



Karen Harman

Parent and School Paraprofessional

**Interviewed by Doug Steffen
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Karen Harman was born in 1955 in Delaware, Ohio. She is a former marketing communications executive for agencies in Syracuse and New York City. She then went into healthcare communications, which makes her more knowledgeable about the medical impact of 9/11. She has worked for the Westport Public Schools for about 12 years and is the mother of two children who were students at Staples High School on 9/11. Daughter Chase was a junior, and son Andrew was a freshman.

Do you remember what you were doing during the attack, specifically when your first heard the news?

At the time, I was an eighth grade paraprofessional in the resource room at Bedford Middle School. Getting the initial news and ongoing information about the attacks travelled among staff via one-on-one conversations because we didn't want to alarm the students. Our Emergency Planning Team met to develop a plan of how to manage the communications, especially to the students.

Did you end up telling the kids?

The team worked through the morning to create a plan. It was decided, Number One, to keep them in school. Our issue in the elementary and middle schools was that we didn't want to send the kids home where they might go watch TV and see the news. We wanted to leave the decision about how much they should know to their parents. If parents chose to pick their children up, they were excused.

Number Two, we wanted to facilitate communications with their families so we set up a communication center in the guidance office with several landlines. Believe it or not, a lot of kids knew that their parents worked in the city, but not where in the city, so we made sure communication was available so that they knew that their parents were safe.

How did you communicate to other people like friends and family about the news?

Bedford staff members/friends kept each other up to date while waiting for the Crisis Communication plan. Our crisis communication team came together and created a plan and a statement before we made things public around the school. But I know at the high school, a lot of the students had cell phones so many got the news before some of the staff.

Communications with friends and family was haphazard at best, especially for those who lived and/or worked in the City. My husband was in the city that day working near the

Rockefeller Center. From the time the towers fell, I did not hear that he was okay until about three o'clock, when I heard from his mother.

Did you have a cell phone at the time?

Yes. I did. I didn't use it until about two hours after I heard the news, though.

Do you think this event changed viewpoints or policies in the school districts?

It changed everything. Not just here but around the world. I'm 59, and I had never been through anything like that. I think it generated a huge commitment to therapy because a lot of people were mentally involved and affected. The Guidance Office now has counselors available for situations like that. The whole crisis communication team had a huge role in re-establishing a safe environment. 911 was unexpected, and we need to be always prepared to respond to world events. It's a matter of planning for the worst and hoping for the best. That was our trial by fire.