

Memories of 9/11 remain fresh

It was as if someone had broken into my house, grabbed the kitchen knife, stabbed me deep in the chest twice and twisted the blade slowly and steadily like disemboweling a pumpkin. That's how I felt on Sept. 11, 2001, when 19 terrorists hijacked four planes, flew two into the iconic World Trade Center, one onto the Pentagon, and the fourth force-crashed at Shawshank, Pennsylvania.

The world watched in horror as the TV broadcast live the collapse of the Twin Towers.

I, for one, was surprised how easily the al-Qaida members hoodwinked our intelligence agencies and hijacked two Boeing 767 and two Boeing 757 planes to unleash terror in the country. While growing up in India, I thought America, the world's technological and military powerhouse, was untouchable. The street-smart terrorists proved me wrong.

Before relocating to Cleveland, I had worked for a small newspaper in New York City. Living in the Big Apple has its rewards: I got to play host and a tour guide to many distant relatives and friends who came from far and near. The World Trade Center topped the list of the places they wanted to visit, followed by our Lady Liberty and the Empire State Building.

From the steps of The World Trade Center, we would stretch our necks to see the top of the tallest building in the



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world in amazement. We would take joyrides in the elevators that traveled the 110 floors. From the viewing deck of the Twin Towers, people on the streets looked like ants hurrying to their nests. Someone would point out to a distant building and claim the restaurant there was featured on "Seinfeld" episodes. Fans of the sitcom would train the coin-operated binoculars toward the direction in the concrete jungle of Manhattan.

A must-see for visitors, the World Trade Center signified the economic muscle of the country. Perhaps that's why the terrorists wanted to bring it down.

Immediately after 9/11, the country was enveloped in a thick, gloomy cumulus cloud of panic, uncertainty and anger. People who looked different became bogeymen. I got a firsthand experience of the national mood. During a traffic stop, a man flipped his finger and yelled obscenities at me. It was not an isolated incident. People of my ilk were looked upon suspiciously. Sikhs, who wore turbans, became the focus of misguided ire.

After two years, I made a pilgrimage

to the site where the World Trade Center once stood. The air in the vicinity was heavy with a strong smell of burned flesh as is in a massive crematorium. A huge pit, later known as Ground Zero, was all that was left of the more than 1,300-foot-tall buildings. In the 16-acre pit were trucks clearing millions of tons of debris, and occasionally the crew would find body parts. The atmosphere was somber. It was interrupted by occasional honking, which sounded like a dirge.

Fences were erected to prevent people from falling into the pit. Several pictures of the victims, notes and poems of love and sorrow were pinned onto the fence and nearby walls. Visitors stood in silence. Some whispered the memories of the loved ones to their children. And a few of them cupped their faces to muffle their sobs like a distant echo of the hapless cries of the 2,753 people who perished in the World Trade Center attack, 184 in the Pentagon and 40 in Shawshank.

As years passed, we took out al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and built One World Trade Center — 408 feet taller than the original structure. We proved that America is resilient and can rise stronger than ever like the legendary phoenix.

But, 20 years later, the wounds of the 9/11 attacks doesn't show any sign of healing.

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