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A Day Shared by All Americans

Tuesday! For many years, the day itself will echo boundlessly in the minds and hearts of America and the world. As the humid morning evolved into a sweltering September day, many lives were changed forever. At the close of a restless night's sleep, I quickly awakened Tuesday, September 11, 2001 to thoughts of the day ahead. Today was the day I would meet the 43rd President of the United States of America! As I scurried around the house to prepare myself for the day's excitement, I imagined the numerous television cameras, photo journalists, and reporters who would be swarming the beautiful Sarasota campus of Emma E. Booker Elementary. While time progressed, the reality of the Presidential visit grew more exciting. As my friend and I arrived at the newly constructed security checkpoint near the rear entrance of the campus, nervous anticipation overshadowed excitement. Media vans, trucks and satellites had replaced the area which would ordinarily be crawling with school ready children. Activity levels had been transposed into quiet curiosity and nervousness as dark suited men with stoic faces stood steadfast at many posts around campus. For approximately 2 hours, I felt extreme physical safety. After all, I was surrounded by many Secret Service men and women.

My colleagues and I, along with many students, family, and community members stood patiently in the school's media center waiting for the special guest. The room permeated all that was right in the world. SUCCESS! The President was visiting because the students and staff of Emma E. Booker Elementary had worked feverishly over the years to maintain and show continual academic growth. I would be celebrating each child's success with the President. As a school counselor in America, what else could I ask for? As time lapsed, my questions multiplied. When would President Bush arrive? I imagined him reading and playing with our school's second grade students and preparing himself for his speech to America and the world. This would be the day the President outlined his education plan. And to think, I would be standing only a few steps behind him. MY school and its success would be profiled to the world! As I stood on the platform with amazement on my face and pride and honor in my heart, I watched the Secret Service agent walk in my direction. He quickly approached the two congressmen standing immediately in front of me, and my amazement turned to curiosity. I was able to hear all "the important stuff". Within an instant, my curiosity shifted to disappointment as I heard the news of a plane crash into the World Trade Center in New York. "Would the President still visit?", I wondered. Moments later, disappointment was replaced by extreme loss and guilt as I overheard the second conversation. A second plane had crashed into the World Trade Center and it was considered a terrorist attack. As the news seemingly rippled across the media center, a steady hum replaced the once present buzz of multiple conversations. Cell phones began ringing and media reporters and their cameramen quickly exited the room.

After a brief absence, both local and national media began trickling back into the room. Another Secret Service agent approached the congressmen again and asked them to exit for a briefing with the President. It was at this moment, that my life seemed to stand still while the world around me began to collapse. Minutes later, a brisk walking man entered through the curtain beside me and a hush fell over the room. Applause began and I wondered why in the world people were clapping. Immediately, I focused on the medium statured, slightly gray-haired man standing at the podium. He began to speak and I listened not only with my ears, but with my heart. With bright lights shining in my face and grief in my heart, I fought back tears while he addressed the nation. He appeared like a father declaring justice for a massive injustice on his children. Immediately following his statement to the world, President Bush turned to exit the room. Just before walking through the curtain, he turned in the direction of my colleagues and I. I will never forget the tone of his voice nor the tear in his bluish eyes. My heart raced as our eyes seem to water in unison. He simply stated with a nod of his head, "Thank you for allowing me to come here today (pause) and I'm so sorry I cannot stay." He then extended his hand in a

firm handshake to myself and very few other colleagues. In my eyes, he walked away, not as the President, but as a father, husband, son, and leader. He exited. I stood numb. I had a difficult time listening to United States Secretary of Education Rod Paige as he spoke of the President's educational initiatives. I remember hoping the cameras would not focus on me as I needed to wipe a tear from my eyes several times. My previous sense of ultimate safety had been replaced with a fear of ultimate vulnerability!

After Secretary Paige and Florida Lt. Governor Frank Brogan spoke, the room was once again full of activity. Reporters became scavengers as they approached anyone for a reaction to our national tragedy. As a reporter from the St. Petersburg Times approached me, I struggled to make sense of this horrific act. He asked me how someone like myself, a school counselor, would be responding to the children. Within seconds, the professional side of me emerged with a fluid response, as the personal side seemed to gaze speechlessly in astonishment. "You have to be strong," I reminded myself. As a role model to children, my response would be crucial in the reactions of my 620 students. With hindsight, I survived this day because of my colleagues and my Emma E. Booker family. Just as time continues, so did the school day. Life and its events had forced me to adjust from a tremendous emotional high to a devastating low. Parents hurriedly found their way to the front office to begin withdrawing their students for early dismissal. Some spoke softly, some lashed out in anger, but all shared a common need; the need to see and touch their children. Fear on their faces, like none other I'd seen, was my initial evidence of the terrorists' newly waged war. As a parent, I shared the same need. I so wanted to see and hold my two year old like I'd never held her before. I sought refuge in my office with a closed door and a brief call to my husband. For a moment, I felt safe, then began to cry. I quickly caught myself. Remember, I had to be strong. In a temporary effort to squash any emotion, I terminated the call with the voice which represented once known safety and security.

Like waters in a breaking dam, tearful anger finally emerged from my petite southern body after arriving home. My small body would lie lifelessly in a state of mental, emotional and physical exhaustion. What had happened to America? What will happen to the many wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters whose lives had been shattered? Tears continued as I listened to the many tributes on the television. I repeatedly found myself unable to answer my own questions. The world was different. I was different.

In the days to follow, I could no longer allow myself to continue to feel threatened or weakened by this devilish, cruel, and unwarranted act of hate. My resolve began to heighten! I was an American! WE were Americans! WE were joined with tremendous solidarity! With the passing of time, I have felt the heaviness of my heart transform itself. Occasionally, I catch myself smiling as I drive down the road. I see American flags flying high and proud. I softly ask God to grant peace to the many victims' families. I ask for the safety of the many men and women who are preparing for war. I often pray, as this is my small contribution to the war. Our soldiers and our country need prayers of protection and guidance. We are fighting for "Enduring Freedom". America is resilient. America and its people will live on!