

Cheryl Thomas--EEB Guidance Counselor (Mrs. Thomas submitted 3 writings, each of them below.)

Hand to frayed brow, the bespectacled and petite fifth grade teacher dashed into the Guidance Conference Room. A meeting in the office had concluded and people were leaving. "I need you to come talk to my class!" she urged. "We were talking about what had happened and (the student) said he didn't want to come to school tomorrow!" She was surprised as much as concerned that an outwardly tough kid in her class had openly admitted that he was afraid. He, like many other fifth graders at Emma E. Booker, had been face-to-face with the President in our school's media center as our nation's leader prayed for victims and pledged to seek justice after hearing that terrorists in planes had toppled the World Trade Center Towers. The teacher explained that when the President left, some of her students were alarmed at soon seeing anxious parents whisk their children from campus. "It'll be all right," I assured the teacher. Next, I called upon my nearby colleagues: a school psychologist and two fellow counselors. Shocked by urgent events, we were mostly quiet along the walk to the classroom. Entering the room, I immediately saw a large white projector-lit screen with the black letters "WTC" and facts that had been scribbled by the teacher; then, I glimpsed twenty or so students with related notes in front of them on their desks. Some were in conversation; others were silent with stares. Soon, the door to my right opened and a teacher and about 15 more students filed in and settled into vacant spots. Another counselor began the discussion. She nodded toward the screen and asked: "Why don't you tell me what you've learned about what happened today?" Hands flew up as student after student rattled off facts: clearly and succinctly. "How do you feel?" was the next question asked by a professional. "Sad!" answered one student. "What makes you feel that way?" was the retort. The student replied that it was because innocent people were killed. Another student responded that he felt angry about the senseless deaths. "Mad!" a normally shy boy blurted with a conviction that surprised me. He explained that his fury was directed toward the terrorists. "Upset! Perplexed! Furious! Scared!" rang the responses. The school psychologist affirmed: "All these feelings are OK." One colleague explained that it's normal to have a rush of emotions after the "high" of the presidential visit that was followed by the sudden "low" of the tragedy. A counselor added: "You are doing the right thing by sharing feelings with someone you trust." I concluded: "It is important to deal with facts to control your fears. People seek comfort when they feel unsure. Some parents picked up their kids early because of rumors that scared them. Or, it could be that some needed to feel better by simply being with their children because they love them." I reminded students that Secret Service agents had swept our campus in preparation for the presidential visit. "Is it safe?" I asked. "If it wasn't, I wouldn't be standing here in front of you right now."

I was shy to admit it: I felt giddy, proud in my formal black dress with white trim. I heard myself say the words out loud: "Emma E. Booker Elementary School will be recognized before ALL of the United States!" As I stood on the platform that was constructed in a day for the 43rd President of the United States' arrival in my school media center, I wondered if I might shake hands with the Commander-in-Chief. I glimpsed to my right, just feet from the place where he was expected to make an entrance and gasped in anticipation of the memorable moment. I patiently waited, got tired of waiting and slipped off my black heels. I waited some more. I put my heels back on and glanced in front at fifth-graders in white shirts and blue shorts who behaved so respectfully that I

was honored by their presence. I watched to my left and listened as colleagues complimented each other and told jokes. Some donned serious looks. Parents stood with their children close to them. Before long, two U.S. congressmen for Florida and our county's school superintendent flanked in front of me as they politely shook hands and greeted fellow platform standers. I looked to my right again expecting the President but was easily distracted by whispers from concerned faces. A colleague turned to me. I bent to listen. She announced: "They are saying a plane crashed into the World Trade Center towers!" I shook my head in speechless disbelief as I paused to envision a Boeing airplane colliding into the famous New York skyscrapers. Before I could comprehend the horror, another message was rapidly related: "It was TWO planes! They think that it was terrorists!" Soon after, the President entered unannounced with an urgent stride to the podium that graced a symbolic eagle. Silence prevailed before he confirmed the whispers to be truth. We bowed our heads and prayed for the nation and its victims. The President quickly left the center stage. As he passed, my hand shot out to affirm solidarity. He grasped my hand with a firm grip as I looked into grave, bluish eyes surrounded by wrinkled lines that conveyed the weight of the world had descended upon the broad shoulders of a human being.

Five days after the bombing that altered history and 1,000 miles away from New York in Florida, I stood at the dining room table of my childhood home clapping with family as my mother took a deep breath to blow out the candles on the cake for her 80th birthday. She smiled for the plethora of pictures. Moments later, my nearly three-year-old triplet grandniece and grandnephews chased my Lhasa Apso in circles while family members sat on the living room sofas engaged in laughter and in conversation. During the excitement, I quietly wandered into a side room for solitude so as not to ruin anyone else's good time with my bad feelings. The television in the side room displayed images of firemen and emergency teams scouring through the rubble of the once great Twin Towers of New York City. Desperate, tearful people of all races, held up smiling faces of missing loved ones in pictures. The news flash at the bottom of the television screen kept me up-to-date with world developments and the count of those missing or presumed dead. Now it was about 5,000. I silently cried and then questioned, "How could I celebrate when so many children do not have a parent?" My grandniece Jazmin, who is African American with big brown eyes and black curly shoulder-length locks, scurried into the room with her mother Bridget, who is blond, blue-eyed and German. Bridget is new to America and far away from the neighborhood and people of her motherland. She snuggled my sweet light honey brown niece into her protective arms while she told of worries for her triplets: their education, their well-being, their future. She stuck her fingers to Jazmin's pink gum to show me her daughter's small, malformed front teeth. She rocked her back and forth with a mother's love and kissed her cheek. I shared with Bridget what I knew to ease her fears and I felt empowered by my knowledge of life. In his work "September 1, 1939," W.H. Auden said it simply: "We must love one another or die." The next day, my silver-haired mother in bright red dress stood in front of the gray chain-link fence of our brick home. The gate header distinctly identified the proud Southern resident as P. Henderson. "Smile," I said, pointing the camera at her as she rested her arm to the gate. She beamed, chin up. Having lived through many wars, she was inspired to see the sunrise on a third generation of Hendersons on her 80th birthday.