

EXPERIENCE—KATHY PISCIONERI, KEW GARDENS, N.Y. 'WORLD PEACE' HAS NEW MEANING FOR ME

I am an artist and the art teacher at P.S. 89 in Battery Park City, Manhattan, which is—was—right in the shadow of the World Trade Center.

On the morning of Sept. 11, I walked to our school with one of my favorite families in the school community while the mother and I chatted light-heartedly about our summers and our busy lives. It's incredible now to think that, only a few minutes later, from the eight-foot picture windows in my art classroom, I stood looking out at a jagged hole in the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

My student teacher and I rushed to our phones to call 911, but before we could even dial, scores of emergency vehicles arrived on the scene. We could clearly see the EMTs, firemen and police rushing toward the building. A media crowd immediately gathered in the baseball field next to our school and began filming what we then thought was a small plane or helicopter accident.

Meanwhile, we set out around the school to see what we could do—taking frightened children out of classrooms, comforting distraught parents, covering classroom windows so that the children (particularly our kindergarten students) would not be upset by the events outside. Eventually, as the situation worsened, we moved all the classes on the south and east sides of our school building to central locations in the gym and auditorium.

The rest became chaotic—parents tearing into the school screaming, roaming the halls shouting their children's names, pulling children out of classrooms and running out of the building, or just standing in stairwells weeping. Between 100 and 150 children were taken out of the building by parents in those first several minutes.

Then we heard loud, rumbling noises that are indescribable. I could see explosions outside and heard the roar of jet engines and screaming as the situation just three blocks away from us completely deteriorated into what looked to me like Armageddon. In one terrifying moment, the entire school building shook and the lights flickered (as the South Tower collapsed, I later learned).

A few seconds later we were given the order to evacuate, and our building was flooded with police. Perhaps the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life was to go into our gym and look into the eyes of the teachers—my friends—trying to say so many things without speaking. I could only tell them that they had to leave the building, to take the children, get out the north entrance of our building, and do it fast.

We were only told to head north. The entire school poured out onto the street class by class, young children being carried by teachers and paraprofessionals. We began to walk north slowly and ploddingly, joining a sea of refugees coming from farther downtown. Many people were covered in dust; all with dazed looks in their eyes. A few minutes later, a tremendous rumble stopped us in our tracks. We turned to look, and watched silently as the North Tower collapsed upon itself, floor after floor after floor, leaving a momentary patch of blue sky where it once stood.

In that moment, the neighborhood that I have worked in and loved for four years was reduced to rubble.

A tidal wave of smoke was coming toward us, and we turned back around as if we didn't see it and began to plod northward again. No one seemed able to hurry; I don't know why. That was the first moment that I consciously began to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo under

my breath. I thought, “We cannot be trampled by the thousands of panicked people behind us!”

We had been completely cut off from any news, so we thought that New York, along with the entire country, was being bombed. I remember thinking, “Kathy, you’re probably going to die today, but before that happens you need to help get these children to a safe place.” It felt good to have a mission in the midst of all of that chaos and destruction, partly because it kept me from worrying about my own safety. I really appreciate that now!

Two miles away we turned to cross onto a side street, which meant getting 250 children and adults across a six-lane highway in between convoys of emergency vehicles screaming by at 90 mph. We ran the kids across in groups of about 30 or 40, fortunately all making it across safely. Moments later, we collapsed inside the gym of a nearby Greenwich Village school, P.S. 3. Some children sat shaking and quietly sobbing while the P.S. 3 staff brought us snacks and even went out to the store to buy the children ice cream.

Six hours passed excruciatingly as we waited for parents to come and collect their children. Most arrived exhausted, red-faced and covered in dust, with bandanas around their mouths, after walking for miles trying to find their children. We saw many tearful reunions until almost every child was retrieved. (One or two went home with teachers and were reunited with their families the next day.) It was such incredible fortune that we were able to get every child out safely and to pull together as a school in order to do it. I was so proud to work at P.S.89 that day!

What followed is the incredibly difficult story of a school community torn apart at the seams. Most of our families lost their homes near the World Trade Center, and many others moved away soon after. Those who stayed were not only displaced but also completely distraught, and the entire staff was traumatized. Our school building was the headquarters for the New York City Office of Emergency Management for more than two months after the attack, and our school doubled up classes into a few extra rooms at P.S. 3, in addition to taking over their library with five of our classes. Fortunately, we eventually moved to a larger temporary space where we continue to strive for normalcy. That our school still exists is in itself an amazing thing.

This entire experience, which for me is still in the process of being resolved, has put everything into perspective in my life. I thought it was hard when my husband of 11 years left me for another woman a year and a half ago, but the last two months make our breakup look like a day at the park. During that painful breakup, I learned to trust the Gohonzon in the face of all hardship, to not need to know immediately how things will be resolved or why they are happening, but to continue to chant with the conviction that I will turn poison into medicine. This is the Soka Gakkai spirit!

That struggle prepared me for this current one. Now I’m thinking these same things, only not just about my personal life but about my school community, my beloved city and our world. The term *world peace* has new meaning for me as I struggle to face the Gohonzon each day to pray for peace with the same conviction that I would pray for a breakthrough in my life. I use this spirit as I continue encouraging the people with whom I work and the children and parents in their distress and grief.

My greatest benefit from all of this is that I have been reintroduced to the concept of appreciation as I have not felt since the beginning of my Buddhist practice: appreciation for my life itself, for the honor of being a P.S. 89 teacher, for the open-hearted people who came together and cared for one another in New York (including the ones who gave us free massages!), for the school children from around the country who send us teddy bears,

notes and supplies.

Most of all, I am filled with deep appreciation for this great organization of warriors for peace like none other existing in the world today. My joyful fellow SGI-USA members in New York make me want to do more and more to support and encourage others and to tell them about this great practice. I feel so strengthened and enlivened by this difficult experience, as if I can think clearly for the first time in several years. For me, this is the manifestation in my life of Nichiren Daishonin's teaching "When great evil occurs, great good follows" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1119).

Our next task is to make this a reality in our world, no matter what struggles we are asked to bear. I believe that we can do it, and I am determined like never before to do whatever I can to make it happen.

Kathy Piscioneri can be reached at blakfish@netzero.net.