



Christina Richardson

English Teacher

**Interviewed by Abby Lustig
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Christina Richardson was born in October in Sea Cliff, Long Island. She attended Northwestern University as an undergraduate and received two Masters degrees from the University of Connecticut and West Connecticut University. In 1996, Mrs. Richardson began teaching at Staples High School in the English department. She is married with two children and one grandson, and enjoys community theater, gardening, travel, and reading.

What classes were you teaching at the time?

I had had a sophomore honors class, and after the class was over, the guidance counselors came in to all the different classes and gave us a mimeograph sheet...and we were told, basically, what was happening. But remember, this was a time when nobody had cell phones, so you could keep things quiet. So we were supposed to go on with our second class as though nothing had happened, and the main reason was because, living in Westport, they were worried that so many of the kids might have had parents that were in the [World] Trade Centers, so they wanted to keep it under wraps. The principal at the time was Gloria Rakovic...She was very insistent that nobody knew anything about it. However, by the time my next class came, in 5 minutes, I had my AP Lit class, and somehow, a couple of [my students] had an inkling that something had happened. So, instead of having class, we talked about the problems in the Middle East. I had a student, at that point, Kieran Wandaragala, who was, amazingly enough, an expert on what was going on in the Middle East. He had known all about Al Qaeda. Nobody had ever heard about any of these people or anything before, and he started talking about it in class, and he basically ran the class because I certainly didn't know anything about it. Then, when we finished that class, I think everything had, sort of, gone to hell in a hand basket at school. We tried to have class, and the kids came to the different classes, but nobody taught. Of course, as things happened, we heard more. Maybe an hour after, people were watching in the library—news reports. People started to see what was going on. We had TVs in different parts of the building, certainly not in our classrooms, but nobody was going to teach. It was too terrible. We also had Judy Nelson, the secretary for the principal, and her daughter, Tara, had been a former Staples student—I'd had her in class. She'd gone on to Syracuse, and she graduated, and she was working in the Trade Center. Tara was in the second building. Judy tried to reach Tara and she couldn't reach her...and she was paralyzed because it's her daughter, and of course, we all knew Tara because we'd had her, and I'd known her even before that because she used to swim with my kids. So I'd known Tara since she was 6. Judy stayed at Staples for some time, but she ultimately went home. She was just a wreck—we were all a wreck. And it turned out that, after the first building had been hit, Tara was sitting in a cubicle office, and the woman next to her said, "Get your stuff. We're leaving here." And, you know, they were told in the second building to stay put—don't worry about it; it's just an aberration. They didn't know what was going on. Tara's coworker saved her life...they left and got home. It took her forever to get home, and you

didn't have cell service—even those people who had cell phones, it was crazy. Of course, Judy tried to get her on a landline, but she wasn't there. She was paranoid that something had happened once the second building went down, but she turned out to be fine. Actually, there were many fewer people affected directly than we all thought there would be. We lucked out. There were people who died who were affiliated with Staples, and Staples parents, former Staples students.

How did you react when you were told about the attacks?

Well, when we first got the first sheet...we didn't know it was a terrorist attack at that point. We thought some idiot had gone into the building, and the building hadn't gone down at that point, and we had no idea how bad it was going to be. Once we did, there was no way anyone was going to teach. Everyone was affected. That whole day, over and over again... you'd see the same image of the planes crashing into the building, the planes crashing into the building. It was not a day you'd ever forget.

What was the school like in the days following the attack?

Somber...Yeah, somber, slower. We taught, not at the same kind of level, but you can't just sit around in a classroom all the time, either, even though something terrible happened. The first day, you can talk about it, and then you really need to go on because life goes on. But it's never far from what you're dealing with. You never really forget it. Those of us who lived through it, you never forget where you were, what you were doing. It's like Kennedy's death—you know where you were when it happened. You never will forget it. It's like it was yesterday. It comes into immediate view.

Did you contact any friends or family after you were told about the attacks?

No. My kids were in high school, so I knew where everybody was, and I didn't have anybody down there, but we got contacted by tons of people. My husband's family's from the Midwest, and they were all calling—everybody was calling to see if we were ok. I didn't initiate any of those calls because I didn't have anybody who I knew would be there. I have a lot of friends from New York City, but I wasn't really worried because they weren't really down in that area.

Do you think your life would have been any different today had the attacks not happened?

No, but I know a lot of people whose lives were changed dramatically. We got teachers who came into teaching because they had been in or around or just missed (because they were late to work) [the attacks]. They decided that they wanted to do something important, so they came into teaching. I know a number of people. A friend of mine's son and his wife moved away—moved to Minneapolis because they didn't want to be here in New York anymore. It had a huge impact on many, many people. On me, personally, no. But I've been one of the few; I think it really had a huge impact on lots of people.