



Rich Franzis

Administrator

*Interviewed by Zach Feinstein and Ethan Kobak
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Rich Franzis was born in Derby, Connecticut in 1955. He has had both civilian and military careers. He started his teaching career in 1977 at Shelton Intermediate School. In 1984 he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in Military Intelligence through the United States Army Officer Candidate School, where he was selected as an Outstanding Leadership Graduate. Mr. Franzis subsequently won many awards and commendations during his military service of over 33 years in the U.S. Army Reserve. While an active reservist, Mr. Franzis became Dean of Students at Staples High School in 1998 and in 2004 became an Assistant Principal. He was deployed to Iraq for Operation Enduring Freedom in 2007-2008 and retired as a Colonel in August of 2014. Mr. Franzis continues to serve as an Assistant Principal at Staples High School.

How did you learn of the attack and from whom?

I learned from someone who told Mr. Farnen and me. We were the two Deans of Students at the time. Everyone has these milestones in their life where we remember the exact place where we were. I still remember where I was. We turned on WCBS radio 880, that's how I remember it, and had heard that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. We thought at that time that it was a little plane. But it became more and more apparent as stuff started to happen, especially when the second tower hit that something was happening here. So that's how we learned about it at the time.

What was the first thing that came to mind once you realized the severity of the situation? What was your responsibility at the position at you were at.

We didn't know at that time how many parents of Staples kids would be impacted. I think everybody was in shock. It was like you got cold water thrown on you, like the ice bucket challenge. Nobody knew how many kids or parents would be impacted here. First thing we did was decided on how to let the students know. I believe the principal at the time Gloria Rakovic made an announcement in terms of what had happened. And, you know for the most part the school was pretty well contained. Obviously people were starting to panic. There was a teacher here at the time who was panicking. It started to take on a life of its own like these things normally do. There was a teacher in the hallway screaming the capital had been hit, and that the Sears Tower is next. Obviously we did not want that teacher to continue screaming that stuff in the halls so we got that teacher out of the way and calmed that particular individual. What was interesting was that we had a number of students who walked out of high school; we don't have that very much anymore. When I got here it was a different Staples, lot of different kinds of kids. What was weird was a lot of those kids came back to the high school to find comfort. By the end of the day we planned that the

counselors would stay here through the night if they had to, to help parents and relatives that were impacted by the crash at the World Trade Center.

How did the attack impact your life? Do you know anyone who was directly affected by the attacks?

Well, later on I did, my wife's brother had a close high school friend who was killed in the World Trade Center. His name was Brett Bailey. It's actually interesting. I have a friend who is a colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve, and at the time his son and my son played hockey together. He was actually there [at the World Trade Center] when it happened and he was in the secret service at the time. They had an office there at the World Trade Center. There's a picture of him at the World Trade Center museum now, covered in dust, with a woman slung over his shoulder that he brought out. So I do know some people who were affected, but not a great number.

Do you remember the government's response to the attacks? the international community? What did you think about terrorism before the attacks? Did the attacks change your view on terrorism?

Terrorism had been all around us, I remember back in 2000 when the USS Cole was attacked by an Iranian boat, blew a hole in the side of the boat. I think it was the Fourth of July because it was really hot at the time. I can remember running in New Canaan, another one of those times that I can remember. I also remember when the Murrah Building was taken down here in the United States by former military guy. These were all isolated incidents and you don't think that's going to happen on the scale it did on 9/11. It really caught everybody off guard. You know I've been around, I've been in the military during the marine bombings back in Beirut in 1983 when 283 marines were killed. But then again that was on foreign sand. You don't think of that happening here. So when it happened on the scale it happened on, it was a punch in the face to all of us; literally and figuratively.

Being a member of the military did that help with being able to console kids?

I think just being in education for a long time and being a father. I think that was more important than any military training I've had. I think in terms of helping me keep my head and my composure, definitely my military training always comes in, I kind of click in to my training mode. I was trained to function as well as you can under exceptional stress. That had something to do with it.

Other teachers we interviewed thought the attacks brought the community closer. Do you agree?

I think it was true, Americans have very short memories. Everyone was kind to each other for a few months post 9/11. After that everyone pretty much went back to their old routines and went along like nothing had happened.

In the days following 9/11, what was school like?

Well, I think everybody was kind of in a zombie haze. People couldn't quite believe we as a nation couldn't come to grips with what happened. I do remember the days afterwards people really screaming for retribution. You guys were probably really little kids at the time, so you don't remember much about it, but there was a sentiment in this country that people wanted revenge for all of the innocent lives that were taken. When we went to war in Iraq, which I participated in people tend to question it, even I questioned it. But at that time people were gripped by fear, they didn't know when the next 9/11 was going to be hatched. Given so slim information we wanted to react on that and spent the next nine years there. In regards to school, people got on with their lives, in a slow deliberate fashion. I don't believe any close relatives, of students were impacted, parents I know were not. We did not know at the time, we thought hundreds of parents could have been impacted.

You talked about Iraq and people wanting retribution, how did the attacks impact you emotionally considering you have protected America?

One way or another I knew something was going to happen. I didn't know when, or where it would, but I knew there would be something. I also did not realize it would take six months for me to see action. Immediately after 9/11 troops were on the ground in Afghanistan. Good friends of mine were getting called into action. It wasn't not until 2006. I was commanding a unit in Massachusetts, and was constantly calling for people to go into action. They did not mobilize commanders. I had to say go to Afghanistan and Iraq, to me they responded perfectly, "Yes, sir!" But these men and women had families so I knew on the inside it was tough. I knew if I was going to be in the military any longer I had to do a gut check, so I actually volunteered to go to Iraq. I called my good friend in the Pentagon who was able to deploy me. I went in January of 2007 until June of 2008. I was gone from staples for about 2 years. I was an intelligence officer for a one-star general. My job was to tell him the best way to possibly keep his troops safe. As a country we have not been the same since. We are always looking over our shoulders. It is probably a good idea not to get too complacent because that sort of stuff tends to happen.