

Fairlington Historical Society - 9/11 Oral History Project

Interviewee: Carol Dabbs

Interviewer: Phil Snelling

Date: May 30, 2026

Phil Snelling: Today is May 30th, 2026, and my name's Phil Snelling. We're going to be interviewing Carol Dabbs for her recollections of the date of September 11th of 2001, for the incidents occurring that day for the 25th anniversary we're expecting. Could you state your name for the record?

Carol Dabbs: Yes, I'm Carol Dabbs.

Phil Snelling: Okay. And, Ms. Dabbs, on September 11th, 2001, where did you live?

Carol Dabbs: I lived on South Stafford Street in the 3300 block.

Phil Snelling: Okay, Fairlington?

Carol Dabbs: Yes.

Phil Snelling: Okay. And how were you employed then?

Carol Dabbs: At that time I worked for the US Agency for International Development. I have since retired from there, but yes.

Phil Snelling: And where were their offices?

Carol Dabbs: At the Ronald Reagan Building, downtown.

Phil Snelling: If it's not too prying, how old were you back on September 11th, 2001?

Carol Dabbs: In 2001, I was 52.

Phil Snelling: Okay. Drawing your attention to that day, what was transpiring? What happened in the morning?

Carol Dabbs: I had a rather unusual day. I had been sick overnight and not able to sleep at all. And at about 6:00 in the morning I was feeling somewhat better, and I called and left a voicemail

for my boss at the Ronald Reagan Building and told her that, you know, I had been sick and that I thought I would be in about noon, more or less. I figured I'd catch four hours of sleep and go in. And the next thing I knew, it was 9:38 in the morning, the minute. And I always look at the clock the first thing when I wake up, and it was 9:38. And I thought, "Why am I waking up now?" You know, I've only been asleep two and a half hours or something. Why am I waking up now? I usually turn on the television, and I did. And what I saw was buildings falling down in New York, and people talking about the Pentagon. And then there were pictures of the Pentagon. I was half asleep, and it was all very—it was rather confusing. It took me quite a while to figure out that both towers had come down in New York, and the Pentagon had been hit, and there was another plane that we weren't quite sure where it was. And there was a lot of speculation about—was that fourth plane gonna fly into the Capitol? Was it maybe gonna try to hit the White House? I spoke earlier this week with somebody who lived in McLean who was concerned about that plane trying to go and hit the CIA in Langley, which would have involved his house at the time. So it was all very unsettling. I realized how very serious the situation was when they said, "Okay, all planes down." Nobody, you know, nobody takes off. Everybody lands at the nearest airport. "We are closing all airspace." And you kind of go, "Okay, what the heck is going on here?" About 10:15, my boss called and she said, "Do not under any circumstances come to the office. We are evacuating the building. The garage is closed. If your car were in the garage, you wouldn't be able to get out." So I was pretty glad I had not driven in that morning, actually, in retrospect. I kept watching TV, and it was—it was just—it was crazy. And it was the same films over and over and over and over and over. There was also speculation about a bomb at the State Department, and they didn't specify which entrance, but I'm sort of sitting there going, "Where would they do that? How could they get it there?" You know. I don't know if you ever drive up 23rd Street now, but there on 23rd Street, where people come off the Memorial Bridge and just go up the hill, on the side, they took an entire lane of traffic and put planters there, which are encroaching on the lane, but still there are still two lanes of traffic there. Those were not there before 9/11. The changes to the office and to the State Department entrances and so forth after 9/11 were significant and really made it a lot harder to get to the office, frankly. Well, then the other thing that happened that day was the same thing that happens to any of us. Anytime there's some major public event in Washington, your friends and relatives from all over the country call to be sure you're okay. And I fielded calls most of the day, which I think almost everybody did.

Martha Herrmann: And did you say you heard something?

Carol Dabbs: It is my belief, and I can't prove it, but given that I woke up at 9:38 and the Pentagon was hit at 9:37 or 9:38, I believe that there was enough noise, even briefly, that that's what woke me up.

Phil Snelling: Were there sirens going off that you heard?

Carol Dabbs: I didn't hear sirens, but my windows were all open. That was part of what made me think that that may be what happened. It was a lovely September day, and it had been a

gorgeous day the previous day, and not so cold that I wanted the windows closed. And so it was just a really weird day. And of course, you know, friends here and I started calling and comparing notes and so forth.

Phil Snelling: Did you have contact with other neighbors in the Fairlington area that day, or—

Carol Dabbs: I'm sure I did. I don't have any specific memories. I did have one friend who lived over on this side who told me later about having, in the afternoon, gone over—there was a hill across the way from the face of the Pentagon that was hit that he was able to get to and climb up on top of to look and to take pictures. And I thought that was very brave of him, actually.

Phil Snelling: When did you next go back down to the office?

Carol Dabbs: I went back to the office the next day, and there was still smoke coming out of the Pentagon when I drove by, because I was going to the 14th Street Bridge to go to the Ronald Reagan Building, which is right on 14th and Penn. And that—I had not been prepared for that, and it provoked tears. It's provoking tears now. And on the anniversary the next year, I was deliberately late to the office that day in order to see—I was trying to time it, and I succeeded so that I would see the flag that they unfurled on that face of the Pentagon, which they had completely sealed up by then. I actually managed to be there as it was coming unfurled. So—

Phil Snelling: Was security at your office different following 9/11?

Carol Dabbs: Yes. They put up more barriers along the street side. Of course, the Ronald Reagan Building had three agencies in it at that time: USAID, EPA, and Customs and Immigration Service.

Phil Snelling: Did you have contact with people that had been actually injured or somehow impacted, or something like that?

Carol Dabbs: No, but I had connections to two, actually three. One of the schoolchildren who was on the trip to California who was in the plane that went into the Pentagon—her aunt worked at USAID, and I had worked with the aunt quite a lot. The brother-in-law of one of my co-workers was killed. And Sharon Van Meter, who lived here, was good friends with the Solicitor General whose wife—it was the ex-Solicitor General whose wife was on the plane.

Phil Snelling: Ted Olson?

Carol Dabbs: Yes, Ted Olson, thank you, yeah. Yeah, so there were, you know, connections.

Phil Snelling: And how long had you lived in Fairlington?

Carol Dabbs: I had at that time—altogether, I only moved out a year ago, and altogether lived here 45 years. So, yeah. So I had been here 20 years at that point. Yeah.

Phil Snelling: Did the events of 9/11 personally impact you or change anything about the work or whatever?

Carol Dabbs: Well, I mean, I later had other assignments where I was working in the State Department building, and all of the additional security at the State Department building and the construction thereof definitely impacted my work life. It just made it more complicated—both how to and how long it would take to get into the building.

Phil Snelling: Did you notice any change in the mood or how people reacted with each other at work or outside of work after that?

Carol Dabbs: Well, everybody was pretty shook up from having been evacuated, and a lot of people had to walk home. And if I had been there that day, I think I probably would have had to walk home.

Phil Snelling: How long a walk?

Carol Dabbs: It's about 6 miles. And I'm not sure I know how to get here other than on the freeway, and you can't really walk on the freeway. Call the Park Service? You have to remember, this is pre-cell phone—actually, it's not pre-cell phone, it's pre-smartphone. I actually—did I have a cell phone at that point? Yes.

Martha Herrman: It was just to make calls.

Carol Dabbs: Yeah, that was really all you could do with it.

Phil Snelling: Is there—I know you had touched on it—is there any area or anything that we haven't touched on that you could recollect from that period?

Carol Dabbs: No, actually, I think I did touch on everything I made a note about. So yeah, I thought it wasn't gonna be terribly long.

Phil Snelling: Well, unless there is something further you would like to add, or any further questions?

Carol Dabbs: No. I mean, my windows through which I would have heard the impact were facing south, and I haven't actually ever looked at the map to figure that out, but—

Lisa Sabol: What about any— I mean, what do you think are the— Do you think that there are impacts today from 9/11 that you see? Long and short-term changes? Like what are you, you know, looking back 25 years now?

Carol Dabbs: Well, I mean, the entire TSA situation at the airports is a direct result, and all of the hardening of federal buildings. It's just been—it's really remarkable. And we don't think about it much nowadays, but it's quite different from what it was before 9/11.

Phil Snelling: Alright. Well, thank you very much, and—

Carol Dabbs: Well, thank you all for doing this project. I think it's gonna be interesting. I'm gonna be interested to hear or read what other people said.

Phil Snelling: Okay, great. That concludes our interview.