

How a childcare problem may have saved my life

By Lisa Daniel

My 9/11 story is a working mom story. Sept. 11, 2001 was supposed to be my first day back to work in the Pentagon after quitting my staff job two years earlier when my son was born.

I had spent the past two years wondering if and how I would be able to balance motherhood with being a journalist. I felt desperate to get back to the news reporting I loved, while also not at all sure if I could, emotionally, separate from my baby, or from a practical matter, make it work with a spouse who had no work flexibility to help.

As was frequently the case, my husband was working in Europe as I was preparing for my first day of work with UPI. I was fortunate to have a trusted nanny, a woman who had babysat Nolan before while I did freelance writing. Still, I was nervous. I prepared carefully the night before, laying out everything Miriam would need, knowing that she probably would not be able to reach me, even in an emergency, as I would spend most of the day moving throughout the Pentagon where there are no cell signals. I took several phone calls that evening from my husband and others wishing me well on my first day back to work.

I woke up early that Tuesday morning, energized by the crisp, early autumn temperatures and beautiful blue sky. I sat Nolan in his highchair with milk and cereal while I got ready. I was nervously watching the clock, expecting Miriam to be there soon. Then the phone rang. It was Miriam. She was sick and had a fever. With a sinking feeling that my career concerns were coming true, I called my new boss and let him know that I would not be there that day. Hopefully, tomorrow, I said.

And with that, I embraced the idea of spending that beautiful September day with my little boy. I packed the diaper bag, strapped Nolan into his carseat, and headed out to a nearby nursery to buy produce and fall bedding plants. As we were driving home, a news bulletin interrupted the music on the radio: a plane had crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. I returned home just after 9 and turned on the TV when the report came: a second plane had crashed into the south tower. Both were passenger jets. As it became clear that New York was under attack, I watched as TV journalists worked to explain what was happening. Smoke billowed from the twin towers in an unbelievable display of destruction. About a half hour later, news came that a plane had flown into the west side of the Pentagon. My mind raced to the people I knew inside and to the realization that were it not for Miriam's call, I would have been in the building. Then news came of yet another plane crash, this time in a Pennsylvania field, apparently en route to Washington. How many more would there be? What would come next?

Some friends came over with their toddler so that the children could play while we watched the events unfold and talked about what to do next. We were in Northern Virginia, about 12 miles from D.C. Should we leave the area? Where would we go? What was safe? I got one call in to my family to let them know I was safe before the cell towers went down. It would be hours before I could reach my husband. As survival mode kicked in, I packed my car with bottled water, blankets, packaged food, and a few tools — anything I could think of in case Nolan and I needed to hit the road.

When no more attacks had happened by early afternoon I decided to drive toward the Pentagon, not knowing how far I would get, while my friends stayed with the kids. As I drove north on I-395, I saw the smoke billowing from the building and, knowing I couldn't access the parking lot, I exited to a side street on a hill about 100 yards west of the building. I opened the

car door to the overwhelming smell of burning jet fuel darkening what had been a perfectly blue sky. An enormous black tarp covered what must have been the fuselage sticking out from the dark rubble. I scanned the perimeter of the building I had been in hundreds of times that now seemed so unfamiliar with firetrucks, ambulances, police, and hundreds of emergency service workers. The view would have seemed like a movie set were it not for the acrid smoke that burned into my senses and haunted me years later in a flashback as I participated in the tenth anniversary at the Pentagon.

I took down some notes from the scene, preparing to go back the next day and write a story, though still unsure of what was next. Would there be more terrorist hits? Surely the U.S. would retaliate — but when, and against whom? And how would my husband get home with all flights canceled for the foreseeable future? I stayed home that night, holding Nolan close and thinking about “what if” and what was next.