

Fairlington Historical Society
September 11, 2001 Oral History Interview
Libby Garvey

Lisa Sabol: Today is May 30, 2026. My name is Lisa Sabol, and I'm with the Farlington Historical Society, and I'm here with Libby Garvey. Libby, can you tell me where do you live in Farlington?

Libby Garvey: So, I remember I moved very, very recently.

Libby Garvey: Okay.

Libby Garvey: I have lived in North Farlington. We moved there in '77, and then in 1982, so way before 9/11, we moved over to the Glen on the south side—Farlington Glen—and I just recently moved. It'll be a year, actually, next month, so.

Lisa Sabol: Okay.

Libby Garvey: So, but obviously many roots and things here in Farlington. It's always a special place in my heart.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah, for sure.

Lisa Sabol: Can you—may I ask your age, your approximate age?

Libby Garvey: I'm...On 9/11...Oh, on 9/11/2001

Lisa Sabol: Yes.

Libby Garvey: Well, I just turned 75.

Lisa Sabol: Okay.

Libby Garvey: So, 9/11, I would have been—yeah, I would have just turned 40. 50, probably? 50.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: 50. 50. I was trying to think where I was in my life. Yes, it would have been 50.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. Okay. And on 9/11, you were living—

Libby Garvey: That's right. Absolutely 50. Yes.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: I got myself there. I figured it out. Yes.

Lisa Sabol: And in 2001, September of 2001, you were living here with your husband, children?

Libby Garvey: I was living here with my husband, who worked at EPA in Crystal City. My daughters were—one daughter was living near, not too far away. Actually, both of them lived pretty close here in South Arlington, but they were not in Farlington anymore. And one daughter was—how pregnant was she? I don't know—about 6 months pregnant.

Lisa Sabol: Okay. And what were you doing during that time?

Libby Garvey: So, I was on the school board.

Lisa Sabol: Okay.

Libby Garvey: And I went—I was having—we had started having coffees with our PTAs, so that was like a monthly thing. You would get together with your PTAs, and it was good. We did it in the morning at the Ed Center, which was over on Quincy Street. And I went into the meeting at 8:30. I think we started at 8:30 and came out, and the world had changed.

Lisa Sabol: So how did you hear about the attempt?

Libby Garvey: Because my—our clerk, you know, I was in a—we were in a closed room with the coffee and talking about school issues and PTA issues. And the meeting was done, I opened it up, and she looked kind of shook, and she said, "Planes have hit the, you know, tower in New York." And she says, "And something's happened at the Pentagon."

Lisa Sabol: Okay.

Libby Garvey: Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah. And that was pretty crazy.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. So what did you do, or what happened after you heard?

Libby Garvey: So, what did I do? Yeah. So, I was ready to leave anyway, and I knew the Pentagon—there had been planes. She told me a plane had hit the Pentagon. And my daughter, the one who was pregnant, did not have a car at the time, and she was living pretty close, and I sort of figured I needed to get to her.

Libby Garvey: So, I started driving home, as I usually go, which would have been down Washington Boulevard, right? And you could see the smoke—the big, huge black cloud coming up—listening to the radio about what was going on. And of course, the radio, I realized, you know, there was nothing—there's no local—there's nothing local telling me what to do if I was on Washington Boulevard and all the traffic was stopped, and it was stopping. I could see the red taillights just, you know, blink, blink, blink, blink,

getting closer and closer to me, and I realized I was going to get totally stopped where I couldn't go anywhere.

Libby Garvey: So, I bailed and went right—went over, I think, next to Glebe Road and started going down Glebe, and then the same thing happened, and all of the taillights, and I said, "Oh, my God, I got to get—" you know. And then I went over again, probably to George Mason. I don't remember how I got to my daughter. She was on the other side of 395 and actually just into Alexandria, near Park Fairfax. And so, I—anyway, I got there with a real roundabout way, but kind of always listening for what should I be doing, what's happening, and not getting much information. So, yeah. So, I got to her, and I realized as I was doing that that I didn't know what was going on, but we needed to make sure we had gas in the cars. So, I picked her up, and we went home, and I said, "Let's get gas in this car, and I've got to—" you know, "I haven't heard from your father." I didn't know where her sister was. So, yeah. It was a hard time. I couldn't reach—at that time, I think by then, the cell phones weren't working that we had because all the lines were full, and so I couldn't reach my husband, who, of course, would have been—he was like Crystal City, I mean, really close by. And I found out later. I don't think I knew it at the time. He was on Capitol Hill. So, he was at a meeting down there and coming back, and then for a while—then he left to come back, and there was a whole panic because they thought there was a plane about to hit the Capitol, if you remember that. So, then they all had to duck and, you know, hide again or, you know, shelter, and that was crazy.

Libby Garvey: And then my older daughter was in some training in Rosslyn area, I think it was, and had—was calling me on her cell phone. I don't know how she managed to get through, but she did at one point, and she said, "Mama, how do I get home? All the roads are blocked." You know, so I started to explain and tried to talk to her how to go big circle route because she hadn't—she was fairly young and hadn't been driving here in Arlington too much, so. So, that was—it was quite a day.

Libby Garvey: I got—she got back, and then I finally heard from my husband, who had—first they made them all like shelter or whatever because they thought another plane was coming, and then they could go, and then he wanted to get to his bike. He cycled to work. He figured, "I can't beat this traffic. Just give me my bicycle." Right? And that was in Crystal City. Well, they were not allowing people to go across the bridge. You couldn't walk across 14th Street Bridge. So, what was happening was people were picking folks up to carry them across the bridge because that's the only—you could only go through in a car. So, cars were just coming by, and anybody

would just jump in, and they would just, you know, everybody really pitched in, which is what happens in these terrible situations. Often, people really do pull together. So, he got a ride across the bridge, and then he got out to go get his bike, and then he was told he couldn't get it. He wasn't allowed entry. So, then he started walking home, which by that point from Crystal City is not too bad, but he didn't have his walking shoes on, and he was older—not that much older, but anyway, his—that's when his arches fell. That was his time. So, people died, and his arches fell, so it could be worse. Right? Yeah. But anyway, so he started walking, but I had not been able to reach him, although I had—I knew, I think, he was okay because he had been able to reach his sister in Ohio, I think, so that you could call outside of the area, but not within the area, and then his sister could call me. So, we got this sort of family thing going with calling, you know, way out elsewhere in the country and calling back in to find out what was going on.

Libby Garvey: Finally, he was able to get through, and he was pretty close, and then I came and picked him up with a car. I knew where he was. He was in like in Park Fairfax, and somebody else picked up another couple of neighbors. They were all walking together. So, yeah. And meanwhile, just sirens, sirens, sirens. I remember just sirens, the sound of sirens all the time.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: I don't remember the smell of the smoke. It probably was there. I remember it in the days afterwards, but I don't remember it so much from that day for whatever reason. Maybe a lot of things going on, but everybody was outside and, you know, what's happening and watching the television, and it was quite a time.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about, in your work, as what—how did the school board react? How did you react? What was, you know?

Libby Garvey: What was happening?

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: Well, you know, the school board doesn't—and that, right in the middle of an emergency, you really don't have a role. It's the staff that does it. You just get in the way. And, but we had, you know, finding out afterwards, there were a couple of things that were very serendipitous, if you will.

Libby Garvey: First, 9/11 came right after Y2K, which was when—oh, there. Here we go. Which was right after Y2K, when all the computers were supposed to break down, and we didn't know the world was going to fall apart. So, there had been a lot of training. So, the superintendent and the county manager and the police chief and the

fire chief and the public health—all of these folks were training together. They had an emergency command center, and in fact, New Year's Eve, many of us were, you know, watching the cool stuff going on around the world, and they were all in the command center, but nothing happening. Nothing bad happening.

Libby Garvey: And, but what had happened—that meant that a couple of things had happened. One, they had all kind of gotten systems of communication together and knew each other. And, you know, any kind of emergency preparedness you've got, it's really important to know the folks you're—you know, it's important that that first emergency phone call isn't introducing yourself. So, everybody knew each other, and that was really—that was really crucial, I think.

Libby Garvey: The other thing that was handy was Tuesday was the day that the superintendent had his staff meeting. So, all of the principals were in and his senior staff, and they were all at the Ed Center, mostly senior staff, I think. And when this all happened, the phones didn't work. They'd been given these phones for Y2K that were supposed to work no matter what, but they didn't. Right? Because nobody's phones were working because it was all overwhelmed. But the email was working. They found the email was working. And what he did was everybody at the Ed Center, the senior staff—so, your assistant superintendent for, you know, this and this and this—each one was assigned a school, and they fanned out around Arlington. So, every principal had someone from the Ed Center with them helping them that day and letting them know, you know, your email's working, the phone's not working, and helping them get through that. And I think that probably helped a lot on how all of the schools coped with what was happening. Yeah.

Libby Garvey: And so, what else with the school system? And then there are just stories that I—I mean, I had really nothing to do with. I think I hired good people, so that helped. Right? But then they do their job. They do their work. And the school electrician apparently was there stringing lights inside the Pentagon that afternoon so that people could see inside because it was pitch black. There was no electricity. So, he was stringing electricity for the rescuer firefighters so they could see and get around. It was an extremely dangerous situation. And I heard it afterwards where it's—I don't know the man's name. He never wanted recognition. And some people say it's the bravest man I've ever seen. I mean, he was in there by himself, you know, and he didn't want anybody to know. You know, he just didn't want that.

Libby Garvey: There was the principal at Hoffman Boston. Her husband was working at the Pentagon, and the plane went over the Hoffman Boston playground, clipped

some of the trees, and hit the Pentagon. And she spent the whole day making sure all the kids were home, her daughter calling in a panic, "Mom, Mom, Dad's not answering his phone. He's not answering his phone, Mom." You know, and when the last student left and was okay, she turned to—I think it was Meg Tocillo, you know—and said, "Will you come with me to the park? Let me go see if I can find Bob." And when she got to the Pentagon, she could see the whole parking lot, and there was one car, sort of isolated, his car, and she knew he was going because he was right in that particular area. She talked to him just before the planes had hit about what was happening in New York, you know, and kind of cracking a joke. "I hope the walls are thick here," you know, never imagining that they would get hit too.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: And there were just—there was just amazing courage, I think, throughout the school system. You just heard stories of, you know, they were worried about their own kids, their own family, their own—and staying with the children and making sure the children were okay. And then it was scary to be kids too because they weren't showing that they were told not to show the TV because you didn't want to scare—right? But the kids know something's up because parents keep coming to take kids home. Right? So, it must have been very difficult. I was not in the classroom, but I think the school system performed really well. Yeah. We had to send staff and adult volunteers on the school buses to make sure there was somebody.

Martha Hermann: We had to send staff and adult volunteers on the school buses to make sure there was someone to pick them up.

Libby Garvey: To pick them up. Right. Right. Right. Yeah. And then the school system really pulled to afterwards, and maybe we'll talk about that a little bit, but just how to help children process and the families processing because obviously here a lot of people were affected.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: So, yeah. And then that was the major—I mean, it was just, you know, there were just reverberations afterwards for quite a while with the school system. I think the superintendent really wanted to get the kids back in school to help them process at school and kind of work things through, which I think was really a good thing. And there was a lot of, you know, bringing together the staff ahead of time to, you know, for—I think school—there was no school maybe for a couple of days. I can't really remember what it was, but bring the staff together to talk about how to handle

the trauma and how to talk to the children about it and how to help the families cope. So, the school system, I think, provided an incredible support for the community. And of course, here we had, you know, we had Abington School right down the road, which is nice.

Libby Garvey: And then I think Fairlington—I thought about it—it's a very—it's such a community place. So, when there's something like this, you walk outside, and there's somebody right there to talk to. Right? And one of our neighbors had put out in the back, sort of central area, had put out a TV, and everybody brought out their chairs, and we had—and we're watching things, and when they had it on the television when the Congress stood and sang "God Bless America," we all stood up and sang "God Bless America" too, and just working through a lot of things. But you didn't feel alone. You had people with you, and that's really important in a situation like that, I think.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah. Yeah.

Lisa Sabol: In the immediate aftermath, I mean, what—and I would say within the like a few months—what did you feel like the mood was or the sense was among people on the school board or, you know, in Fairlington?

Libby Garvey: In Fairlington?

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: I think everywhere there was a sense of fear because you just never knew, would something happen next. Right? You didn't know what was—and America—we're not used to having bombs drop on us, which is really what happened. So, there was a lot of, I would say, fear, and I hadn't felt that before in my life, really brief periods of time, but to go an extended period of time. And at that time, for me, I was disappointed that more people didn't kind of get this. It was a very unpleasant feeling. It's really not pleasant to be going around worrying if somebody's going to be dropping a bomb on you. And I realized this is what we do to people around the world. We did it in Vietnam. We do it in the Middle East. It's happening now in Gaza. It's happening in Iran. I mean, we drop bombs on people, for God's sake. And it's a really hard way to live. And I had hope that we would have developed sympathy and understanding and empathy, and instead we just went, you know, wounded animal and flailed around and started wars and shot ourselves in the foot and destroyed our, you know, standing in the world, which was—it was such a lost opportunity.

Libby Garvey: One of the things that was how the world came together, I mean, you know, Kennan had worked in—he was with EPA, and he did work internationally. And so, there were so many people reaching out to find out, "How are you? What's it like? How are you doing?" So, there was a lot of that.

Break in recording....

Libby Garvey: Back in, back in, back in business again. That's fine. That's fine. Yeah, we were talking about people, how people felt. So there was a lot of fear and then, you know, as I say, I was talking about how the country just blew it instead of being empathetic and realizing this is just not a good way to live. And maybe people might be upset with us because we dropped bombs on them?

Lisa Sabol: Mm-hmm.

Libby Garvey: Humans.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: They're kind of crazy. Yeah, yeah. So yeah, so that would, that would be the short term was the fear.

Libby Garvey: The long term you know, we were talking a little bit, I think everybody, I've always been into emergency preparedness and it kind of kicked big time then. And that was when I realized we needed an emergency radio station because, you know, I realized there I am driving by the Pentagon trying to figure out what to do and there's nothing, nobody to give me any information. You know, I'm listening to the same thing my family's listening to in Wisconsin. So and we actually did get an emergency radio station. And, you know, we've been doing other things and obviously a lot of money came into the region for you know, making sure that the radios could talk to each other. That was another problem.

Libby Garvey: The other, I mean, there were interesting things where, which people don't all know on how our fire department was the, the fire chief was the incident commander at the Pentagon. And I'd heard this great story. This has actually nothing to do with Fairlington exactly, but it's very Arlington. Although, you know, gosh, it was all so, so close by to us.

Libby Garvey: The secretary of defense then, Rumsfeld was, was there, you know, on the site. And the fire chief was, at the end of the day, ordering the firemen to leave the building and they would start again the next day. And Rumsfeld saying, "No, they have to stay at no, no, they have to work all night because I want to," he wanted to open up

the Pentagon the next day. And the fire chief telling him, "No, we've lost over 300 firefighters in New York. We're not going to lose any more here, not on my watch." And Rumsfeld getting on, and the fire chief explained to him, "I'm in charge here. You are not in charge. I am the commander here. You got to do what I say."

Yeah.

And Rumsfeld didn't take that well, but that's where it was.

Libby Garvey: And one of the things that came out of that in general in the region often is this issue of who's in charge. And that is a big thing. So, you know, we, we started I ended up on the emergency preparedness council for the COG - Council of Governments. And you know, and that, that could have been better in a lot of ways, but they, at least it's a way of bringing people together to talk about things. So there are issues like if we have to evacuate, which kind of happened, you know, like 9/11, people, everybody wants to leave. What you want to do is get all of the roads going out of town, you know, change. And I remember at one point asking, asking so who makes that decision, you know, in a meeting? And it was a long pause and they didn't know yet.

Libby Garvey: I don't know if anybody actually has figured it out exactly. I mean, one of the things is when you have a major emergency, who is in charge? Is it the Feds? Is it your local? Is it, luckily enough, there at the Pentagon, it was clear, but there are instances where there could really be a major conflict as to who is actually in charge, which actually we're seeing now politically in things that aren't even emergencies or they're created emergencies, right, by our own government.

Libby Garvey: But that, how the chain of command works and who is in charge is, is a major thing. So Fairlington, very much community-oriented and everybody works together really well. But if you've got a larger thing going on, you want to kind of know who's in charge a little bit so people don't get in each other's way.

Lisa Sabol: From a more of a longer term impact, I mean, what do you think, looking back 25 years later, what is, how has 9/11 changed things locally and, you know, nationally, internationally? I mean, what are your thoughts?

Libby Garvey: I think it's probably the first time that Americans realize, and certainly here that they're somewhat vulnerable. And I think it's the first time we started talking about having a target on our back, right? And I think now with the craziness in the world and things going on, people are a lot, if 9/11 hadn't happened, I think people would be still a little more blase about it. But 9/11 made it very real. And it basically showed you that the world could change in an instant and you needed to be ready.

I, I think some of those lessons were somewhat forgetting because it's 25 years. There are a lot of people that have grown up and not experienced that, right? But in general, there is a sense, I think, here in this area and region that we do need to be prepared for a lot of crazy things to happen. I think we could do better than we do, but we at least have that sort of sense. And I think that is, is, is a little bit different. I think that's maybe the main thing.

Libby Garvey: You know, and it was actually, thinking about it, watching what's going around the world now this is what they're calling asymmetric warfare. So how does Ukraine hold off Russia, right?

Libby Garvey: How is this little Iran like holding off the United States? And then you had this guy in a cave. I mean, I, I think, I don't know if people remember, it was, I forget how much after, it wasn't all that long after. There was this videotape thing that Osama bin Laden sent out talking to the American people, sit cross-legged on the cave floor.

Libby Garvey: And here we are. And it's like, oh my. So what it should, it probably will do long term, long, long term, but we're so slow to learn these lessons. What's power? What's security? You know it certainly isn't big bad things because you get people who are just, people are so clever. You can have, you know, a bunch of people from a desert country come in and get on a plane and destroy a whole bunch of things.

Libby Garvey: And you're finding that with this Strait of Hormuz, and now you've got drones, which has just, you know, really elevated the whole thing. So I think that's a long term thing and they'll probably show 9/11 as being sort of a start, perhaps, of that whole change in modern asymmetric warfare and actually the start to the decay of how much power great powers can actually have, I think. So that's my armchair philosophy on that one.

Lisa Sabol: Is there anything else that you would like to, to add or to say about.

Libby Garvey: About it all? Yeah.

Libby Garvey: You know, you asked about the interim thing. I think there was the immediate aftermath where you could smell, I mean, for like for several weeks you could smell it, the, the, the smell of the burning. And that was sort of, and then of course we started repairing the building. And that lasted. So you were always kind of cognizant. You could see that big wound in the building. You could, you know and that was a good, that was an intermediate thing and lasted for quite a while. So the whole

sort of healing process and getting over it took quite a while. And yet, and I guess back to the, the sort of theme that I've thought about, about, you know, being sympathetic with people. That was one major building here. It's not like Gaza where the whole area has been completely destroyed, you know? So I wish people would become more understanding and empathetic and try to clean up the human species act because we've got to stop acting like this.

Lisa Sabol: Yeah.

Libby Garvey: I think the last thing on Fairlington, I have thought about that, it's such, it's the way it's constructed, it builds a sense of community. I mean, it's sort of architecturally built in, you know, that it has a sense of community. And if you're going to go through something like 9/11 or whatever, I mean, this is absolutely the best place to be. It really is a, you know, call it Fairlington Villages. It really kind of is a village. And we've lost a lot of that in the way we construct modern life and our buildings. I think we're trying to get back to it more. But it's a very special place and if you're going to go through a trauma like this, this is a really good place to do it. You have lots of people around to talk to, to lean on. You're going through it together. People help each other and you're in a, a smaller area where you can easily, conveniently do that. And that's great.

Lisa Sabol: Well, thank you, Libby, for your time.

Libby Garvey: Thank you. This was great. Yeah. Always good. Nice to see Martha again.