



Lee Ielpi: "It happened on our soil"

LEE IELPI: Well, you know I probably should have what I am here, which is Vice President of September 11th Family Association. Retired Firefighter, twenty-six years in the New York City Fire Department. I worked the Brooklyn Rescue Company 2, of the nineteen of those and my first seven years I spent in Brownsville in Engine 227.

My son Jonathan, who was a New York City Firefighter, Squad 288, Special Unit, similar to the rescuers but just below the rescue companies,



with their status of being in the Fire Department. John called that morning to say "turn the TV on" and, of course, we turned it on. We saw what everybody else saw across the world. With that, I could hear the tones in the firehouse going off which means that they're gonna be going out on a run.

So when Jonathan said, "Dad-- Dad we're going to the World Trade Center", I said, "Okay buddy, just be careful." He said, "Okay." And that was the last time I spoke to John.

So at that point I realized, you know, that I'm not gonna stay at home. My son Brendan, who is also a New York City firefighter, he was only on the draft four months at the time. You know, he came outta college, had a couple degrees and he decided he wanted to be a fireman. The-- The college is gonna be good in the future for him. But he wanted to be a fireman. So he was only on four months at the time September 11th happened.

So when Brendan and I took off for the City, I dropped him off at his firehouse, which is just on the other side of the Manhattan Bridge. I hopped into a police car -- we had an escort over the bridge. Then got to as far as City Hall, met with a couple of friends; I met up with one good friend. You couldn't see down the streets, it was still very, that gray horrible cloud that the City was covered in was still hanging all over the place.

Surreal is not even, no, there's no words to describe what it was like. So, this one friend of mine, he was looking for his brother. And, of course, my main objective was to find Jonathan at this point. We started coming down the streets, I think I was about three blocks up, four blocks up. You couldn't see more than maybe a quarter of the way, half way down the blocks, the streets.

A lot of walking wounded still walking towards us. You could see things burning but you couldn't make out what they were until you got a little closer. And there were a lot of cars and trucks was somewhere burning. So we're talking like three blocks up I guess. So my first fatality for the day, which was a firefighter..

LEE: Oh forgetting. You know in the -- in the course of the Country we live in, forgetting is sometimes is easy -- we've become so complacent you know. If we become complacent with this event here, we're just destined to repeat history because the people that did this to us are -- it's more than obvious that they've done it again and again since 9/11 in different countries. So it's just a matter of time, I think, that we'll become really complacent and then they'll -- they'll be back.

Which is unfortunate to say. That's what I think. I think most of the people think that way. I know the government thinks that way and I know the FBI thinks that way. It was told to us by the FBI, it's not if they're coming back it's just when. And complacency is gonna have a lot to do with it. They came here in 1993 to these -- to this very spot and they tried to knock the buildings down and they didn't succeed.

Thousands of people were injured, six were killed; what did we do? Well we became complacent. And what do we see now when we look out the window? They just sat back and waited and when the time was right, they came. So, I think that's gonna be their scenario, again, unless we can fight this war on terrorism and make sure we win it.

We can't -- we can't dilly dally with it. There's a lot of people that complain about what we're doing. And that's what's nice about this country, we can do that. But the fact of the matter is if we don't stop terrorism or try to make a good concentrated effort to stop it, this will repeat itself.

LEE: I speak to the people from different groups, I explain to them about victims; it's not just family members. In all these windows we see here -- you have to remember the time of day that it was. It was a workday, roughly quarter to nine in the morning. So these offices were packed with people coming in.

There are resident buildings all around here also where people and their kids are just getting ready for school. So all these windows -- as we look out these windows how many -- how many people? Tens of thousands of people watching? They heard the plane crash, the first plane. Nobody knew it was an attack at the time. But when they looked out their windows, they had to watch some of the worst sights that anybody could ever want to watch in their life.

The people were in the North Tower, and the plane hit up around the ninetieth floor. Above the impact area, there were over thirteen hundred people, above the impact area that did not make it out of the building. A lot of those people had a good choice to make. Either stay in a position where they were going to be burned or they're gonna jump.

And a lot of people made the decision to jump, and they did. A tremendous amount of people jumped. So all these windows and all those people and the young people, old people -- had to watch these people jump from over a hundred stories high. So how many victims did we make that day? Tens of thousands; they'll never forget. And then the South Tower was hit. And then I would imagine a lot of people evacuated at that point.

LEE: I know when we moved I into this office and it was over, it's over a year now. And the office next door still had the reminiscence of that day. And we found, attaché cases, shoes, personal belongings, passports-- People ran and didn't come back, never came back. Are they victims? Oh my gosh, yeah. And you just were saying how you saw this in California watching it on TV.

Are you a victim? Well, in a sense you are, in a sense. I mean it happened to us here but the people that day here? My gosh -- and then this went on for nine months. And there's an estimated half a million people worked at the site within that nine-month period either literally in the site doing rescue recovery work or support work. And that support also would be going uptown and into Brooklyn in different support areas, so over a half of million people worked here for nine months.

LEE: A typical morning -- a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. I don't remember what I was gonna do that day, but hopefully I was gonna fish because I love to fish with the boys. My son Jonathan was a New York City Firefighter, Squad 288. Um, it's a special unit, specially trained unit. And called like he always did.

And if there was something big going on he'd let me know about it and let me turn my scanner on and listen. He said, a plane just hit the North Tower of the Trade Center. With that, I heard the tones go off in the background of the firehouse, which means that they're -- they're going out on a run. Then he said, "Dad, we're going to the World Trade Center. I said, "Okay, be careful."

That was the last time I spoke with Jonathan. My son Brendan came over to the house, also a New York City Firefighter, of only four months at the time. And he just came out of college and wanted to be a fireman. So Brendan and I took off for the City. Got into the City. I got

here, I would say, less than a half an hour after the North Tower came down. I dropped Brendan off at his firehouse in Brooklyn.

I came across right into the site. Walking down the street, the cloud was still hanging throughout the lower Manhattan area of the City. There was a slight breeze coming from the west so it blew a lot of the cloud into Brooklyn. There was money found in Brooklyn, paperwork found in Brooklyn. Um, so I met a friend of mine that was looking for his brother, I was looking for Jonathan.

We walked down about three blocks up from the site. We walked down the street. Many of the people were still just moving away from it, walking wounded-type people, whatever, walking up the street. A lot of cars were burning, trucks were burning. Saw my first fatality, which was a firefighter as it turns out. He was probably the chauffer of an engine company. That's a company that delivers water at a fire. And he was right next the panel that controls the hose lines.

And he was laying on the ground covered with that turnout coat. I realized it wasn't gonna be a good day; I didn't how bad it was gonna be. Got to the site and my main mission, of course, was to find Jonathan. Um, you couldn't see too much into the site. There was still a tremendous amount of smoke and cloud that was there.

So I just started searching. But doing this work for so long, you know, you can't go helter skelter -- you can't just run off. Gotta realize that this was not gonna be an easy search and there was no place to really start. So I started right where I stood. And I started looking for him.

I knew it was gonna be a difficult situation just by-- Before I left home, the second plane had just hit. So I realized then that this was an attack and this was more than obvious. But any fire of that magnitude that's eighty, ninety stories above ground, you know it's gonna be a difficult day. It's gonna be very difficult.

LEE: Did we think the buildings were gonna come down? No. You think the buildings were gonna have maybe interior collapse? Yeah, no question there's probably gonna be some sort of an interior collapse. Especially since the planes hit and they're gonna compromise the -- the structure of the buildings. But not WHERE the buildings would come down, no.

There was a lot of talk after the '93 attack on high-rise fires. But the reality is in a fire situation is you've got up to the fire. You have to bring your hose up to the fire. There -- its-- it's not too complicated. And you need to bring your equipment up to the area. In this scenario here, the elevators weren't totally compromised.

They were use-- usable up to a certain point. A lot of the firefighters were climbing stairs. When you put your gear on, you're probably adding fifty-plus pounds and then you're throwing hose on top of you. To think that we would be able to fight fires eighty, ninety stories above grade, this type of fire? This is not an average fire, right? Um, it wasn't really a practical scenario.

So the main thrust of the Fire Department, I'm quite certain, was the rescuer. Because it was obvious that you were driving here seeing those people out the windows and they were just dozens and dozens of people waving out the windows. So the thought was let's go in, let's go up, let's get these people out if we can. And you know if we can find a fire up there, okay. But the main emphasis, you know, rescue work.

LEE: It was a quiet day. It was a beautiful crisp day and it was just a cloudy day, and my mind was not geared for anything other than finding my son. and in the end, the smoke did clear a little bit towards the afternoon and you could see what devastation we had here. I just had a sinking feeling, you know, what the death toll was gonna be. I had a feeling that we might have a problem trying to find Jonathan.

This is my passion. I know the guys. I know hundreds and hundreds of firefighters. So, I was gonna come here to see if I could help. You know even if I'm retired I could help out in the street or something.

But of course this was an event where they were gonna need help. Little did I know, the buildings were coming down. So I was coming, one way or the other. And once I knew the buildings were down, my main concern was Jonathan, you know, and his safety.

Jonathan was twenty-nine years old. Married, and wife **Yesenia**. Two boys Austin and Andrew; Andrew's the oldest. At the time, they were nine and three.

Jonathan I guess favored Dad and, loved life. Emotional type of guy. He called me every day of the week. Three, four, five, six, seven times a day, every day. And he only lived a mile away; lived in town with us. It was just one of those relationships where, if I was working and he heard on his radio, then we went out to a good job he'd call to find out about the job.

A good, down to earth guy. Strong, aggressive-- One desire and that was to fight fires. Didn't go to work, went to play. Enjoyed what he did. Wanted to go to Rescue 2 where I worked. And he was actually on the list to Rescue 2. So he would've gotten there.

INTERVIEWER: Was the Fire Department equipped to handle something like this?

LEE: I don't think there's a fire department in the world that was equipped to handle what happened that day, no. Impossible. No. How do you do that? Two billion struck and eleven stories high? Struck by large planes, fully loaded with fuel. Thousands of people trapped. Can you think of any department? No? Not a one.

You know, there's been so much said about it and again, I count the fire department because that's what I did for twenty-six years in the New York City Fire Department. I love it -- it's the best department in the world, there's no question about it. And we'll just go back to what I said before. We had two billion struck by two large planes. So what was the response; how was it coordinated and all that?

If people would just sit back and think about it -- again, and think that this a norm, it's not a norm. What did the fire department do? They responded and they worked the way they were supposed to work. Thank goodness that there was a camera crew that showed what the fire department was like in the lobby. You didn't see helter skelter. You didn't see people ringing around with their heads under their arms. You saw people that knew they had a job to do.

They came in with their equipment. They were told to go and do what they had to do and they went and did it. So, as far as I'm concerned, the fire department that day did exactly what they're supposed to do. And the way it's told in the fire service. The first thing that you do is you think of life, and then you think of property. And then you think of the adjoining areas, you know. But life is number one.

Those men that responded here that day -- there were many heroes that day. Police, EMS, civilians within the building, a tremendous amount of heroism was shown that day. The people in the building, they were in the building and they did what they were supposed to do, many of them. The people that responded here -- the fire department that responded here. If you're in California and you looked at that television that day, you still remember those images.

Well those men that responded here looked out the windows of those fire trucks. They looked up, they saw what the hell they were gonna into, and what did they do? They went into it. They went into it. And then they went up the stairs; three hundred and forty-three didn't come back.

INTERVIEWER: You lost a lot of friends.

LEE: Maybe a hundred.

INTERVIEWER: Is it hard to talk about your son?

LEE: Oh yeah. Is it hard not-- How would I answer that?

INTERVIEWER: Well you told me—

LEE: It's not super hard -- I mean I cry. I didn't get to the part here where we-- you'll find out. I'll save that.

I speak to thousands of people that come here that we show the site to -- I get to speak about my son. And I feel good to talk about my son. That's like he's still here. Where other families would love to be able to talk about their loved ones that have died. Um, but like human nature being what it is, you can only do that for a certain amount of time after the accident or whatever there was. Different people, they don't wanna hear it anymore.

So I have that luxury where the other people don't. When we talk about death, 9/11, three-thousand-plus people died that day. We've had people say to us, "Don't you think it's time you moved on?" You know, it's over three years now and you still talking about it". And my comeback usually is, "Yes, I am moving on and I know a lot of other

people are moving on because I'm doing this constructively. I'm not sitting in a corner babbling or something."

It's very hard to talk about Jonathan. I'm not gonna tell you it's not hard to talk about Jonathan, but it's a luxury to be able to talk about, in my case, my son that was killed here. Because it makes it makes it feel like he's still here in some way. Where the other family members don't have that opportunity to do that. And I think they're not doing what I'm doing. They're at home.

INTERVIEWER: When you heard about having a Commission, did you think there was a need to investigate?

LEE: Absolutely, positively. 1993 they came to knock these buildings down. They didn't succeed. They killed six people, they injured thousands of people; they knew it was a terrorist attack and they did do some investigation. We did find out through the 9/11 Commission that a lot of the investigation they did, there were some internal squabbling about who was gonna get, the accolades of what they found. Then we became complacent, in my eyes, all parties.

This is not picking on the Bush Administration. This is picking on every administration right on down the line -- Democratic, Republican. You became complacent, they came back -- it took a bunch of years, they came back, they knocked the buildings down. Do I think we need to do something? Do I think the 9/11 Commission was needed? My God a 9/11 Commission and we need to act on everything the 9/11 Commission said we should act on.

Do we have to lose some of our civil liberties all the way? You better believe it. Cause we don't live in that world, back in the Second World War where that big ocean was there and we sat here in the lap of luxury and we didn't wanna go to war. And we didn't have to worry. We don't have that luxury any more do we? They can come here now with dirty bombs. They can come here looking out this window at what they did.

So, am I worried about losing some of my civil liberties? No, because my grandchildren, my friends and family are more important to me than losing a little bit of my civil liberties. So the 9/11 Commission in my eyes was extremely beneficial. And if it wasn't for the 9/11 families, there might not have been a 9/11 Commission. And if we don't

act on the 9/11 Commissions findings, shame on us. But I think we are.

We have to keep some pressure where pressure is needed. But I think we're doing -- we're in the beginning stages of doing that and I hope and I'm sure that the 9/11 families that fought so hard for the 9/11 Commission will stay abreast of it, there's no question. And they will make sure that the Commission's results are acted on.

LEE: You know something, you talk about that -- I speak to thousands of people and people say to me, "Well what should we do?" Because after they listen to me talk about this here, their emotions come out; their feelings come out, they want to help. What can we do? And I say to them very nicely. I say "I'm not gonna pick on you, but how many of you, after hearing about the 9/11 Commission and those results, And if the government wasn't going to maybe act on it, how many of you -- and raise your hand, called your Senator, Senators, your Congressmen in your states and demanded they act on it? Raise your hands."

Well, you know what the results were. I was lucky if I got one or two. Complacency. It didn't happen in California, it didn't happen in Chicago. It happened in New York, what a horrible thing. I talk about it, people cry, they become emotionally upset -- complacency. And these bad guys that look at us say, "We'll sit back and we'll wait." They did after '93. "We waited, we came back, we trained here in the country and we succeeded."

Complacency. So what could we do as a country? Remember what happened here but more importantly you have to support your government, whichever party is in office. If they're fighting a war against terrorism -- if you don't support it, don't complain if this happens in your city, in your state. If you lose a loved one because of this, don't complain.

Well you know what's interesting about everything I just said. Everything I just said about how people are complacent. I was asked if I would testify before the 9/11 Commission at their first hearing, official hearing; where family people would be coming in, whoever had to come in. "And I was told that we would like you, and I won't say who I was told by."

We would like you to instill the emotional aspects of what happened here to you and time you spent here to the board so that they will be stern. Their mindset would be "My God, what a horrible thing that man just went through. So it'll give them the drive and go out and accomplish this". In essence they were saying to me, I think, they're complacent just like everybody else is.

They know how bad it was but don't really know how bad it was. They run a wonderful Commission, they do a great job but you still have to express to them how bad it was. Complacency. So I was asked to do that, I did it, along with other folks that were affected in one way or another by 9/11. I said what I had to say, and I went on.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the things you said in that room that day?

LEE: I could tell you what the most important thing was. When I finished speaking I said to them, "You have to remember something. At the end of your investigation, not only the eyes of America and the world have be on you, more importantly the eyes of the families of 9/11 are gonna be on you. And if the task you're taking is not done correctly, the 9/11 families are not gonna let you rest." In those words that's what I said to them. And that was the most important thing.

I was on TV a number of times, along with many many other families. And we did what we said we were gonna do at that very first Commission meeting. That we're gonna have our eyes on you. A lot of people I would imagine thought, "Man, they can be complacent just like everybody else is." And what did we do? We showed them that we weren't gonna be complacent. They're not gonna get away with just saying you're not gonna do something. And we fought and they did it. And they did pass some of that.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel as citizen, especially since they were stonewalling?

LEE: I was very confused. I wasn't sure what was happening here. Was it -- It's so easy to say it was a cover up. Which, I don't think we have to worry about a cover up. It was exposed by a Commission; it was more egos, you know. The FBI is not gonna tell the CIA and the CIA is not gonna tell New York City. And so there were a lot of egos there. Internally, I don't know. I was just very confused.

INTERVIEWER: What about accountability?

LEE: I think we should have had a little more accountability. I think there should have been a little more people brought to justice, for what they did. I mean, they were responsible. Their responsibility is for the welfare of this country.

If we don't show some form of, oh, I'd say punishment, you know, that might leave the door open for somebody to say, well, they're really not gonna get too mad at me, if I do it like this, you know. I think accountability is very critical in this situation.

LEE: If we remember that each footprint is one acre in size, and, how many desks, how many file cabinets, bookshelves, chairs, were just on one floor alone, I can tell you in nine months, I never saw a desk. I never saw a bookshelf. I never saw file cabinets.

I never saw anything that resembled humanity. It was just destroyed in the horrible mix as the buildings were coming down. I can tell you that, um, the numbers sometimes goes up and down a little bit, but I can tell you, in nine months, um, nineteen thousand, nine hundred and thirty eight body parts were found here.

I can tell you that, at this site here, two thousand, seven hundred and forty-nine people died. I can tell you that there's only two hundred and ninety two whole bodies. Out of two thousand, seven hundred and forty nine people, there's only two hundred and ninety-two whole bodies.

My son, Jonathan, our family, we're blessed. We're one of the two hundred and ninety-two. We found Jonathan three months to the day. December eleventh. And, I wasn't here. I had gone home.

I'm kind a glad I went home. I wanted to be here. But, anyhow, three months to the day. And, I got a phone call, at about eleven-thirty. the Chief in charge of the site, Paul Farrell, who I know well, called. And said,
"We have Jonathan."

I was blessed to be able to come back to the site with Brendan. And, we walked down the -- the horrible road, down inside the site, just about forty feet below grade.

And, Brendan and myself, and is in the custom with the New York City Fire Department, some men from Squad 288, and we carried Jonathan out. So, we were blessed. The other families, there's only two hundred and ninety two of us that have whole bodies at home, to this day.

His mass card says, he loved what he did. And, he did. He loved being a New York City firefighter. He loved going to fires. He was proud to be a part of it. And, there's actually a tape of Jonathan that someone took.

And, it's Jonathan running right down Liberty Street there. And, he was running to the buildings. So, there were a lot of heroes that day and, my son was definitely one of them.

INTERVIEWER: And, what lessons do you want the rest of the country to learn from all of this?

LEE IELPI: Well, I guess we're gonna have to go back to that same word again about being complacent. That, guys, you don't want this to happen again to us. We don't need it.

And, just be mindful that-- You can't dwell on it, day in and day out. But, you have to be mindful. And, just the right phone call, every now and then, to your Senators, to your Congressmen, and just staying abreast of the issues.

And, don't say to yourself, well that's an issue that happened in New York City. It didn't happen in New York City. It happened in the United States of America. It happened on our soil.

I guess that complacency word is -- is the best word to use. Think of it that it's gonna happen to me the next time. So, I better stay abreast of it.