly different than anything I had ever seen. I had been to a morgue. I had been to an autopsy. The whole thing usually is very clean and sanitary and in a secluded area. I wasn't used to working with body parts while you're hearing horns honking 15 feet away.

I became a utility man, errand boy — anything they asked, you did it. It was very much a servant role there, which is why we did it. That's why we went up there. And sometimes you didn't know how to do your job, but there was no time to ask. You just go do your best. So, it was different. And the opportunities I had there to serve, there were so many, and I had so many varied opportunities.

One day, my task there was to escort a 23-year-old widow who lost her husband — he was a Port Authority police officer — and she wanted to see the site. They asked me if I would just walk her around the site. I escorted this girl around and tried to take on more of a chaplain role and just listen. I asked her questions about her husband and what he was like. At the site, all you heard was machinery. Cranes, trucks — all that, it was just constant. Whenever the

workers would find a body part in the pile, everything would come to a stop. If there were trucks getting loaded, they would shut them off. They had huge cranes like I have never seen

before. Everything quit and all of a sudden it was just completely quiet. They would send a chaplain and a group out and they would have a little service wherever they found this body part. They would have a prayer time. I don't care if it was a finger or a toe, everything came to a complete stop. They would come up with a full body bag and it was carried out with an escort.

While I was walking with her, that happened. She asked me what was going on and I told her. She said, 'I wonder if that's my husband?' And I just thought, 'Oh my God.'

**How often did this happen?**

If I worked three shifts, it would happen five or six times over the duration. Everything would come to a standstill.

**When they were moving out debris, how did they separate the mangled buildings and rubble from the victims' remains?**

There were trucks constantly coming in, scoops picking up debris, putting it in the trucks and the trucks went out to the landfill. It was a constant motion. They had huge crews at the landfill, and everything came down on a conveyor belt and they sifted through it for remains. They had cadaver dogs all over the place. Some of the cadaver dogs died from all the junk they were breathing in.

One of the most gripping things I saw there was in a building out at the landfill. When they would find people's ID cards, they had them all out on a table. You know, if this guy's ID card is here — that's what they kept on the item — he likely did not get out of the building. These people are probably all dead. You start seeing these faces — that was really something.

**Was there one thing that was your primary role or responsibility while you were on site?**

They had actually told us, you are not here to carry buckets. You are here to just go up and talk to people and see if you can get them to talk. These people needed some decompressing. Get them talking about anything. Any of the workers, anybody you want to walk up and talk to. My first thought was, these are New Yorkers. I'm from Kentucky. This is not going to work. So, I would just walk up and talk to people. That has never been a problem for me.

It amazed me that it didn't take much. It usually started out with them asking me if I was from Lexington, Mass. That's what they expected. When I told them Lexington, Ky., I was surprised by how many people had been to Kentucky. How many of them had been to Keeneland. They were all very gracious, and I talked to a whole lot of people. What's interesting is that I still get phone calls from people I talked to there. As a matter of fact, it has not been but a couple of months since someone called. I have a different cell phone number now than I did when I was at the police department, but I still have people tracking me down to talk and to thank me. Really, I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything. I was just there to talk to them.

**Were there many people who really opened up about how the terrorist attacks had affected them or did you have people just want to talk?**

Both. But what they did, when they started talking, they would talk and talk and talk. I knew from my education in counseling and critical incident stress that when somebody just keeps talking, talking is healing. Getting it out is a big deal. Sometimes you don't necessarily even have to talk about what the problem is. You're just talking. I would introduce myself and usually start off by asking, 'What is your job here?' At some point I might ask, 'Where were you when all this happened?' And boy, if you asked that, you were going to get an answer. Maybe they would bring me up to date from that time. They would tell me they had friends who were in the building — people who died, people they knew. I don't remember being turned down or shut down or anybody not talking. There was a lot of cop talk.

**Were there any people or stories that have stuck with you?**

Oh yeah. There was a fire captain named Capt. Chris O'Sullivan. I found him one day; he was sitting on a five-gallon bucket. He was probably 60 or so at that time. So I pulled up a bucket and talked to him. He asked me where I was from. When I said 'Lexington, Ky.' he said, 'What the hell are you doing up here?' And I said, 'Well, I'm just up here helping out,' and we started talking. He said, 'Have you gotten to do >>

John Welsh holds a photo he shot of Ground Zero during his time there after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Below are photos he shot as well as some that were given to him by others he worked with in New York City. Clockwise from top left is an American flag suspended among the wreckage, Welsh helping to look for the black box from one of the airplanes that struck the twin towers, a daytime shot of "the pile" and Welsh's Lexington Police cruiser parked in the center of downtown New York City.

>> any sightseeing? I looked at him and said, 'No sir, I'm kind of here to work. However, I noticed as I was passing through that I passed signs for Gettysburg. If I have time on my way home, I'm going to stop by and see the battlefield.' Well, it turns out, Capt. O'Sullivan was a big Civil War historian. He talked to me about the Civil War for two straight hours. Now, we didn't sit there on the buckets for two hours, we walked around. And interspersed with that he was telling me stories about some of his guys who had been killed. He kind of weaved in and out of that. He was one who made me think, this is a guy who just needed to talk to somebody. Maybe it even helped that I was from somewhere else and I wouldn't be seeing him everyday.

When he retired the next year, he sent me these letters. And what was really cool was — you know, police, we're such geeks. We trade patches. Well, he gave me fire department patches. But, he sent me the ones he took off his uniform. That meant more to me, that he took them off his uniform.

**What was the attitude of the people you met? Did you see the grief in them or were people just working and trying to get the job done?**

I didn't see much grief. I saw more anger than I did grief. At that time, too, there was still the possibility something else could happen. There would always be rumors that they were going to attack something again while all the workers were there, just to further demoralize America. But you'd look up occasionally and see an F16 fly over, and boy it just made you feel good.

I did have people who would cry when they would tell me how they wished I had seen the World Trade Center before and how beautiful it was. They were so proud of their city that they hated for a visitor to come in and see it like this. It bothered them that much.

☞ The threads still stitched to the patch, Welsh admired a gift he received from a New York City fireman whom he befriended at Ground Zero. The gift was especially poignant for Welsh because the fireman removed the patches from his own, weathered uniform following his retirement, shortly after the terrorist attacks.

**When you arrived there to work, did anyone give you a time frame for how long you would be needed?**

No, it was open ended. The head of the critical incident stress team would basically be assessing you the whole time. First of all, were you effective? Word would get around. You would work a six-hour shift at the site, then you would go back to the Critical Incident Stress Center in Jersey City and they would assess you. 'Are you OK?' Because, as crazy as it sounds, if you just sit and listen, if somebody just dumps on you all day long, it just wears you down. After awhile, you're taking it all in and you're not getting it out. You'd sit, get something to eat, something to drink, and if you needed to talk to somebody, there was somebody there to talk to. Then you go back and work six more. Then you came back again. And when you came back from that six, if you could talk them into it, you worked another

six. That's what all of us tried to do. So, whenever you were walking through the door, no matter how you felt or looked after that second six-hour shift, you're like, 'Hey! Everything's great, man! Good to see you, what's happening, buddy?' Yeah, I'm good to go back, no problem.'

There was only one night Roland (Kandle) wouldn't let me go back. It was like the fifth night or something. I was really tired. He made me go sleep a little bit. But, we would try to pull off 18 hours, go back, sleep, set your alarm and get back in the morning. I never had problems doing it because I always had people who needed a ride. I needed to be the one to drive them if they were out of vehicles. I could pull off the three shifts. I tried to do that every day. That does start to wear on you as the days go on, but you think, I'm only up here for a certain amount of time. I just couldn't imagine working two of those



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

☐ John Welsh displays a poster with photos of the nearly 350 New York City firemen killed on Sept. 11, 2001. The poster was given to him by someone he met while serving in New York City following the terrorist attacks.

shifts and being off for 12 hours, thinking, 'What am I going to do?'

**Could you see the impact you made in people by allowing them to talk?**

Only in the fact that they talked a lot. I wasn't changing anybody's life. Part of Critical Incident Stress Management is the understanding that mental breaks are a very good thing. If you have a very stressful job and you go on vacation for a week, does that make your job any less stressful? No. But you get a mental break and you get to see some other things, come back, now you're better prepared to handle that stressful job.

There were a lot of things they tried to provide at the site for mental breaks. We had a lot of celebrities come to the site. When I got back home, I saw some news accounts where some people were critical of the celebrities being down there. But to me, it was one of the best things that happened because these celebrities gave these guys a mental break from what they were doing. The entire cast of the

"Sopranos" came down. I had never seen the show at the time, but boy everybody bowed down to them. It was huge. I met John Travolta, Jason Alexander from "Seinfeld" and I met and talked to Harrison Ford for awhile. It was cool for me to come across these people. I can't imagine for some of these workers to come off the pile and there is Harrison Ford. And they were so non-celebrity in their attitude. They were there to help.

The chef from the Windows on the World restaurant that had been at the top of one of the trade centers set up a restaurant across the street. Harrison Ford served me mashed potatoes at dinner. Bernadette Peters gave me a pork chop. They were there to serve. Sigourney Weaver also helped — I didn't recognize her until somebody told me who she was. She had her hair pulled back and she had no makeup on. The dust you saw just rolled in to that restaurant where everybody would come in to eat, and you had to constantly wipe down tables to keep the place clean. Sigourney Weaver had a broom and she swept during the entire meal one time I was there, occasionally stopping if somebody wanted a picture with her or wanted her to talk, but she was working. So, the celebrity thing was great for those people who were working there.

**At what point did they say, 'OK, I think it's time for you to go home?'**

I came off my second six-hour shift one day and Kandle put his hands on my shoulders and says, 'Kentucky, you're done.' He said, 'I can see it in your eyes. I know what I'm looking for, and you're done.' I was like, 'No, no, I'm good, man.' He said, 'You're done.' And he took away my ID. You cannot get on the site without your ID. It doesn't matter what badge you have, what patch, what you're wearing — if they took away your ID, they just took your life. So I said, 'Oh, Roland, don't take away my ID. Let me just go rest, give me the 12 hours, let me go rest.' He said, 'Man, I appreciate that, but I have some more people coming in. You're done. You need to get out and do something fun tonight, then I want you out of here tomorrow.'

I found out that my favorite guitar player of all time — Les Paul, an old guy who was in his 90s then — was playing at a club on 51st and Broadway called the

Iridium. I thought, I'm going to see Les Paul. I had to ask some people how to get there because the whole city was messed up then and I had to go way north to the next tunnel — it was a real hassle, I almost turned around and came back. But, I got there way early, and I parked my cruiser right on the street. I go into this club and it's empty except — there stands Les Paul.

I'm standing there talking to Les Paul. I only had one pair of shoes, my boots, and they were just covered in that white junk. I'm still wearing everything from working. He and I stood and talked for a long time. Then this guy came in and walks over to me and says, 'Hey man, that'll be \$35.' Les Paul looks at him and says, 'This man's money is no good here. And I want him sitting up at the front of the stage.' So, I sat right at his feet.

This guy winds up sitting at the table across from me, and I started talking to him. He asked, 'What are you doing here? What's Lexington police?' And I start telling him. He tells me that he worked in the World Trade Center. He was gone that morning to a doctor's appointment. He lost his best friend in the building. He was living on survivor guilt, and this was the first night he had been out. Now, we're talking, we're in October now and he's not been out of his apartment since the attacks. So, I wound up talking to him, just listening to him get it all out about how horrible he felt that he was at the doctor. That he should have been in the building with all his co-workers. It was just really interesting, that I randomly ran into this guy at this concert, and that was his story. I almost felt like God had put me there for him that night, too.

**When you came home, did you see ways that your professional career, or you personally, were affected by the work you had done in New York?**

I have had a lot of people ask me that question, and the thing is, it did have a big impact on me at that time. When I went out and spoke about it afterward, I always told this story that right before all that happened, I had spent two days of my life looking for the right lawn mower. I thought, two days of my life, making phone calls, going to stores, because I gotta pick just the right lawn mower. Then after that, it just felt like I wasted two days of my life >>



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

>> that I can never get back. I don't know how much longer I've got. Those people who went to work at 8 o'clock that morning, they thought they had a whole lot of time, too. You just don't know. And would it really have made a difference if maybe, the first lawn mower I came to, I said, 'Alright, let's get this one.' I'm not saying you should live your life not caring about everything, but it made that time feel very wasted and inconsequential, compared to what I could have been doing for two days.

Long term, I just don't know. I guess I could make something up, but you know, you're trained to do a job and you do it, and you go on. I think it has more of an impact on me when somebody calls. Because let me tell you, when I left there, and when I first started going out and speaking about my experience, I would say every time, 'I don't know if I did any good or not.' I don't know. All I did was talk to people and let them talk. But when people call — and still call — it gives me a little bit more of a feeling that maybe my time there meant something. You also have to think, too, since this happened and even before, we've had officers who have been to Desert Storm. And certainly since, we have had officers who have been in combat, injured in combat, in Afghanistan and Iraq. You know, that's huge. What I did at the World Trade Center is no comparison to what these guys have experienced. J

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## BY THE NUMBERS

- Body parts found: **19,858**
- Total number killed in attacks (official figure as of 9/5/2002): **2,819**
- Estimated number of children who lost a parent: **3,051**
- Tons of debris removed from site: **1,506,124**
- Days fires continued to burn after the attack: **99**
- Jobs lost in New York owing to the attacks: **146,100**
- Economic loss to New York in month following the attacks: **\$105** billion
- Estimated cost of cleanup: **\$600** million
- Estimated amount of money raised for funds dedicated to NYPD and FDNY families: **\$500** million
- Percentage increase in Peace Corps applications from 2001 to 2002: **40**
- Estimated number of New Yorkers suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of 9/11: **422,000**

— Statistics courtesy of New York Magazine



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

## 2010 KENTUCKY CRIME STATISTICS

From "Crime in Kentucky, 2010"  
Compiled by Kentucky State Police  
[http://www.kentuckystatepolice.org/pdf/cik\\_2010.pdf](http://www.kentuckystatepolice.org/pdf/cik_2010.pdf)

**121,289**  
SERIOUS CRIMES\*  
COMMITTED  
IN 2010

A SERIOUS CRIME  
COMMITTED EVERY  
**4 minutes, 20 seconds**



**44**  
LIVESTOCK  
THEFTS REPORTED

**1,757**  
POLICE OFFICERS  
ASSAULTED  
BY WEAPONS\*\*

**351,976**  
ARRESTS

**50%**  
OF VIOLENT  
CRIMES  
SOLVED

**16**  
SERIOUS CRIMES\*  
REPORTED IN CLINTON CO.  
LOWEST IN THE STATE

**ONE**  
MURDER  
EVERY  
**48 hours, 40 minutes**

**29,170**  
BURGLARIES REPORTED  
Valued at  
**\$65.5 Million**

ROBBERY  
COMMITTED EVERY  
**2 hours, 20 minutes**



**267**  
PICKPOCKET OFFENSES  
REPORTED

**8,180**  
SWORN  
LAW ENFORCEMENT  
OFFICERS IN KENTUCKY

**29,971**  
DUI  
ARRESTS

FIREARMS  
USED IN  
**64%**  
OF MURDERS

**3,666**  
STOLEN VEHICLES  
Recovered Valued at  
**\$25.3 million**

\* Serious Crimes defined as Part 1 Crimes: Murder, Assault, Larceny, Burglary, Rape / \*\* Assaulted by firearms, edged weapons, fists, feet or other dangerous weapon