

Fairlington Historical Society

September 11, 2001 Oral History Interview

Interview conducted 5/17/26

Dan Burd: Hello, my name is Dan Burd from the Fairlington Historical Society, and I am here with— Would you mind spelling your name? Excellent. We are here to discuss an oral history about what Fairlington people's experiences in Fairlington were on 9/11 and after 9/11. So, what was your approximate age on 9/11?

Andrea Solarz: Oh, why did you have to ask me that? Okay, now I have to do arithmetic. So it was in 2001? So, I would have been 45, about to turn 46, I believe. I was born in 1955, if that helps.

Dan Burd: And how long have you lived in Fairlington?

Andrea Solarz: Since 1989. November 1989.

Dan Burd: And which community do you live in?

Andrea Solarz: In Fairlington Commons.

Dan Burd: 'Cause it was there the whole time? In the same house?

Andrea Solarz: In the same place, yep.

Dan Burd: Yeah, I see. So were you in Fairlington when 9/11 happened, or were you somewhere else?

Andrea Solarz: I was. And I was actually still asleep—I don't know if I was asleep, but I was still in bed. I got a phone call from my mom. My parents lived out in Annapolis. And she asked if I had seen the news. And I hadn't yet, you know. So, of course, then I went to watch and saw what was going on.

Dan Burd: So you turned on the TV? You were then at home?

Andrea Solarz: I was at home.

Dan Burd: Okay. And so what was the first thing you saw when you turned on the TV?

Andrea Solarz: You know, I don't remember, but obviously it was all the news reports about what was going on and that the Pentagon had been hit. So, you know, it's just kind of being glued to the TV. I don't recall at what point I interacted with other neighbors. My neighbor Don across the hall, I know that he said that he heard the plane hit. And, you know, so really it was just a matter of being glued to the TV because nobody knew what else was gonna happen. You know, we didn't know if we were still vulnerable to more attacks in Washington or, you know, the Pentagon is literally a stone's throw away from us, you know, from my home. So, you know, you're really part of it, you know, when you're that close, you know. And, you know, I didn't even think to look outside for a couple of hours, you know, because I was just so focused on being sequestered at home. And, of course, when I did look outside, you could see the plumes of smoke coming from the Pentagon, you know, they were still very much present. And the air was just filled with sirens, you know, from the ambulances and police that were going to the scene and, you know, taking victims to hospitals and so on. And, you know, the air was also filled with the sounds of fighter jets that were scrambling above, which was a very different sound for our usually very calm and quiet, you know, neighborhood. So—

Dan Burd: You said your neighbor across the hall heard it?

Andrea Solarz: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, yeah, he heard the collision. And I think a lot of people did. I don't know anymore if I did, you know. It's because memory gets confused and you don't know, is that somebody else's memory or is that my memory? But he definitely heard it.

Dan Burd: What were your first thoughts when you learned about it earlier?

Andrea Solarz: I mean, just, oh my God, what's going on, you know. What's gonna happen next? Is something gonna happen next? What do we need to do to be safe, you know? Are people who I care about safe?

Dan Burd: Did you have people calling you asking if you were okay, since you lived so close?

Andrea Solarz: Just my family, just my family as I recall, yeah. And they wanted me to get out of there. And initially, you know, I was just gonna stick it out there. And then I decided to go ahead and get out to my parents' house in Annapolis.

Dan Burd: When did you go there?

Andrea Solarz: Probably—I'm gonna just guess in the early afternoon, you know, so it was a few hours later, or maybe around noon. And, you know, it's like usually, of course, when you look at the highway outside there's tons of traffic. There was no traffic, you know, because the exits had been blocked. You know, you couldn't go north on 395 into D.C. And I—you know, I can't recall, it's like right now I can't recall for sure if I went down I-95 or went down Route 1. But whichever way it was, you know, the traffic was very dense, especially, you know, once I got down near Fort Belvoir because all the troops were being called back to base. And, you know, it was just gridlocked down in that area. Cell phones were—you know, you couldn't use your cell

phone because all the lines were, you know, full or whatever. So, you know, you just kept going in the direction you were going, but you couldn't find out a lot and you couldn't communicate a lot to others because, you know, everybody was trying to do the same thing.

Dan Burd: Was there someone you were trying to get in touch with that you couldn't get in touch with?

Andrea Solarz: No, but it's more just, you know, a status report. You know, "I'm here, I'm still on my way." You know, I ended up going down to like Route 3 by Fredericksburg and then up 301 to Annapolis. So it was a very circuitous route because, you know—"Are they gonna bomb a bridge by D.C.?" I didn't wanna go over a bridge by the city. And I probably couldn't have gone how I would normally go because, as I said, you know, they weren't letting traffic go in that direction. Or it appeared that they weren't letting traffic go in that direction. So I went down further and took the next bridge over. You know, even the Beltway, I didn't feel like—I didn't wanna get on the Beltway. I think you just didn't know what's gonna happen or what risks there were, but it just felt safer to get a little further away from the city and then head over. So it took me, you know, almost like 4 hours to get to what was normally maybe a 45-minute trip, but I did get there. And then spent, I don't know how long I stayed at my parents' house, but probably a couple of days.

Dan Burd: And what motivated you to wanna go to Annapolis?

Andrea Solarz: Well, as I said, my family wanted me there. You know, they wanted me to get away from where I was.

Dan Burd: Was it concerns about maybe future attacks, or just the chemicals being there in the aftermath?

Andrea Solarz: No, no, I think because they just didn't know what was gonna happen. And, you know, okay, that was one plane that went into the Pentagon, but you just didn't know what was gonna happen. And as it turned out, that was it, you know, but things just felt very up in the air and unsafe.

Dan Burd: Yeah. Yeah.

Dan Burd: Did you talk to anyone else in Fairlington before you left? Anyone you encountered?

Andrea Solarz: I don't recall doing that, and I didn't have close relationships with any neighbors at that point other than Don, my neighbor across the hall. So there weren't other, you know, Fairlington friends who I would have called or touched base with.

Dan Burd: Did you stay in touch with him while you were in Annapolis, asking him how things were?

Andrea Solarz: I don't recall. I don't recall. It's likely I did, but I don't recall. And he stayed—he stayed, you know, he just stayed at home.

Dan Burd: So when you got back, what was your first impression upon your return to Fairlington?

Andrea Solarz: Well, I mean, nothing with respect to Fairlington itself, but of course, since the Pentagon now had a huge hole in it, you know, I mean things had fundamentally changed in terms of, I don't know, you know, kind of our perceptions of safety and worldview. And you know, I mean in the United States, we've been very lucky, you know, to be so insulated from the type of violence and war that has taken place on the soil of other countries, even when we have been involved in those conflicts. So, you know, this was something very different to have happened, and to have it happen so close to you, you know, heightened a sense of vulnerability.

Dan Burd: Did you go near the Pentagon in the aftermath to take a look, or did you avoid it, or what just happened?

Andrea Solarz: You can't avoid—you couldn't avoid it. You know, I mean, if you have to go into D.C. for any reason, you know, or if you're going to other parts, you couldn't avoid it. You know, it was there. And it was gonna be there for some time. You know, I mean, they did a remarkable job in getting it repaired, but it was still very much a part of what now is how we see living in D.C., you know, living around this area.

Dan Burd: And so what was people's moods around Fairlington? Like the day of, and then when we were trying to adjust?

Andrea Solarz: You know, I can't really answer that because I don't recall interacting a lot with people. You know, I can speak to my own feelings, but I didn't really talk to a lot of people. You know, I'm sure a lot of people were talking, but as I said, I didn't have—I hadn't developed many friendships at that point. You know, it's just really my immediate neighbor.

Dan Burd: What would you say changed for you, like, from that time?

Andrea Solarz: I mean, I was glad to be home because I feel, even though all this had gone on, it's still being home and where I wanna be. And then, you know, I mean, I did have colleagues—you know, friends and colleagues who had more direct reactions, talking more with them. Like, one of my friends, one of her colleagues was on the plane, you know, who was killed, and one of my long-time work colleagues. So, you know, you can see it having very direct personal effects on people who are part of your life, you know, even though I didn't know that person, but I know they were a wonderful person because of what this person tells me about her and knowing her, you know. So, you know, it's like even if you didn't know somebody personally, it still felt personal, you know, like an attack on us. And so many people, you know, could have been on that plane. I mean, I think back to years ago, you know, there was the crash where the plane kind of crashed over the 14th Street Bridge and landed in the water. And I was in

graduate school at that time in Michigan, and I just remembered, "Oh my God, you know, I mean, I have family members, I have loved ones, I have friends who commute over that bridge every day who could have—they could have been one of the people killed there, you know." So, you know, it just gives you more of a sense of vulnerability when something like that happens, when it's so close.

Dan Burd: Do you remember any continuing disruptions to your day-to-day life in the aftermath?

Andrea Solarz: Not so much me, because I was self-employed and worked at home, which is also why I was still lazy, lazing away in bed, you know, when my mom called. But you know, I remember—I mean, I think on the day, I know calling somebody and saying, "You know, you should probably cancel that meeting," or something like that, you know, things like that, but that was on the day. You know, it doesn't change how people live their lives for the most part, unless they were, of course, members of the military, which changed things pretty dramatically.

Dan Burd: So what are the kind of the big short-term or long-term impacts to your life?

Andrea Solarz: There's actually been quite a few long-term impacts in different ways. I mean, I still, if I hear fighter jets up above, it still makes me catch my breath and look up and, you know, sort of brace myself. And you know, that has lessened some with time, but it's definitely still there. It always brings back that memory of hearing those on that day. And, you know, there's been a big increase over Fairlington of military helicopters and planes and so on, so that now, you know, it's like the younger people in Fairlington think, "Well, that's just part of being in Fairlington, you should have known those sounds would be there when you moved here." Well, no, they weren't there when I moved here. You know, that's all because of changes after 9/11, you know, and just a heightened military presence, you know. So that's a change. Another thing I had mentioned the other day is, you know, it's like this was followed closely the next year by the D.C. sniper, and that was terrifying, you know. I mean, I was, he killed people at the Home Depot up the street, you know. So it felt like it was surrounding you, the way they were hitting different areas and they were very close to D.C. And I kind of think that, well, if 9/11 hadn't happened, would I feel so concerned and vulnerable with this incident? And I don't think I would. It was more like it was just building on a sense of vulnerability and just sort of questioning how do we keep ourselves safe. And then, you know, personally, in other ways that it affected me or changed me is once we started sending troops over to the Middle East, which I wasn't particularly supportive of, I wanted to help those soldiers, you know, to help them get through what they were gonna be experiencing a little more whole, if possible. And so, I joined this online group called Books for Soldiers, where soldiers would write in wanting different books and care packages and stuff, and volunteers would on their own put together care packages and send them to soldiers. So I'd sent out hundreds of care packages to soldier, troops overseas—not just soldiers: airmen, Marines, you know, overseas—and developed continuing personal relationships with a number of them that I still have today. You know, I ended up meeting several of them over the years and, you know, it's a personal relationship. It was a meaningful connection to have made, for them and for me. So that's been important. You know,

it also connected with other volunteers there. We used to do an annual group of volunteering at the Army Ten-Miler, we did that for years as an organized group. Just this March, I went out to Oklahoma to go on a ruck walk in honor of one of the soldiers who'd been killed, who I supported, and his wife I had become friends with. So it's like, even all these years later, there's still very present personal impacts for me.

Dan Burd: Do you feel that there was an increase in kind of civic participation in the aftermath of 9/11 in this area?

Andrea Solarz: I think there was a—you know, just generally speaking, a more of a "thank you to the troops." And a lot of that is really, I think, performative. You know, "thank you for your service, thank you for your service," and that's fine, you know, that's nice to do, but for many of them, they'd see it as performative, you know. But that's an easy thing to do, is to just say that. And a lot of that also, I think, is a reaction to what happened after Vietnam. When troops came back after Vietnam, they did not give that kind of welcoming and appreciation at that point, and I think people, in general, have come to realize that that just was not right.

Dan Burd: Yeah.

Dan Burd: Did 9/11 change how you planned or thought about the future?

Andrea Solarz: I don't know, you know. It's one thing, like, I went on a trip with a friend to Peru not long after 9/11, and you know, we were kind of debating, "Well, should we go or not, do we need to worry about this?" And obviously, we decided to go. But one thing I remember is going to the airport and there's all these armed soldiers, you know, with these long guns hanging around, and it's just now part of the security presence at the airport. And at that time, you know, it's like, well, actually I'm okay with this 'cause I do feel safer with them being there. But we did have to think about, "Should we go or not?" you know.

Dan Burd: But did you go?

Andrea Solarz: Yeah, yeah. Had a wonderful trip, of course. So that's just one example that was pretty near-term. And, of course, anytime you travel now you're faced with all these new security changes. You know, at least I don't have to take my shoes off anymore to go through security, but it has changed how we travel, you know, to even just domestically, you know, but certainly internationally as well.

Dan Burd: Did you consider moving away from Fairlington in 9/11?

Andrea Solarz: No, no. No.

Dan Burd: You felt that it was still safe then.

Andrea Solarz: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I mean, well, and also it's like, so where are you gonna go? You know, even if there would be another attack, it's like, well, you know, if I were some international terrorist and I was planning an attack, you know, you could go, "Well, I'm gonna go to Kansas," you know, because nobody's expecting that there, and that will really, you know, make people afraid because you don't know, even if you're in the quote "middle of nowhere," that you're safe. So, I mean, I don't know exactly how terrorists think, so I don't know if they would plan that. But that's—you're not truly safe anywhere. If somebody is going to plan attacks and complete them successfully, you're not truly safe anywhere.

Dan Burd: I wanna follow up on one thing from earlier. Did you say what people could smell from Fairlington, on the day of 9/11—you mentioned that you could hear the collision, someone had already seen it—I'm wondering if people could smell jet fuel, what it smelled like?

Andrea Solarz: I don't recall that. I didn't go outside. It's like, you know, it was hours before I actually looked out my window, where I have a very clear view towards the Pentagon, and saw the smoke going. So—the other thing I was gonna mention, just in terms of the day and my experience of the day, it wasn't until after I got to my parents' house and we were watching the TV there that I actually realized that the Twin Towers had fallen. You know, I knew that planes had hit them, but it seemed so inconceivable that they actually would have collapsed that, even though I was watching the footage, I wasn't seeing it as the buildings actually falling to the ground and collapsing, you know.

Dan Burd: Do you remember what you all talked about that day when you were at your families house?

Andrea Solarz: You know, I don't really. I mean, I'm sure we were just focused on, what do we know, what's happening? Is this it? Or, you know, what's going on?

Dan Burd: You know, the number of people exchanging stories about, you know, "I was here..." over the years.

Andrea Solarz: Over the years, yes, yeah. Like, I have another neighbor in Fairlington who was living in Arlington Village, I think, at the time, and she said that the plane basically flew very low right over them. I mean, she could see the bottom of the freaking plane, you know, flying over them. So, you know, people have those kinds of memories too.

Dan Burd: Was there anything I didn't ask about that you would like to share?

Andrea Solarz: I don't think so. I took my little notes to trigger my memory here too, and I think we've pretty much covered all of it. I think with these kind of events, it's important to realize that they don't end on the day they happen, you know. That the memories continue, the impacts continue in sometimes subtle, deep ways that aren't necessarily at the level of consciousness, but they're still there and they're still impacting people.

Dan Burd: Do you kind of relive your experiences on the anniversary?

Andrea Solarz: I mean, I'm always aware of it. Now, I think it was the fifth anniversary at the Pentagon, they did this light thing, you know, where they had these blazes of lights coming up from the Pentagon. And my niece was living with me at that time, and we went down there and took photos and sort of remembered it that way. I don't know, there's something—a memorialization like that is really nice, you know, doing it without it being kind of overwrought and overdone and overly focused on quote "patriotism." But I sort of mentally acknowledge it, but I don't focus on it.

Dan Burd: Well, thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us today. I really appreciate it.

Andrea Solarz: Very glad to, yeah. I do think it's important to save the memories of it, you know. Everybody has their own individual memories, but collectively, that's our community response.

Dan Burd: Absolutely. I really appreciate it so much.

Andrea Solarz: You're welcome.