

COSTNER, Beth
INTERVIEWEE

Interviewer: Andrew Russell
Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections
Winthrop University

September 11th 20 year History

Interview #651

Interviewed: February 12, 2021

Transcribed: June 9, 2021

MP3 file format

Length: 00:22:29

Abstract: In this interview with Andrew Russell, Beth Costner discusses her memories and thoughts of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Mrs. Costner describes her experience during the attacks and the response of the Winthrop community as well as the local area to the events.

* This is an edited transcript. Our transcription guidelines are available upon request/on our website.

Time	Keywords
00:04:00	AR: Today is February 12, 2021. It is 11:00 a.m. This is a September 11th Oral History interview with Beth Costner. My name is Andrew Russell, interviewer. Let's go ahead and start off, Beth if you could list your full name, where you were born, and where you grew up. BC: Sure, so I am Beth Greene Costner. I was born in a very small town in northeastern Kentucky. It's called Vanceburg, but honestly there's nothing there so I'm not sure any of the listeners would have any idea where that was. I lived there until I went away to school at the University of Kentucky. I taught in the Lexington area before I went on to Ohio State and now I'm here at Winthrop.
00:00:58	AR: What brought you to Winthrop? BC: My husband was already employed at an institution of higher education in the area. He is from Shelby, North Carolina, so when I finished my graduate work I was fortunate enough to secure a position at Winthrop. We came here and it was a great fit.
00:01:20	AR: I know you said in your email that September 11th that was your first semester working at Winthrop, right?

BC: It was. I had arrived in August. I actually had a friend whose institution didn't start until after September 11th that year. So she had come to visit us and had left and flew out to New Jersey on September 10th. She was actually the first—I had been in class when the first planes hit the towers so I was not quite aware immediately but my phone was ringing as I got back to my office. It was her because she was thinking and then I was thinking about “Oh my goodness, we're one day away, when she was flying.”

00:02:19 **AR: So that's how you heard about the attacks, she called you?**

BC: Yes.

00:02:25 **AR: What were your first thoughts when she told you?**

BC: You know, it was... It is a different feel now. There have been so many things that have happened since September 11th. I think you see them now in the lens that you created after September 11th and so you—your mind immediately goes to the negative now. That it is an attack or it is some dangerous event but when it happened—I also spoke to a colleague who had an office right next to me. You know, it was almost hard to believe. What is happening? Was this an accident? You know once you have multiple planes it's not an accident but those were the first things that you think about when this is happening. So that, I think I wasn't even equipped at that point in my life. I was 31 at that point in my life. I still was not equipped to think through really and truthfully what was happening and the impact on the number of individuals that that day had.

00:03:36 **AR: Everybody thought, initially when the first plane hit, that it was pilot error or a mistake. When did you find out for sure? Was it the second plane or how did you find out that it was terrorism?**

BC: The individual that I was talking about who had the office right next to me, we—for those individuals who might listen to this that are younger, jumping online and watching something streaming was not someone of my generation's first thought on September 11, 2001. You—we were like, where can we get to a TV so we can find out what is going on? We found a television in the building so that we could go and sit and watch. I think as we realized there were multiple planes, there is a plane that has hit the Pentagon. So it was as things continued to happen you began to realize that this was coordinated and that this was catastrophic.

00:04:44 **AR: Aside from being scared for your friend who took the plane the day earlier, what was your initial feeling?**

BC: Disbelief, definitely. I remember watching the first tower fall on the television. Just thinking ‘oh my goodness, there were people in that building.’ I don't think I had even completely considered the fact that there were people on

the plane at that point, which is horrible to say. I think everyone was in almost a sense of shock. As your in shock it takes a while for things to roll in so you start thinking 'oh my goodness, there were people in that plane.' Since then we've learned about the people above where the plane hit versus the people below where the plane hit. It was just this...it was just like this rolling—and I know you said initial, but it was just this rolling realization of thinking about did the individuals know what was about ready to happen? To them. Did they have opportunities to consider their life and possibly—we've learned that some were able to reach out to family members. Which I can't imagine if I was a family member who had been reached out to or if I was the person who was doing the reaching out. I think—just all of that as the day went on and you saw the second tower, and pictures of the Pentagon, and the field where the last plane went down. I think it was just a rolling feel of despair and how do we get beyond this.

00:06:33 **AR: Can you describe how you felt as far as for your safety and the safety of your family?**

BC: Sure. As I said we watched—with a close colleague I watched the first tower fall and we both looked at each other and said 'we don't need to be here. We need to go home.' I was done teaching for the day, I know Winthrop ended up cancelling classes but I was done teaching for the day. I got in my car. I drove home, which was about 45 minutes away so I had that length of time to listen to the radio and just think through and pray a lot for safety. There was a thought process—when you lived in this area, Charlotte is the largest banking hub between New York and Atlanta. So there was some nervousness but I remember talking to my family, who live in very rural areas where safety for themselves was not as much of situation, where I would say 'Charlotte's a good distance away. I really feel safe here.' So I was safe and I felt—I didn't really have any fears for myself in the immediacy. What this was going to mean for our world moving forward was a different story but you didn't quite get there until you got through the initial shock.

The other thing if I might skip ahead a little bit. The other thing that struck me was the church that I went to at the time was very close to where we live. Walking distance. We got phone calls and said we're going to have a prayer service and so it was evening time and my husband was not home yet. I had contacted him and told him I was going so if he came home and I wasn't home; that's where I was. I walked out and there was a plane flying over. I had been hearing how they had—all planes were landed and I've often—it was either a military aircraft or possibly transporting some of our national leaders because those planes were in the air but it was very eerie sound. To hear that plane and think are there other things going to—even though they've grounded what they think is everything, are there other planes out there that they don't know. That's the first time I felt any personal angst from a fear perspective.

00:09:22 **AR: What's your most vivid memory of that day?**

BC: I think it was—and I discussed this with my mother on the phone. I was just the overwhelming amount of images and pictures that were beyond belief. I think that's my memory. How can this be happening, and how do you move forward after that—from here? We also had family members that were at a destination wedding in New Orleans. As the day went on we had been contacted to—because they were coming back that day, later in the day, we had been contacted that they were staying in New Orleans and they were fine. Those kinds of things. There was just this constant 'oh my goodness, I never even thought about that'. There's just this unbelief and worry for our nation.

00:10:40 **AR: You said Winthrop cancelled classes after the attacks, what was the response of Winthrop and Rock Hill as a whole the day off and then further down the road, the weeks and months after the attacks?**

BC: I did appreciate, especially as a new faculty member, having not really—because of the generation that I was in I—yes, there was Desert Storm and things like that that had happened but it was very removed. You were worried about the war but you didn't—it was. They were shooting rockets [nervous laugh] into cities so it just looked different than what I had pictured from other wars. I was born after Kennedy was assassinated and that unrest with Martin Luther King being assassinated and Bobby Kennedy. I was not alive so I wasn't living through that angst either. So I was—this was other than the Challenger explosion watching that, there was not really another event where I was like 'oh I'm'—you know I have some concept. I did really appreciate the outreach of the campus to try to provide some direction for the instructors if we has students who were still upset when we went back to classes. We had services both in the community as well as on campus to try to help people process those tragedies and things like that. I think they did a good job and I've...there's just been a lot of thought to security both because of campus shootings and school shootings as well as, I think, because we're seeing things through the 9-11 lens.

00:12:56 **AR: It has been said that 9-11 is our generation's Kennedy assassination; you will always remember where you were and what you were doing. What changed here at Winthrop after the attacks? As far as—I know after we discerned it was terrorist attacks Muslims were targeted and looked down upon. Anybody who was Middle Eastern was not welcome. Did you see any of that at Winthrop?**

BC: I have a lot of privilege, Andrew. I am a white, educated, because of my career middle class individual. I fully admit that sometimes I have blinders on. I am really working as we all are to try to bring down those blinders but I personally did not see that. I did have, at the time and after, students who were both international students from the middle east as well as students whose families had moved here who had middle eastern decent in their background. I didn't personally see it, that doesn't mean it wasn't happening here. It's just not

something that I personally saw. I think more what I saw were things that were changes in the way that security was thought of. This was also amplified by some of the shootings that happened on campus and some of the unrest from that perspective not necessarily associated with 9-11 but in the same bubble of time. I think I also saw some effects when military personnel were being called up. Because I did have some students who were called up for active duty during that time and then had students who were enrolled after that who had experiences that were difficult through their military experience. So I think that's what I saw more than the unrest for Middle Eastern individuals.

00:15:36

AR: I definitely understand the military aspect. I was in basics of basic training when it happened. I remember the Captain and First Sargent of our platoon came in and turned on the TV. We thought it was a joke because we had heard stories of the hazing that goes on in basic training. We watched the plane hit the second tower and then we watched the towers come down. Then [voice shaken] we knew, and we were terrified. [voice normal] The last question that I have is how did your experience during the attack and the aftermath effect you overall. Did that change your views on anything?

BC: I think about, from time to time Andrew. It's hard. I fly—well not right now in the middle of Covid. However—I have to say that for—I know people hearing this in the future can think back to this time but my role does have me fly quite a bit. I had not flown what I would say an enormous amount before 9-11 but I had flown enough that I knew how things worked. It is now hard for me to go through an airport and not think about 9-11. Because the changes in how you check in and what you have to do are directly impacted by that. It's not a thought that is 'this is inconvenient for me' it's a thought 'oh my goodness' it's sad. That we are now in a place that this is what we experience because of what happened in 9-11. It does make me think there are families and children who were born and never knew their parents. I think back, I saw a news story and they swept across a parking lot. I think it was for a ferry where people parked in New Jersey and rode the ferry across to the city and there were cars there that the person who drove the car there didn't come back to get their car. I think when there are large events, and when we're filming this we're only a month away from the insurrection at the Capitol, but I think when I was watching that there was less disbelief that something like that could happen *because* I knew 9-11 had happened. It's just—it's a—it changed—if you were a part of that day and old enough to understand what was going on. As an educator there was a lot of conversation about how do you talk to young children, all those conversations have come up again in the attacks against black individuals that you see on TV. How do you talk to your children about this? We have this now when we had the insurrection. I often wondered just out of curiosity and I asked my mom sometimes. Was that a conversation that was happening when Kennedy was assassinated or when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I don't—because you didn't have the same access to news at those times you weren't as inundated with it. She said it was a very different experience but the amount of news and visualization will effect anybody who lived through

that. Anybody whose generation is living through what we're living through right now and this may be their events. I think it does change your brain and how you think about it.

00:20:02 **AR: That's all the questions that I had. Do you have anything else that you'd like to share on that day?**

BC: No. I appreciate opportunities to talk about that day. Sometimes when we get this far out from a day like that we don't take a moment and reflect back on—we think about this is where we were or things like that but we don't think about that gut feeling that we had when we walked out and we heard a plane for the first time. [small laugh] Because you just hadn't heard planes! You think back about smaller stories that were big for the families that were involved. That I shared about the parking lot and you don't—it's good that we don't relive those on a regular basis but it's also good that sometimes we *do* relive those. It helps us put into perspective our own lives and our own privileges and opportunities and safety that we have on a regular basis. So I'm thankful.

00:21:14 **AR: Again, me being military I thought that this is the 20 year anniversary of the attacks this year so I thought something needed to be done. I'm glad that I'm the one that's able to conduct this and be a part of it.**

BC: It is odd that a big transition in my life was to move and that all was happening right around the same time. So that was a monumental point in my life. It will always stick with me. As your talking about this being the 20th anniversary for 9-11; this is my 20th anniversary at Winthrop as well.

00:21:56 **AR: Well Happy Anniversary.**

BC: Thank you. I really like to be here.

00:22:09 **End of Interview**