

Citizen First-Responders confront panic, mass hysteria and risk their lives to help others

Written by Administrator

Saturday, 21 June 2014 22:07 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 June 2014 13:50

This post is based on a conversation with two citizen first-responders who, in face of terror, did what they could to help. It is not a complete report, and no one is claiming any props for heroism. In fact, the tragedy is compounded for them by the fact that despite the finest efforts, a life could not be saved. These people did something extraordinary and, while they are not asking for any special attention, deserve our thanks. If anyone referred to in this piece wishes me to remove it, just give me the word and I will take it down.

Tiny Town, USA – Allen Forest was halfway through his haircut at the Big Time Barber Shop when a loud concussion rocked the building. Someone wondered aloud if a crane had collapsed on the construction site outside on The Ithaca Commons. Forest's brother Kyle Henderson "got a funny kind of look on his face," says Crystal Forest, who also was there with her husband and 10-year old son. With uncanny precision Mr. Henderson guessed exactly what had just occurred: A runaway truck had slammed into a building down the street. Mr. Henderson, shop owner Joe Knight and Mr. Forest's wife, Crystal, among others, left the building and confronted an appalling scene: Dozens of people, pedestrians as well as construction workers, were fleeing the site of an incomprehensible disaster: A semi hauling a two-tiered trailer of vehicles was embedded in Simeon's Restaurant, the rig itself completely buried inside the building. Mr. Forest's son, Anthony, was terrified as he watched his father and uncle move deliberately toward the horror. The boy cried out "why is daddy going that way? Why?" says Crystal Forest who told her son to remain in the shelter of the barber shop, and then returned to follow her husband. A woman, badly injured and bleeding from head wounds came toward them. "One of her shoes was missing and she wanted to find it; she was speaking a hundred words a second," says Mrs. Forest. "We tried to get her to sit and wait for help, but she was in such bad shock she only said, 'I've got to get a phone, I'm going to the library, I need a phone.'" Several people, including Mrs. Forest attempted to convince the injured woman to stay with them. "But she wouldn't. We couldn't get her to stay, she just kept going." Mass hysteria erupted on the east end of the Ithaca Commons Friday afternoon at a little past 4 p.m., the couple told me today during an informal interview at my home. "Lots of people were on their cells calling 911, but it was a few minutes before we heard sirens and police and fire fighters arrived. A reporter from the Ithaca Journal was there taking pictures and asking questions right as we got outside." There was no time for answering questions. The situation was intensified by construction barriers that line the center of the mall hemming people into a narrow area. Workers also fled the scene, the couple said, running down the center of the site. To get to the building, Mr Forest says the men jumped the barriers and criss-crossed the Commons; somehow they navigated past the wreckage. Mr. Henderson entered the building and Mr. Forest and Joe Knight followed suit. Mr. Forest says a man exited the bar carrying an injured woman. Bricks fell from the upper stories of the building, the air was filled with smoke and dust and powdered glass. There was scant visibility inside a surreal space filled with "smoke and fumes and we could barely see," says Mr. Forest. He called out for his brother and for survivors. Gradually the shape of the semi came into focus: the truck had passed through the entire restaurant at an angle "kitty-cornered to the street" he says. He heard his brother also calling for survivors but could not see him; Mr. Henderson had somehow gotten onto the other side of the vehicle and was furiously smothering

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a fire with pieces of cloth. Debris continued to fall. The smell of gasoline was overpowering, says Mr. Forest. "It was so strong it made me dizzy; I pulled my shirt up over my face." The men's voices pierced the gloom as they desperately calling for anyone who might be conscious or alive. "We assumed the driver was dead," says Mr. Forest. "But there wasn't anybody in the cab, he wasn't on the scene."

Crystal Forest says the cries of pedestrians outside made it almost impossible to hear anyone in the building.

She also smelled the gasoline and feared for her husband's life. "I've been through a few bad things in my life," she says. "Like hurricanes in Florida, but this was the saddest thing I've ever seen – it really seemed like something from 9/11."

She recalls a young woman in a state of terror who said she was supposed to meet her mother on the corner and could not find her.

"People were in a complete panic," she says.

Not Mr. Forest, nor Mr. Henderson or Mr. Knight. Forest, a retired oil field worker, is trained in CPR and first aid and understands hazardous duty. "The first thing you don't do is panic," he says. Mr. Henderson, a motor equipment operator for the county highway department, focused on dousing fire and crying for injured people. But after several minutes, says Mr. Forest, the danger of an explosion was too great and, not hearing anyone other than his brother and Mr. Knight, implored everyone to get out. "My brother thought he heard someone, but I didn't hear any voices calling back. The way that truck was positioned, I figured God had already taken anyone who was in its path." It was a terrible feeling, he says. "We really wish we could have pulled someone out of there. I'm from Ithaca, this is my home, and I really wanted to know if there was anyone in there who was alive." That job would require entire rescue crews and 12 hours of intensive, painstaking labor on the part of uniformed responders. What they discovered was everyone's greatest fear.

For more about that, see

<http://ithacavoices.com/2014/06/mother-killed-simeons-crash-sweet-earth/>

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The Forests remained at the scene for an hour. They had a dinner date for a family birthday but their son refused to go. He didn't want to eat in a restaurant because of what had happened, they say. Mr. Forest, realizing "I only had half a haircut," visited with a friend who finished the job. Mr. Henderson, shook-up by the experience, didn't want to talk about it with me today, but we did meet the evening before. The Forests returned to the Big Time Barber Shop late Saturday afternoon to see friends; the shop was open for business.

"Now I know what it was like on 9/11; now I know what it was like at the Boston Marathon," says Mr. Forest, referring to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, and the bombs detonated at the Boston race in 2013. "It seems that you can't be sure of anything – not sending your kids to school, not going out on a date to the movies or even going out to eat."

We thank these people for telling their story. We hope we have conveyed accurately what was expressed to us and we extend our thanks to them for their exemplary actions.

– Franklin Crawford, administrator, tinytowntimes.com