

Fairlington Historical Society

September 11, 2001 Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Stephen Gregory Smith & Matt Conner

Interviewer: Martha Herrmann

Date: August 24, 2026

Martha Herrmann: Hi, I'm Martha Herrmann with the Fairlington Historical Society, and it's August 24th, 2026. I'm here today with—

Stephen Gregory Smith: Stephen Gregory Smith.

Martha Herrmann: —and—

Matt Conner: Matt Conner.

Martha Herrmann: —and we are talking about your remembrances of 9/11 in 2001. Let me ask—start by asking about how old you were at that time.

Stephen Gregory Smith: So, I was 23.

Matt Conner: And I was 31.

Martha Herrmann: And where were you living then?

Stephen Gregory Smith: We were at 3220 South Utah Street.

Martha Herrmann: So you were right here in Fairlington.

Stephen Gregory Smith & Matt Conner: Yes. Yep.

Stephen Gregory Smith: We were close to 395—or the house like, kind of closest to 395, and there were no fences in those days. So you could see to the Pentagon from our house.

Martha Herrmann: And you still live here in Fairlington.

Stephen Gregory Smith & Matt Conner: Yes! Yes.

Martha Herrmann: So you know everything! *(Laughs)*

Matt Conner: *(Laughs)* Yes.

Martha Herrmann: Tell me about that morning, just a regular morning. You're getting up, going where?

Stephen Gregory Smith: I was starting my first day at a new job in D.C. And I was working at Dogma, which is a dog daycare facility on Capitol Hill. We actually took care of a lot of the senators' and congresspeople's dogs. So, they would drop them off in the morning, pick them up in the evening.

And I had to be there very early in the morning. I had to—I think I had to be there at like 5:00 AM, around there, because we had dogs boarding overnight and you had to be there to let them out right early in the morning. I was learning the job that morning, and the guy who was training me—like, I didn't know him that well, I was, you know, very nervous about messing anything up, and everything was going fine. As fine as it can be with a yard full of 40 dogs barking at each other.

But at a certain point, I heard my name being yelled. And it was just me and him there. And I thought, *Oh, I've done something wrong. I've lost this job.* And he called me to say a plane's hit the World Trade Center.

And so I came inside, and left the dogs outside. Everyone had arrived who was going to arrive at that point. And so there were 40 dogs outside not being minded as the two of us just stared at the TV in disbelief.

And then it wasn't too, too long after that when the second plane hit. And that's when, you know, everything changed. And I looked out to the left and there—there was a huge window in the front of the office, and there were 40 dogs that were just sitting down looking inside at us, quiet as anything, because they could understand that there was something wrong with us. And that was a moment that I'll never forget.

And meanwhile, Matthew was at home on his own.

Martha Herrmann: Yeah, so, Matt, what was your morning like?

Matt Conner: Well, we are both performers, or were. So, I was doing—so, when it comes to mornings, we don't really usually have mornings. Our morning might start at 9:00 AM, 10:00 AM, 11:00 AM, because we would go to bed usually between 11:00 and 2:00 AM depending on what show we were doing. You were doing *Grand Hotel* at Signature?

Stephen Gregory Smith: Mm-hmm.

Matt Conner: He was doing *Grand Hotel* at Signature when Signature was still on Four Mile Run. I was doing *Carousel* at the time at Toby's Dinner Theatre in Columbia.

So, I had a very lazy morning and was, you know, hanging out with a cup of coffee. I had seen on the news that something happened in New York. Didn't really care or offer too much concern, because I thought, *Oh, some crazy person just flew into a building.*

And at some point, I heard the impact of the Pentagon. Now, our home is the last home in the row of Fairlington homes, and the next thing after I run out of my house is basically—I guess

that was the Greens—is the tennis courts and the Utah field. So I just went running out. I was wearing nothing but a t-shirt and my underwear, because I thought, *Oh my gosh, what just happened?*

I went running out, I saw this smoke, and I climbed up into a tree. And a friend called me from the dinner theater, Tina, and she said, "Are you guys okay?"

And I said, "Well, yeah, we're okay. What's going on?"

She said, "Well, someone just hit New York City, and now someone has just flown a plane into the Pentagon."

And I'm always the class clown, and I said, "Oh, Tina! Oh my gosh, if the world is ending, just think—you'll be the last person—" *Click.*

And all the phones at that time just went dead. We could not call anybody. And then, of course, the last—the next time I talked to Tina, she was like, "Don't you EVER..."

And then I could see the—the billowing of the smoke. At the same time, I couldn't—I didn't really comprehend that any of this was what we now know as 9/11. I just thought, *Oh my gosh, there's some crazy aviation stuff happening today.*

And then I went back to the house, and our—we had a roommate down in the basement. And he also was in theater. And I was like, "Mike, get up!" And so we started watching it. And then, you know, I think we didn't have contact until what—you drove home through the roundabout way? You had to come like, 295 around D.C. that way? You couldn't come through the city?

Martha Herrmann: Now, Stephen, the traffic—what happened to the dogs?

Stephen Gregory Smith: So, to counter, as soon as I saw the dogs staring at us, I, of course, wanted to keep watching the TV, but in a way I didn't. It was too horrific, and my mind was spinning, wondering what this all was meaning. So I said, "You know what? I'm going to go back out with them and just be with them." And God knows what they had gotten into, but I don't think they gotten into anything. I think they felt some kind of—something was wrong.

And so I went back outside with them, and my manager just stayed inside watching the TV, of course, like everyone did. And I heard the impact of the Pentagon when I was outside. And I saw the smoke come up from across, you know—I was in Capitol Hill, but you could see it, of course, because we have a very low—we don't have a lot of high-rise skyscrapers.

So, I ran inside and I told my manager, "Something else has been hit! Come look outside!" And we could see the smoke, and he said, "That's the Pentagon." And he just knew, like, just the trajectory of where we were looking.

And at that point, we had—the Navy Yard is right next to where Dogma is, and that's when I noticed there were soldiers who were up on the roof of the Navy Yard with guns aimed at the sky. And I thought, *Is it going to come to that? And would that do anything?*

And then I thought, *Oh, is the Navy Yard a target?* No one knew what was a target. Of course, I think they probably knew something was trying to maybe head towards the Capitol or the White House. But to see, you know, Navy people with guns pointed to the sky right next to where you're working kind of makes you go, *Oh, where—I'm in the wrong place.*

So my manager said, "My wife's at home and I live in the city. I've got to get out of here. Can you stay until the next person comes in?"

And I said, "Oh, of course." And, of course, it was also like my first day, and I thought, *Well, yes, I'll hold down the fort and this'll be...* somewhere in the back of my mind I was thinking that. Mainly I was thinking like, *Go do what you need to do, I'll be here with the dogs.* And then another part of me is thinking, *I don't know anything about what I need to do here.* You were teaching me when this all happened.

And then the next person never did come in, because no one was going anywhere. No one could, and everything was shut down. So my very first day of work, I was by myself after, you know, two hours.

And I did get a hold—I was trying to call Matt, I was trying to call my mother. Couldn't—the phone lines were down. And finally, I think my brother got through to Dogma, and—I think, did my brother call you?

Matt Conner: I believe so.

Stephen Gregory Smith: He somehow was getting through to try to connect and make sure we were all okay.

And I was talking to the owner of the business and was like, "What do I do?"

She said, "You have to stay there until the dogs are picked up."

And I thought to myself, *What if some of these dogs aren't getting picked up?*

So I stayed till—because I was there from 5:00 something in the morning—I stayed till, I think it was around 7:00, 7:30, until the last dog was picked up. And everyone was very apologetic that they were late. And I was like, "Sure, I just wanted to get home."

I didn't know how to do that. We didn't have MapQuest back then. We didn't have maps or anything else, so I just kind of went where I could go. My options were limited. So I couldn't go back downtown—14th Street was closed. You know, we put on WTOP and listened to the traffic back then in the day.

Martha Herrmann: Yeah.

Stephen Gregory Smith: And so I knew it was closed, and I knew that 295 was right there, so I had to take 295 all the way around the other bridge, you know, and I could see as I was crossing the Potomac, the fighter jets kind of going by the Pentagon, the smoke, you know, the ruins of the Pentagon. And there was no one on the road but me. I was the only car.

Martha Herrmann: And were you able to get on 395?

Stephen Gregory Smith: No, no, no. I had to go 295 all the way around to like—

Matt Conner: The Beltway?

Stephen Gregory Smith: Yeah.

Matt Conner: Where the Woodrow Wilson—come up. You had to come up through—

Stephen Gregory Smith: Through Alexandria.

Martha Herrmann: Right.

Stephen Gregory Smith: And there were cops parked sporadically, like every couple of miles there was just a cop off the main road. And I was like, everyone's just watching everywhere for everything, because they don't know what's next. And just seeing that scene, it was like a scene from a movie—like *Independence Day* or something, some horrible tragedy, which it was. But then I finally got home.

Matt Conner: I guess after everything got grounded, they realized that the problem had been—there was maybe no one else flying after the crash in Pennsylvania.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Mm-hmm.

Matt Conner: But then our theaters were dark for like two nights with no shows. I was doing *Carousel*, and I do remember that there's a song in *Carousel* called "You'll Never Walk Alone." And we always have this crazy reminder in our lives that just fleets, but every time there's a national emergency or even a local emergency, everyone kind of like comes together in this human way that's just so beautiful that, somehow, we then tend to like, forget. But it was such this beautiful moment. And I remember the first time the company sang "You'll Never Walk Alone," and everyone was just like—just bawling, you know, at the idea of that. But...

Martha Herrmann: So you were home alone. Were you able to talk to neighbors about what was—you said you could see the smoke.

Matt Conner: I could see the smoke. And you know what's funny is I did not go out. After I went back inside, I did not go back out. I just was glued to the TV trying to figure out—and because there was no phone, I didn't want to drive anywhere, and I probably couldn't. But I don't remember ever thinking about anything except just watching it on TV, 'cause as it unfolded, you

trying to comprehend, as all of us were, was just the—in—it was incomprehensible of like, *Is this—is this happening?* kind of thing.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Mm-hmm.

Martha Herrmann: And then you got home late. And did you notice the next day—what did you notice the next day? What'd you see the next day in terms of...

Matt Conner: Well, you could smell.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Yeah, there was a residue on the windows a little bit from the smoke, 'cause, you know, you could kind of see it from the Utah Street before those walls were there.

Matt Conner: We had a friend that was on Columbia Pike that was in a car when the plane went over his car into the Pentagon.

Stephen Gregory Smith: And clipped some of the telephone poles towards the end at the top of the hill of the Pike.

Matt Conner: Mm-hmm.

Martha Herrmann: Did you talk a lot afterwards with neighbors at all? Did people come out and come together or share?

Matt Conner: Our—our community at that time was very theater-focused. We really weren't as neighborly as we were—

Stephen Gregory Smith: Well, we were—we were always going to work when everyone was home. So we didn't know as many people back then.

Martha Herrmann: Were you able to go to work the next few days?

Stephen Gregory Smith: It was two days. Two days that we were—everything was shut down because no one wanted to do anything, and...

Matt Conner: We did have a friend that worked in the First Tower who had either forgotten something at home or—something kept him away from going to work. He worked in the restaurant in the tower.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Windows on the World, yeah.

Matt Conner: And he did not go to work by happenstance.

Stephen Gregory Smith: I was doing the show, as he said, at Signature, *Grand Hotel*, which—for those not familiar, it's based off of a film from the 1930s or '40s, I believe. It's about the Berlin pre-Nazi era, and it's the haves and the have-nots, and the workers of the Grand

Hotel have this rage just right under the surface that they work and work and work, and they have nothing. Which that attitude led to Nazi Germany.

And so, the show ends quite ominously that something bad is coming. And you don't quite go there, like it's not spoken of, and there's just a Jewish character going off to Poland with a friend of his, and you're like, *You're never going to be seen again*. Like, there's so many bad things that are...

So that's the show we had to do coming back from 9/11, which was—and it was a discussion night! Which, thank goodness it was. Because everyone needed to talk anyway.

But I remember saying, "I really wish we were doing like, *State Fair* or something tonight, because this was not..." But everyone was getting their own rage out on the stage, which kind of helped, but it was not probably the funnest watch for the audience. Because you think about how people—how fear and anger and resentment and things form a kernel in your brain that leads to actions like this that we can't fathom because it's something we would never do, but it's always so fascinating to understand how people have that in them to do, you know?

And that's kind of—that was my return to work. Not as fun.

Martha Herrmann: What kind of changes in general did you notice in the area after?

Stephen Gregory Smith: Well...

Matt Conner: I definitely felt a different sense of community, a different sense of kindness, a different sense of oneness. And I felt like people—this is why I love living in Arlington, kind of, because where I'm from originally was kind of a farm. Not that we didn't have neighbors, but, you know, here there's just a very tight-knit, everyone's, you know, in closer proximity. And I do remember that feeling of every—I mean, any place: bank, 7-Eleven, it was everywhere. Just felt like everyone was connected and everyone was affected in some way.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Yeah, there was, of course, the flags were everywhere. And it was—it was a different time, because we all kind of *en masse* felt the same way.

Matt Conner: And then slowly people started talking about the family members of the Pentagon, because that was our closest affected community.

Martha Herrmann: Did you know anyone?

Matt Conner: I didn't know anyone personally, no.

Stephen Gregory Smith: No, but it—it's a—it was an interesting couple between that and then, let's not forget, not that far after that, there's a famous photo in *The Washington Post* of a funnel cloud going over the wreckage of the Pentagon. Because a tornado like a week later came right through our backyard area. Knocked over trees, and it blew out a bunch of windows in Shirlington.

Matt Conner: Yeah.

Stephen Gregory Smith: But that happened, the anthrax thing happened shortly thereafter, and the sniper. And everything became very scary for a while, and everyone walking in zigzags during the sniper, and all of that.

So I think it was the first thing in a chain of—of fear and anxiety that that kind of permeated the area. And I know at least our circle of friends held very tight together and would gather a lot more together, even if it was with the blinds down and, you know, in the safety of our own home, because you felt like you just wanted a whole bunch of friends on the couch with you at all times. You wanted security, you wanted, you know, community.

And while I'm sad we didn't have that with our neighbors at that point, we definitely have it now, so...

Matt Conner: Well, we're not doing a show till 11:00 at night and coming home when everyone's in bed! (*Laughs*) Our community's changed a lot, yeah.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Yeah. For the better.

Martha Herrmann: I remember birds. That it seemed that all the birds came back because there was nothing in the sky anymore. There weren't cars going, there weren't planes flying. And I remember so many birds everywhere.

Stephen Gregory Smith: The same thing happened during COVID.

Martha Herrmann: That's absolutely true.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Yeah. Another—(*laughs*) yeah, another moment.

I think that, you know, this area, because—I mean, we are in Arlington, and Arlington was targeted and attacked. 9/11 feels so much different than it does to a lot of other people. Of course, people in New York will say, "Well, you don't understand," to people like us, and we don't. But we can understand parts of it. And people in Pennsylvania have a different feeling. And my family's from Pennsylvania, and after that day, they would go back to that field and, you know, pay respects.

And I remember, I think it was the 10-year anniversary of 9/11, they did this incredible, moving light show at the Pentagon with like red, white, and blue lights that kind of danced all over the—the clouds in the sky, and it was very moving and beautiful. And I know they do the Pillars of Light, of course, in New York and things, but I'm hoping they do something special to commemorate this year since—

Martha Herrmann: 25 years. Can you believe 25 years?

Stephen Gregory Smith: No. Doesn't seem possible.

Martha Herrmann: Uh-uh.

Stephen Gregory Smith: And for those of us who lived here and lived through it—and I'm sure for New York as well—sometimes it was yesterday, and sometimes a lifetime ago.

Matt Conner: Because everything changed, too, after that. Everything changed.

Martha Herrmann: What changes did you notice?

Stephen Gregory Smith: Well, I mean... selfishly, my birthday's on the 5th of July, and I used to like to go downtown for the 4th. Well, that was never the same. And even if you did go, it was such a rigmarole, and it's such a, you know... and so things like that. Things were easier, so much easier, of course, you know?

The—actually, the summer of 9/11, me and Matt and my parents went to the Mall. It was the last time pre-9/11. And we had a blast, and there were no security checks, and it was pouring raining by the end, and we were soaked like drowned rats with everyone else on the Metro. It stunk, everyone was laughing because you could do nothing but... and it was a different, you know—the pre-9/11 era is such a more innocent time that, you know... to say nothing of security at airlines or anywhere else.

But I think the main difference is just the fear factor because I—for... not since Pearl Harbor... I mean, we felt like we were invincible, and maybe that was, of course, incredibly naive. "Who would have the gall to attack us," you know? "We're the good guys, right?"

So, to be caught with our pants down in that way, I think, um... You—I mean, there's a reason it's called *terrorism*, that you're afraid about everything. Your mind starts inventing new ways that they're going to attack us next. And I think that was, at least for me, being already a highly anxious person in my everyday life, that's what my brain did. It was like, "What about this? What if they do this next? We should be vigilant now."

Martha Herrmann: Matt, were you feeling some of the same things?

Matt Conner: Well, I think... I guess, yeah, when you don't really think that you are ever going to be, uh, destroyed or touched the way we were on 9/11 as an American because we do live in a very removed world unless you are a wonderful, world-renowned traveler that sees things. It wasn't really until I flew to Paris in 1995 with my college that I even really realized how little anyone cares about, you know, my American point of view. So, I think, "Oh my gosh, there's a whole world out here. Who would have thought?" But we live in this bubble here a little bit about, um, crises like that. And so I think when that happened, there does become this sort of inward, um, thinking about who is it that wants us to be destroyed, and how did we get here, and how do we fix it? And, you know, I teach children of all creeds and backgrounds, so I, you know, I have a very collective, um, family in the circles I teach. And to try to think that somehow we were divided with, you know, this enemy that was going to attack us, and was it possible that we even knew about it before it happened, and all of these other things that creep in of... 'cause we're not at war, but it was a reminder that maybe we always are. I don't know, you know? You

start thinking. And, of course, us being artists in the theater, we already live in sort of a non-nine-to-five box where we research and dig really deep into different... So, yeah. But I do think 9/11, anyone who went through it, whether you were near one of the, um, sites or not, you still carry some sort of scar or some sort of image of how that affected you. You know, my parents would say, "You know, that's when we started locking the house. That's when we started locking the doors."

Martha Hermann: Yeah.

Matt Conner: And that is kind of a... that's... We don't lock our doors, but you did start kind of locking your doors and thinking a little bit differently about like, "Is someone going to hurt me personally?" And...

Stephen Gregory Smith: I'll never forget my mother said, um... I live in... well, I grew up in this very small town in Western Pennsylvania called Connellsville. Um, she said on the phone, "Well, they've shut down the Connellsville Airport." The Connellsville Airport would be lucky if it was hit by something (*laughter*) because it was such a tragic, pathetic-looking thing for like one-person planes, and there was maybe two on the runway. It's a shame to even call it an airport, you know? I remember that sense of everyone also wanting to feel like, "Well, this is happening in my town, too." It's this—it's... It's almost... It was almost like the thing when you're in like, uh, grade school and a classmate dies, or high school and a classmate dies, and everyone was their friend all of a sudden. Everyone also wanted to feel a part of this because they did feel it, some so viscerally. But maybe they weren't there in the affected areas, but their psyche, their heart, their... you know, their brain was affected in some way. And I think that's valid, um...

Matt Conner: Well, and for weeks...

Stephen Gregory Smith: Not for the Connellsville Airport, you know.

Matt Conner: Well, I mean, for weeks we could just literally drive by the Pentagon and still just see this like... this memorial site of knowing that people had been on a plane that went through a building. And now the Pentagon is no longer the Pentagon? Like, yeah.

Stephen Gregory Smith: And even after the rebuild, noticing the texture of the new stone versus the old is always a, "There it is. There it is."

Matt Conner: Yeah.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Every time you're on the Parkway, you're like, "Oh."

Martha Hermann: I remember across from the Pentagon, there was that building that the firefighters came out and put the huge American flag.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Yeah. Mhm.

Martha Hermann: They unfurled. That was there for a long time, you know?

Stephen Gregory Smith: Long time. Yeah.

Matt Conner: And, of course, Fairlington was built for the Pentagon workers, like it was...

Stephen Gregory Smith: The connection there.

Matt Conner: Yeah.

Stephen Gregory Smith: Yep.

Martha Hermann: Oh, you guys, this has been wonderful. Is there anything else you'd like to say just in general that I didn't think to ask?

Stephen Gregory Smith: After my harrowing trip home seeing all these things, my—now, I've been with this man for almost 30 years, and he's the love of my life, but it was newish then. And I said, "Oh my God, thank God you're okay." And what did Matt say to me? Do you remember?

Matt Conner: "I don't work at the Pentagon."

(Laughter)

Stephen Gregory Smith: That was our heartfelt reunion. And I was like, "All right."

Matt Conner: Well, well, I mean, in—as we all—we... it was all unfolding in real time, and we didn't really have any answers, I don't think, even that night about really what the plan was. You know, we just knew that something bad was happening, and it didn't feel like it had anything to do with a global anything. But at the same time, I don't know if I really quite even remember how serious I even took that day because it wasn't until we really realized at some point, "Oh my gosh, this is..."

Martha Hermann: The big picture. What happened.

Matt Conner: "...this is what went down."

Stephen Gregory Smith: The picture didn't fit the frame. That's the thing. I mean, and to his credit—I'm only saying that with love—to his credit, two years...

Matt Conner: Sounded like love. *(laughs)*

Stephen Gregory Smith: Two years after 9/11, our house—we moved out of Fairlington to a place off of 16th Street, and our house burned down. And I called him from the back of a firetruck, and he was waiting tables at Luna Grill and Diner in Shirlington, and he said, "Well, I guess I better stay and work. We're going to need money."

(Laughter)

Stephen Gregory Smith: He knows how to deal with the, uh...

Martha Hermann: Oh, dear.

Stephen Gregory Smith: ...those tragic days. So...

Matt Conner: Yep.

Martha Hermann: Oh. On that note, thank you both so much...

Matt Conner: Absolutely. Thank you, Martha.

Martha Hermann: ...for telling us your stories and your memories.

Matt Conner: Yes. Thanks for having us.

Martha Hermann: Thank you.