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His example 'challenges me to be a better person'

By Timothy L. Epstein

*"And I know it aches**And your heart it breaks**And you can only take so much**Walk on, walk on." – U2, "Walk On"*

The images conjured up by this U2 song that would become a 9/11 tribute song, along with Ryan Adams' "New York, New York," filmed with the twin towers in the background the weekend before the attack, never fail to bring me right back to that beautiful September day.

Ten years ago I came into the College of Law's building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Champaign, Ill. crestfallen at the idea of summer's end and the prospects of spending a beautiful, cloudless early September day in one of the law school's many windowless classrooms. Not yet enjoying the privileges of school-wide Wi-Fi, I plugged my Dell laptop into my Ethernet portal, stealing a few minutes of updates from The New York Times, ESPN, and e-mail before professor Maggs' lecture began. Whispers of a plane hitting the World Trade Center came from some classmates. Initial thoughts were of a small plane accidentally colliding with one of the towers, but I recall one of our military compatriots yelling out, "We are under attack!"

We scoured the Internet for any corroboration of the Captain's theory. It was a jet, and "Oh God" another tower just got hit. Was Chicago a target? Who was the enemy? A double Illini theorized that the University of Illinois was a possible location for an attack due to a super computer on campus. The classroom became stifling with the theories and suspicions from these people who were so far removed from the site of the attacks, so I grabbed my cellphone and ran outside.

My concerns immediately turned to my friends in New York, including those that I

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knew worked in or near the World Trade Center, so I just began frantically calling friends at Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, etc. I quickly reached one friend who picked up his phone while running. He just started running to his apartment on the Upper East Side after the second plane hit and he was not alone. A later call confirmed that he did not stop until reaching his apartment; Brooks Brothers suit and wing tips worse for the wear.

Another friend who lived in Hoboken ran to the Battery after the second plane hit, cellphone and wallet in hand, prepared to jump into the waves as a cloud of dust and debris approached. He did not jump, but would later tell stories of watching those jumping from the flames of the north tower.

Later, I would hear stories of near misses that warmed my heart: late to work that day, still on vacation, sick that day or the guy who refused to sit at his desk and wait after the first plane hit as instructed by security. He immediately got on an elevator and took the Path train back to New Jersey. Another couple would meet weeks later while in the waiting room to attend company-mandated post-9/11 counseling, and later marry.

Being in Champaign when the planes hit provided for a level of shelter from the day-to-day disruption that those hijackers brought to New York City, but as an alumnus of Boston College, I knew that while my closest friends working in the area were safe in that first day or two, sad news would arise. As some days went by and e-mail lists and Internet posts confirmed those that were still missing likely meant certain death, some names came my way, including Kevin Williams and Welles Crowther. Both guys worked at Sandler,

O'Neil and both were my hall mates freshman year at BC. I did not know Kevin that well, but heard that he was engaged, which crushed me. I knew Welles fairly well and was certainly saddened by his likely loss, but only later would I learn the full extent of his story.

Many know Welles' story by now as "the man in the red bandana," the equities trader who used his skills acquired as a volunteer firefighter to bring at least 12 people to safety before he and members of the FDNY perished as the south tower came crashing down. It is believed that Welles, on his third trip to rescue fellow workers, this time with firefighters, was approaching the Sky Lobby with a Hurst "jaws of life" tool to free victims who were trapped under debris when the south tower came down.

With a good amount of my legal practice, as well as my teaching at Loyola's law school, now focused on sports law, I look to ESPN not as just as a source of entertainment as a fan, but a daily catch-up like a financial analyst might look to Bloomberg or CNBC. Which is why this past Sunday as I began reflecting on my legal career that began in the aftermath of 9/11, I was struck by an ESPN Outside the Lines feature on Welles, produced by my friend, Drew Gallagher.

Drew, Welles and myself were all residents of the Boston College freshman dorm Duchesne East on Newton Campus. In forwarding Welles' story around to friends and colleagues and hearing the reactions back of how powerful and gut-wrenching the story of the hero in the red bandana is, I do not focus on the hijacked planes, terrorism, our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bin Laden, or the balance of safety versus constitutional rights. I focus on how one human being, with so much of his life left to live, chose to save others, twice refusing to get himself out of the building that he must have known was close to collapse.

As I set out to reflect on how 9/11 has impacted my legal career and legal practice, I simply cannot get past the story of the quiet lacrosse player from Nyack, N.Y. who continues to inspire me on a daily basis. Welles' example makes me proud to have known him, but challenges me to be a better person, and in turn, a better lawyer.