

Fairlington Historical Society
September 11, 2001 Oral History Interview
Susan Kernan

Scarlett Bunting: Our next interviewee is Susan Kernan. Today is May 1, 2026, and Susan, do you recall how— what your age was on 9/11/2021?

Susan Kernan: Well, let's see. If— excuse me, this is going to be a problem with the coughing.

Susan Kernan: guess I was 71.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. Is that right, 71?

Susan Kernan: I was born in 1940, so to 2000 it was 60.

Susan Kernan: And 2000—

Scarlett Bunting: Oh, 61. So you were 61.

Susan Kernan: Sorry, not 71. Yeah. Okay.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay, 61. Okay. And then how long had you— on that day, how long had you already been living in Fairlington?

Susan Kernan: Oh, gosh. I lived first in an apartment, and I think that was in maybe the mid-'70s. And then I stayed there for about 7 years, and then I bought a— Clarendon across the street and stayed there till I came here.

Scarlett Bunting: Which was when?

Susan Kernan: Which was 2019.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. Wow.

Susan Kernan: So I was there a very long time.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah, that is a long time to see things happening and whatnot. So what kind of— were you working when 9/11 happened?

Susan Kernan: I was a principal of a school for— a Fairfax County school, for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. And that was located—

Susan Kernan: It was in Fairfax. In Burke.

Scarlett Bunting: Oh, in Burke. Okay. I went to that elementary school when I was a kid.

Susan Kernan: You went to Burke?

Scarlett Bunting: I did. Burke Elementary.

Susan Kernan: Well, it wasn't Burke Center that I had, though. I had one that was at Laurel Ridge.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. Yeah, I went to the little old school at the corner of Lee Chapel and Burke Lake Road. It was built in 1939, and it had a cornfield around it and all that when I went there. But anyway. Yeah, so— okay, so you worked out in— Yeah. In

Scarlett Bunting: Burke area, like then? Okay.

Susan Kernan: Yeah, it was on Commonwealth Boulevard there at Laurel Ridge, near Robinson High School.

Scarlett Bunting: Oh, okay. Yep. That's where my kids went. Anyway, so— and oh, and where in Fairlington did you live? What was your village name or whatever?

Susan Kernan: I lived on— in North Fairlington.

Scarlett Bunting: North Fairlington. Okay. All right.

Susan Kernan: Buchanan Street.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. All right. And so how did you— probably like other people— how did you find out what was going on that morning? I mean, what was your first recollection of finding out what had happened?

Susan Kernan: I'm sure that my secretary came in and said, "Turn on something." I don't know what. I think I had a TV in my office, but I know I had a radio, but I think I had a TV too. And we turned it on and we saw it. But then, before we could even process it, calls started— you know, in a system like that. First, the system is calling, saying, "Don't do this. Don't do this. Don't do that." And then we got the parents all panicking, so.

Scarlett Bunting: Yes.

Susan Kernan: It was a hectic time. And right in the middle of it, my daughter called me from Connecticut, "What do you think about that?" I was like, "I don't have time to think about that."

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. You've got to deal with all these kids and their parents right now. Yeah, it must have been quite chaotic at work and with— I mean, because in a school setting, I mean, you know. Yeah.

Susan Kernan: Well, first decision we had to make was whether we were going to tell the children or not. We had them from age 5 up to 13, so.

Scarlett Bunting: Right. Yeah.

Susan Kernan: And we made the decision, no, we were not telling that. That was the parents' job, and we were not going to take that on. So trying to get everything organized and keep it under control was— because we had about 10 school buses. These kids that I had came from all over the county. It wasn't just right there.

Scarlett Bunting: Local. Yeah.

Susan Kernan: And so we had to get the drivers there and then tell the drivers, who love to tell children everything, "Do not tell this. Just say, 'The school's decided to close early today.'" I don't know why. And let it go. Because some of the older kids weren't, "What's going on here?"

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. Right. Wow. Okay. And then so did you have to work a full day, or were you able to leave with your kids?

Susan Kernan: Oh, yeah. I had to stay by the phone at the school until every child was home. I think I had 70 kids, and I had to contact all of them.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. All right. So then.

Susan Kernan: And my secretary stayed too.

Scarlett Bunting: So meantime, you know, all this is going on. And you said you had a husband? Or wait, a daughter. You had a daughter that was living in Connecticut. Anybody else living with you in Fairlington at the time?

Susan Kernan: No.

Scarlett Bunting: You were on your own? Okay. All right. And so when you— how did you— driving home was not a problem?

Susan Kernan: I don't remember. We were talking about that today. I don't remember it.

Scarlett Bunting: And you were coming from Burke and heading—

Susan Kernan: I all of a sudden stopped thinking about school and kids and wondering what was going on. I mean, I knew my daughter knew, so. I just— I don't remember it being a big problem. There may have been heavier traffic. I was coming from out in Fairfax.

Scarlett Bunting: Right. Heading in.

Susan Kernan: In toward the city on 390— on 95, so.

Scarlett Bunting: Right. Okay. And then when you— so you get home and you're in Fairlington, and did you see any neighbors? Or did you talk to anybody? Any kind of vibe in the neighborhood that you were aware of?

Susan Kernan: I didn't see anybody that I remember. But of course, several— I had several good friends living there and also other places close by. So we did a lot of phoning. I remember that.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. So you were on the phone.

Susan Kernan: And mostly, you went to the TV and you were just watching that, trying to find out what really was going on.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. So did you feel yourself kind of keeping more to yourself and figuring all that out, rather than getting out and about, like sharing with neighbors or anything, or?

Susan Kernan: Yeah, I don't think I went. I was exhausted by the time I got home. I think I was probably more concerned about what to eat for dinner than anything else. But yeah.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. And after working that full day with—

Susan Kernan: And then I was going out at night.

Scarlett Bunting: After working that full day with all the kids and sorting them out, you probably needed that.

Susan Kernan: Well, I knew I had— pretty sure I was going to have to turn around and go back. When the school is closed, the administration has to go. So I would be there even though there wouldn't be any kids, so.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. Okay. So not really a lot of trouble getting home. Traffic wasn't bad. And did you— you were coming from the south. You didn't see any smoke or anything like that? Or any kind of evidence of the Pentagon?

Susan Kernan: No. I didn't see any signs of anything.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay.

Susan Kernan: Although I don't live very far from the side of the Pentagon, but I didn't go that far.

Scarlett Bunting: Right. But it wasn't like on the horizon or anything like that that you could—

Susan Kernan: No. Not that I could see.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. So what was it like just to be in Fairlington in the weeks after? Did you notice a different— I don't know, just a different vibe or anything?

Susan Kernan: Well, yeah. I mean, it wasn't a catastrophe, a physical catastrophe in any way for people living in there. I mean, it wasn't like somebody's house burned up or something. I guess many people were affected by various things, not only here but in Pennsylvania and in New York. And so that was— the TV was the big source.

Scarlett Bunting: Yes.

Susan Kernan: Yeah. And I did get to— we got together with friends, but then we always did that, so that wasn't— I was a tennis player, and I used to play a lot of tennis. And I probably was out the next day maybe playing tennis. I don't remember.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. All right. So trying to get back to normal in some way. Yeah.

Susan Kernan: Yeah. Well, you know it's horrendous. You know it's worldwide, earth-shaking. But there's nothing— nobody in your neighborhood got hurt, so. Although there was the risk that somebody from the Pentagon could have gotten hurt, but no one that I knew personally did.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. All right. Yeah. Anything that you changed about your— I don't know, either your views or anything around you, your kind of like your life being changed?

Susan Kernan: Well, it was scary because it became obvious very quickly that it was some kind of domestic terror groups who were doing this of some kind. We didn't know who or what, but I mean, it didn't come from Japan.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Susan Kernan: So that was— that impacted our thinking, I think.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. Okay. Was there anything else you wanted to add or any other recollections you have?

Susan Kernan: Well, I thought we knew better, but that was such a— it was a frantic day.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. Well, you were very busy for the first—

Susan Kernan: Yeah. Sure. So.

Scarlett Bunting: It's all late in the afternoon.

Susan Kernan: But just making sure they got— once they got home, yeah. It didn't bother me, but.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. So you did have to go back to work the next day even?

Susan Kernan: Mm-hmm. I'm sorry I don't remember.

Scarlett Bunting: But the kids— I don't remember. The kids were out of school the next day, probably?

Susan Kernan: , I think they were. I think.

Scarlett Bunting: I think, yeah. I'm guessing they were too.

Susan Kernan: I'm pretty sure they were for a couple of days because I don't remember. One of the things that I would have had to do was had a rehearsal with the staff on what tale are we telling today. And I didn't have to do that. I don't remember doing that. I think when the kids came back, they knew. They all knew. And there was no— it was old stuff by that time.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. I guess one of the things I kind of remember, and maybe you felt it or saw it, I felt like people were— that big push to united. We're united.

Susan Kernan: Well, sure.

Scarlett Bunting: It brought us together as a country. Did you feel anything like that in Fairlington at all? Like any kind of community-wide changes?

Susan Kernan: Of course, I didn't work in the government. I was an outsider occupationally, so. I don't remember. I'm sure it affected many people there, probably directly, but.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. And nothing you recall, so. I

Susan Kernan: can't recall it.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. Well, thank you so much for sharing. You know what?

Susan Kernan: When I think of it, though, I think I was working in the district when— was it Martin Luther King? Yes, I guess it had to have been. When he was killed, that was a time when there was a lot of gathering anyway, and then he got killed. Oh, that was— somebody tried to take the starter button out of my Volkswagen on my way to work the next day.

Scarlett Bunting: Oh, okay.

Susan Kernan: Because I had to go over and go up through Georgetown, and some guy— Georgetown student, I'm sure— opened my trunk when I was stopped at the corner. And that's the engine in a Volkswagen.

Scarlett Bunting: Yeah. Right. Right. Right.

Susan Kernan: And tried to pull out the— I was very proud of myself. I got out with my umbrella and gave him a whack.

Scarlett Bunting: Good for you. Good for you.

Susan Kernan: I did. I've never forgotten. I've never hit a person in my life. But I took that thing and I blasted him in the back of the neck.

Scarlett Bunting: And so did you live in Fairlington then too?

Susan Kernan: No. Yes, I did.

Scarlett Bunting: Oh my gosh. Wow. So you're really—

Susan Kernan: Well, I don't know if I— no. I think I was living in Arlington, but not in Fairlington. Yeah.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. Oh, yeah. That's right. Because you moved in the '70s, I think. Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Susan Kernan: I was living in an apartment building in Arlington.

Scarlett Bunting: Okay. Wow.

Susan Kernan: But so to me, that one was a much greater— and then on the first day back, one of the little boys came in and said, "Miss—" oh, no. That was when John Kennedy— I had just started working when John Kennedy got killed. And somebody came in.