

HARBECK, Robert  
INTERVIEWEE

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September 11<sup>th</sup> 20 year History

**Interview # 654**

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**Abstract:** In this interview with Andrew Russell, Robert Harbeck discusses his thoughts and memories of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Mr. Harbeck describes his experience as a resident of New York and how the city and country responded to the events.

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

**Time**                      **Keywords**  
00:00:00                    **AR: Today is April 15, 2021 and this is an oral history interview with Robert Harbeck concerning the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9-11-2001 attacks on the Twin Towers. Mr. Harbeck if you will go ahead and state your full name, where you were born, and where you grew up.**

RH: Sure. My name is Robert Harbeck. I was born and raised in Long Island, New York. Specifically I was born in a town called Rockville Center. Spent my whole life living on Long Island and working in New York City.

00:00:43                    **AR: Where were you the day of 9-11? Obviously you weren't here at Winthrop because...yes. The questions are tailored more toward Winthrop but we can make an exception so about where were you on 9-11?**

RH: Yes. September 11 was a beautiful Tuesday morning. In the northeast we would refer to it as an Indian Summer day. Bright blue skies, 75-80 degrees, and it was just a normal Tuesday working day. I spent my entire career with Sprint, and in New York City I was an engineer. I was on a conference call with my team and... at about 8:45 someone said 'gee it looks like there was an accident in New York City.' We thought there was a small plane that had crashed as a—perhaps a commuter plane. Again we didn't think much of it but about 15 minutes later the

second plane hit and we realized that it was not a random event. We realized it must have been some sort of act of terrorism.

00:02:14 **AR: So how far were you working from the Twin Towers? I know New York is a big city.**

RH: Are you familiar with New York City?

00:02:21 **AR: I have only been one time so not that familiar.**

RH: But just in general are you familiar with where the World Trade Center is in Manhattan?

00:02:31 **AR: Yes.**

RH: I was in my office on Madison Avenue at 45<sup>th</sup> Street. So basically about 40 blocks north of the World Trade Center. Incidentally two days later I was next door, near the Federal Reserve where we had an office downtown Manhattan. But on the morning of September 11, once we realized the tragic events... the challenge was no one knew what was going to be next. Again being a telecom carrier, cell phone carrier signals were lost. There was a major switching station in downtown Manhattan that was destroyed. There was no cell coverage at the time and then landlines coverage was spotty. No one knew what could have been next. The building that I could see from my office next to it in midtown Manhattan was Grand Central Station. At that point we saw people not walking but running north, away from downtown in the middle of Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue. Again we didn't know what if anything could have been next. As we realized the Pentagon was next and obviously the plane that crashed into Shanksville Pennsylvania was headed either to the Capitol or to the White House. We really did not understand or realize what was happening at that point in time.

00:04:19 **AR: What was the first feeling you remember after hearing the news and realizing what was happening?**

RH: We were able to watch the local news but if you look at pictures of the World Trade Center there's a large spire on One World Trade Center which was primarily used for radio stations and TV stations at the time. Once that went down the local NBC, CBS, and ABC stations were taken off the air. We were able to watch in a loop just the planes crashing into the Trade Center so the information was spotty. No one realized what was going on. There was a lot of chaos and people were extremely nervous, worried, and scared.

00:05:15 **AR: That's understandable. Did you take any steps to ensure you and your family's safety afterwards? We've heard people going into lockdown for days on end and what not. What steps did you take if any?**

RH: The very first thing I did was I called my wife and said that—she was an administrator in our local high school. I said ‘I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know how I’ll be able to get home.’ I wanted to assure her that at that point in time I was safe but that I didn’t know whether or not she would be able to call me subsequent to that. Our office was on the third floor of Madison Avenue and I thought at the time—the first thing we did as an organization as far as Sprint. We wanted to make sure that every employee that was assigned to our facility was accounted for. There was one person who lived in Jersey City that brought her daughter to a day care facility in the World Trade Center and she was unaccounted for. About 45 minutes later she came walking into our office with her daughter. She had been lucky enough to avoid that area. The first thing that we wanted to do was to account for our personnel. Secondly then, we felt that the safest place was in our building. We thought with the vast... number of buildings in Manhattan that we felt that where we were was the safest at that point in time. Again, the first thing that the police, FBI, or government did was shut down bridges and tunnels so we realized we would not be able to take mass transportation out of Manhattan. I, living on Long Island, took the Long Island railroad everyday into Penn Station and then would walk to my office in Madison Avenue. We felt that we would not be able to take those trains because again the government felt that we did not know if any terrorists were on the ground. So we felt staying in the office was the most fortuitous way to go at that point. And this is about maybe by 9:30 or 10 a.m.

00:07:58 **AR: So this is literally less than an hour, hour and a half after the initial attacks?**

RH: Right

00:08:07 **AR: So what is your most vivid memory of that day?**

RH: Well there is a number of them. The most vivid memory was at...10 a.m. seeing the first tower collapse. Seeing it collapse. The second thing I can’t ever—again being 20 years later, at the time I was 49 years old and the constant sound of sirens. Every second of every minute of every hour for the next day all you hear and heard were sirens. Which was first responders heading *into* harm’s way and heading into danger. That’s the one thing I could not get out of my mind. The second thing: this was a Tuesday, the next day Wednesday, no one in New York City went to work but we did go back to work on Thursday. I did have to go down to our office on Maiden Lane which literally is in the shadow of the World Trade Center. All I could smell was an electrical fire. That’s the only way I can explain it. The smell you would get from an electrical fire. That’s something... other than the neighbors and friends that we lost. In New York City you have a population of over 8 million people. Everyone felt—if you didn’t know someone who perished on 9-11, you knew someone who did...and that’s something that’s lived with most New Yorkers. Again resiliency was unbelievable because the next couple of days normally there’s a lot of noise and sound and different types of... sound

happening in New York City and you could hear a pin drop in the next couple of days with no one saying anything.

00:10:20

**AR: Yes. I remember the silence after the attacks. Obviously you spoke a little bit about what changed in the immediate aftermath with the bridges and tunnels closing. What happened in the weeks after? What did you see change?**

RH: At that point in time, Andrew, we did not look at it in terms from a historical perspective. We did not look at it in days or weeks. We looked at it in hours. My next door neighbor, Brian Thompson died. He was a Vice President of HR for Fuji Bank. His daughter Sara, was my daughter's best friend. They went to high school together. They were seniors in high school. He made it out but he was with the CFO and he was concerned that there were still people left on the 78<sup>th</sup> floor in his office. So the CFO stayed on the ground and Brian went back into the building. When the second plane hit, he died. [voice shaken, strained] That's still emotional. It's still very emotional. [voice stronger] Another neighbor who lived three doors away was a New York City fireman. He was assigned to Chinatown, which is in the shadow of the World Trade Center. He did not go to work on September 11 because the day before he had a car accident and he had stitches in his forehead. He was a driver for a rig. The person that took his place was killed. His name is Ritchie Sipiletti [spelling?]. He has four children. He survived but the guilt that he had that his replacement, his back-up, was killed was very very very traumatic for him.

Again the aftermath of 9-11, you would mention in the weeks and months ahead, New York City is the financial capital of the world. 9-11 was on a Tuesday and the stock market was closed for the following three days. Just think of not just a company, a business, a vertical market, an entire industry of finance closed, for all intents and purposes, a week. Which brought the economy to a halt. We saw subsequent on the news, at the time President Bush was speaking at an elementary school in Sarasota Florida. My wife's brother was in Sarasota Florida. When he was advised of what was going on he was taken into Air Force One and the first thing that President Bush wanted to do was go back to Washington. The Secret Service, since we didn't know what was going on, took him out to the Midwest. The first stop was in Shreveport Louisiana to Barksdale Air Force Base. When we first got married my wife and I lived about a mile from that Air Force base. Then from there he was taken out west and then didn't come back to Washington until later that night. So we didn't look at information in a macro type of way at that point in time. In hindsight we can. One of the things I provided to Dr. Gilligan was original copies of the newspapers from our local paper. What was ironic was the very next day, the *very* next day September 12, Osama Bin Laden was named as the mastermind behind it. So the intelligence community was so amazing to be able to find that he was responsible for it.

00:15:13 **AR: I remember just about everything that you just mentioned. It was truly amazing how we all came together and helped each other after that. So you spoke a little bit about how emotional it was because you lost a neighbor and then another neighbor had survivors guilt, how would you say that the events of 9-11 changed your outlook? How did it effect you overall as a person?**

RH: What we felt at the time—again, I was 49 years old and had three children in high school. The first thing we felt is that that day was equivalent to Pearl Harbor, which was the same effect in our parent’s generation. Subsequent to that when Doctor Gilligan asked me to present to her class, the very first thing I mentioned to the class is that the next generation there will be something that happens that they will never forget. At the time I was sort of flippant to say ‘well, what conceivably could have happened?’ and again this presentation that I did in Dr. Gilligan’s class was in April of 2019. So no one would have predicted a pandemic but that occurred. What I tried to concentrate on was the fact that the next generation will be tested. It may not be a terrorist attack. It may not be an attack like Japan did on December 7, 1941. It could be something damaging to the water supply. It could be something damaging...an electronic pulse. It could be something that invalidates your ATM card. It could be a multitude of different things. The biggest take away that I have lived with is that you can never *ever* live in fear. We live in the greatest country of the world. Regardless of what happened... yes, New Yorkers are unbelievably resilient. I’m a native New Yorker so I can say that. As our old expression, if you can make it in New York you can make it anywhere. However yes, the country came together because we needed to and there was a higher need than any petty discrepancies that anyone had. The thing that has lived with me is that we need to be involved whether it’s using our right to vote, or express our free will in...affirming or opposing any political beliefs. The thing that you can never forget is you cannot live in fear.

00:18:47 **AR: That’s a very good lesson that we all need to learn. So that’s all the questions that I have prepared. Is there anything else you wanted to share that we haven’t talked about?**

RH: Well putting it in perspective, a few things that politically occurred, which has been resolved, I’m happy to say it has been resolved. John Stewart as a television host has recently been very adamant, vociferous with the victim’s compensation fund also called the Zadroga Act. Where people who have had serious physical and emotional, and mostly tragic cancer diagnosis as a result of 9-11 authorized billions of dollars to future victims. When I gave the presentation two years ago, that had not been reauthorized by Congress but I’m happy to say it has now been. John Stewart’s now taken within the last couple of days a position on fire pits that have been burning in Afghanistan and Iraq, where we’re trying to get rid of some of our old military equipment and that is causing health issues.

Putting the entire 9-11 in perspective for...a younger generation if you will, technology that was not available when 9-11 occurred. Again we put so much in

perspective and that was—I forwarded a copy of the presentation deck that I had put to Dr. Gilligan and I put together a page of technology that did not exist on 9-11. There was no iPhones. Facebook did not exist. Twitter and Instagram did not exist. Google was only three years old at that point in time, founded in 1998. Amazon was only seven years old, founded in 1994. Those types of things we take for granted every day that does not exist. The question is ‘what technology in the future...’ Who would have thought after the pandemic Zoom would have been such a preeminent technology? I used to use at Sprint Cisco Web-ex, which I think quite honestly is a thousand times more secure than Zoom. The ability to use a technology such as Zoom for distance learning is a benefit. So we can never take that for granted. I think the ability to have distance learning benefits everyone. It’s not just across the room, across the street, across the town but across the world. I think that a benefit from that is that people would then be able to have business meetings without the requirement of travel. A take away from 9-11 is I think it’s extremely important...to vote. Again the presentation I did two years ago, was prior to the 2020 election and I’m happy to say that the number of people who voted in 2020 was higher than it has been in a generation. That is very very positive for everyone to express their right and vote for their elected officials.

00:22:46 **AR: Alright. I want to thank you for your time. Thank you for doing the interview. It was nice to get a perspective from someone who was blocks away when it happened. I am glad that you are safe. Thank you for your time and have a good rest of your day.**

00:23:15 **End of Interview.**