



Dr. Gloria Rakovic

Former Staples High School Principal

**Contacted by Tylor Frank
April 27, 2015**

Gloria Rakovic was born in New York City in 1942. She began her career in the New York City public school system for 28 years before becoming the Staples High School Principal for 10 years. In NYC she taught speech, theater, and language arts. She was principal of the three schools she founded; Park East High School, the Satellite Academy at Foster Street, and the High School of Telecommunication, Arts, and Technology. In addition to being a principal she joined the Peace Corps in 1996, and served in Caracas, Venezuela. Dr. Rakovic was the first woman principal in Staples High School History. Today she has retired from her last job as Director of New School Development in Brooklyn for New Visions for Public Schools, a non-profit organization. In her time managing, she received a grant for 60 million dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to open 100 new small schools throughout the city. She retired 3 years ago from that position.

What were you doing during the attack?

On the day of the attacks, I was visiting a school in upper New York along with the chairpersons of Science (Stan Rhodes) and Social Studies (Elliot Kraut). We left Staples at about 7:00AM to travel to our appointment. We were there to look at a science lab configuration and to discuss with teachers and administrators how they scheduled science labs as well as the science and social studies curricula. It was really rare for me to be out of the building other than for administrative meetings. This of all days was not the one to be away from the building. I was not at school for the better part of the morning on that day.

How did you learn of the attack?

The first attack occurred at 8:45AM and the second plane slammed into the World Trade Tower 18 minutes later. We heard about what happened probably around 9:30AM or so. A teacher at the school was rushing down the hallway and mentioned that the Towers had been attacked. Initially, we thought he was joking. He assured us he was not joking.

How did you react immediately to the news?

We immediately called Staples to see what was happening there. I probably spoke to Lee Littrell (AP Admin.) and definitely to Karyn Morgan (in charge of Special Education and some Guidance Functions). They gave us an update that things were as OK as they could be. But clearly people were going to become more rattled as the morning progressed. We literally ran to our car to hurry back to Staples. I was on the phone with as many people as possible who could give us more information from Westport. While in the car we had the radio on and learned of the Pentagon attack. We were speeding as fast as we could to get back to Staples. Elliot, Stan, and I couldn't believe what had happened. I called Elliot Landon to let him know that we were on our

way back to school. I believe we talked about setting in motion a plan of action for the district and our schools and the need to stay in touch throughout this event.

My personal immediate reaction was something like.... "I can't believe this is happening. This can't happen here. Not in my lifetime. Not on our shores." I was very concerned about staff and student reaction and what steps the Staples administration was taking to monitor the well-being of the school community. On the drive back to Staples, I was on the phone several times with Karyn Morgan, who began to signal that students were getting quite upset and that the Guidance Department staff were all on call to talk with students. She was concerned about some teachers taking their students to the library to watch the news events as they developed over the course of the morning, which only served to heighten student fears about the potential loss of loved ones and relatives. She felt their anxieties could affect other students and spread more unrest than had already existed. When we were about 20 minutes away from Staples Karyn called (thank God for cell phones), "Gloria, how close are you? It's getting really hairy here." Or something pretty close to that. We assured her we would be there in a few minutes.

Do you know anyone who was affected during the attacks?

I had a close friend who was killed in one of the Towers. I had friends in Brooklyn who described looking at the horror on their rooftops across the East river. The white soot from the collapsed Towers covered blocks and blocks of downtown Brooklyn. Buildings were white. Many people crossed the Brooklyn Bridge covered in white dust as they walked their way out of lower Manhattan. My deep personal anxiety stemmed from the fact that I could not communicate with any of my dear friends in the city because telephone lines were not functioning.

Did you make an announcement to the student body? What did you say? When you were made aware of the circumstances, did you contact administrators at the westport schools? What was the conversation like? What did you tell them to say to the students, if anything? Was the conversation more official or emotional?

You ask whether conversation between the administrators at the school level and district level was "official or emotional". The conversation was appropriate, right, compassionate, strategic, collaborative. School administrators can't afford to not act in this way in times of crisis. That's their jobs. Stan, Elliot and I knew we had to be strong, clear, and empathic with the staff during this situation and that student well-being was the most important goal we had right there and then and for the days ahead.

I think we arrived at Staples somewhere between 11:00 and 11:45AM. Stan and Elliot went to their respective departments to take stock of what was going on there and to let staff know that there would be a staff meeting at the end of the day. I told them to tell all administrators, teachers (when not teaching) and non-teaching staff that I wanted them in the hallways throughout the rest of the day to monitor how students were feeling and to see if they needed help. I proceeded to Lee Littrell's office to get his feedback on the school's tone and what had been done to maintain a positive environment. I spoke with Karyn who indicated that quite a few students had become emotional, scared and a few inconsolable. She again reiterated that students should not be watching these terror attacks in the library which were playing over and over on the

televisions in school as it could provoke emotional outbursts. I was very concerned about this. I went to the library and there was a substitute teacher (who should have been in his classroom teaching) with his class watching the news reports. I spoke to the librarians and told them to shut off the televisions. I explained my concerns about doing this and its potential impact on students and that we all had a responsibility to try to maintain as normal an environment as possible without promoting and exacerbating student fear. I also explained this to the sub and he may not have liked my decision but it was mine to make and I made it. I am less clear about the computer internet access but if anyone made that decision it would have been me. To this day, I know it was the absolute right decision and I would do it again. Throughout the day I walked the halls talking to staff and students, sharing information, holding small meetings with department heads, planning for the next day.

I am pretty sure that the core message that went out to staff was from me. Whether there were other departmental missives specific to the department's needs...that could be possible. E.g. informing their teachers that a guest speaker scheduled for French classes would be cancelled the next day. That kind of thing.

I don't recall the exact contents of my statement to staff/students but I know it would have and probably did address the following:

How did you, as one of the leaders of our school district, guide the students and the community?

The Guidance counselors and I would be at Staples until 9:00pm that night for any students or family members who needed someone to talk with and that we would be in early before classes for them to address concerns and needs with us. (Note: The Guidance Department and Dean's office acted extraordinarily throughout the weeks that followed exhibiting compassion, comfort, and understanding) Teachers were exceptional and made student referrals to them when they felt they were not able to handle the emotions of students.

How did you as a principal guide the students and staff, and district?

- We held a meeting at the end of the school day for all staff and one the next morning as well
- We identified students who were having a difficult time of it and made a referral list to guidance and other support personnel
- We created a revised schedule for the week
- Long range: Department chairs were to work with their teachers to plan ways of talking about the attacks and integrating them into the curriculum (e.g. writing assignments, terror research, personal points of view activities, safe ways of expression, advisor lessons etc.)

My memo would have addressed the above in addition to my gratitude for all they did and how valiantly they stepped up putting their students needs before all else. All teachers were directed to convey ONE message. To the best of my knowledge students heard the principal's message. There may have been other directives that were department related.

The school administration agreed that parents' phone calls would be filtered through the Guidance Department as they were the most skilled in processing worries about their children. I

also sent a letter to parents about the resources available to parents and students within the Staples community. Fortunately, no Staples student lost a close relative in the 9/11 disaster. This information we would not discover until the day after the tragedy. We were lucky.

The superintendent and principals met immediately and regularly about how to proceed within the district. My colleagues were extraordinary and Elliot Landon's leadership was impressive and supportive of his administrative team throughout the crisis. The schools were not shut down as I recall. There may have been some revised schedules within the Westport schools. That would make sense.

Perhaps leadership under crisis is the greatest test of who you are as a person. First, it was important to rally staff that we could surmount the challenges of 9/11 as caring human beings who wanted more than anything to protect the psychic and emotional well-being and safety of all people within the Staples community. That was the clear goal for me. Gathering administrators and other critical staff to buy into this mission was easy. We were all on board. Teachers worked hard and were asked to be alert and aware of any students that might require additional school support. They came forward and were extremely sensitive to student needs. They went above and beyond and they knew the kids and I appreciated that. I had an open door policy about any matters or suggestions related to the tragedy. Some teachers shared ideas for curriculum related to 9/11; the Music Department asked to plan for a special assembly to honor those who were killed, collections were taken up, social studies integrated some studies on religion's role in Middle East cultures, work was done on stereotyping etc. We instituted a grieving program with intensive training for teachers.

Did you ever think of terrorism as a threat prior to the attack?

Terrorism then..... I really never believed it could happen in NYC with such gigantic impact and tragedy in my lifetime.

What do you think about terrorism today?

Terrorism now.... All bets are off.

The 9/11 attack humbled me into understanding that no city, no country, no continent is free from the impact of evil peoples and depraved ideology. I have also come to the conclusion that we are not doing such a great job of dealing with it. If bike-copters can land on the White House lawn and people can jump the gates with impunity, then something bigger may just be on the way.

Are there any final things that you think I should know or last things you want to say?

Looking back at the way Staples High School rallied may be one of my finest hours. I am proud and grateful.