

SLAY, ZaDonna
INTERVIEWEE

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September 11th 20 year History

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Abstract: In her interview with Andrew Russell, ZaDonna Slay discusses her thoughts and memories during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Mrs. Slay describes her experiences as well as the response of her local community 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 February 8, it's a Monday at 11:12 a.m. I am interviewing ZaDonna Slay for the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks here in New York and Washington. If you want to go ahead and state your full name as well as where you were born and where you grew up please.
00:00:28	ZS: Alright. My name is ZaDonna Slay. I was born and raised and grew up in Savannah, Georgia.
00:00:42	AR: So what brought you to Winthrop? ZS: Taking a career in Social Work Education so I am an instructor in the Social Work department. After about 10 years of Social Work practice I was ready to spread my wings from Savannah.
00:00:57	AR: Did you have any connection to Winthrop during the attacks of 9-11? I'm assuming not. ZS: No.
00:01:07	AR: How did you hear about the attacks at first, when they were happening? How did you hear about them?

ZS: I was a senior in high school and we were in our Comparative Literature class. Another teacher came into our classroom frantically saying ‘turn on the television, a plane just hit the Twin Towers.’ We were all like ‘What? Where? Huh? What?’ That’s what happened. [laugh]

00:01:43 **AR: I remember the same feeling. So obviously that answers the next question you were in class. What was your first feeling? What do you remember about it?**

ZS: It was almost like slow motion because we turned the TV on right as...I remember seeing the plane and I just thought oh my gosh a pilot miss-corrected something and that was off. Then it was developing news—the Pentagon. Then, I’m not sure what order but it was The Pentagon. Then they were going to Pennsylvania. It was like ‘oh my gosh’. Then right at the same time they were coming over the intercom telling us we were on a lockdown in school. It was one of those moments of ‘what’s happening?’ I can’t contact my parents. This was pre- real cellphone, smartphone days. [laugh] So it was one of those moments of ‘I need someone to explain this to me’ and our teacher was absorbing it all in. It was just a moment of slow motion putting the pieces together.

00:02:52 **AR: So obviously you knew about the attacks. You said that you thought that the pilot had overcorrected or miss-corrected. When did you actually learn that they were terrorist attacks? What was your feeling?**

ZS: I think. So we ended up keeping our televisions on in the classrooms. I don’t know if the teachers were supposed to or not, but I remember my teachers keeping their TVs on the entire day. As the news were developing that this was not a mistake, this was not an error. This was indeed a terrorist attack. It was a fear of ‘Why America?’ because I grew up in this place of... America being a melting pot. We’re this land of opportunity. So I’ve read about it but now to experience it; it was almost are we even safe? Are we going to experience a world war III on American land at this time? What’s getting ready to happen?

00:03:55 **AR: Tell me a little bit more about how you felt—you touched on it briefly about your safety and your family’s safety. Can you talk me through what did you all do after the attacks as a family?**

ZS: My dad is retired military, serving 20 years in the Army, so for him it’s always been that perspective. I’m growing up in a town where there’s a military base as well. It was really...we responded the way Hunter Army Airfield responded in terms of lockdown. Be safe. Let’s not go out and about until we figure out what’s going on. After school that day I actually... I meant to look up to see what day of the week 9-11. By any chance do you know what day of the week 9-11 in 2001 was?

00:04:46 **Pretty sure it was—actually I have a written history from a Poli-Sci professor. I thought he said it, he does not. Let me look that up real fast.**

ZS: It was a Tuesday. So that day it was really... after we stayed in our second period class an extended amount of time as we went on through the day. But it was immediately go home until we figure out what was going on. We waited until President Bush addressed the country. But the *next* day—I was a part of a youth civic organization called the Chatham County Youth Commission. It's teenagers 10-12 grade from all walks of life. So the next day—we're like a youth replication of the county commission where each period we talk about issues effecting us in the community. We had to talk about it globally at this point and now bring in the impact of religion, because I had friends who were in the organization who were Muslim. It was the fear of being looked at. Being shunned upon now after that first night of finding out more what happened. Not really *why* but we found out what happened. I remember sitting in a circle the next day with friends Black, White, American-Indian, Asian-American really sharing our experiences of what racism looks like. Of what the myth and stereotypes related to different religions and especially Muslim. They were able to speak more about their faith. It was really a learning opportunity. In high school it's one of those things...you're care free. My biggest concern was SAT and getting into college. [laugh]

00:06:47 **AR: Let's veer off track for a minute. What were some of the feelings that were expressed by your Muslim friends? Obviously we saw in the aftermath of the attack we saw very anti-Muslim rhetoric. What were some of their experiences? Did they give you any [idea]?**

ZS: It was mainly a fear of will they be lumped together with the terrorists. That's not how they were raised. They do not have any sort of terrorist belief. They are indeed American. Maybe their parents or grandparents immigrated to America but for the most part all they know are American ideals and values along with their faith. So it was mainly a fear of what would it be like now? I think we had more questions than answers. What would it be like for us to get on a plain again and travel again? What is it like sitting in a classroom? Especially as...I didn't know anyone who immediately had any connections to 9-11. I did have friends and family friends who lived in New York and were in the vicinity when everything happened but it was those moments of questioning. Just the general safety and what other people think. Will I lose friends? Because again a high school senior, you're thinking about friendships and so that part—that was the biggest part of us. To be able to ask the questions about their belief, their prayers, their connections, where their strength comes from to really get through this. It was more tell me what your experience is like than anything.

00:08:33 **AR: So obviously you learned a lot about it.**

ZS: Definitely. Then for me it was a way to provide some sort of empathy or connection. Granted I didn't grow up in the Civil Rights movement or anything

like that, I wasn't directly connected to any form at that time of racism or sexism or ageism or anything like that but it was a way to say well my parents and my grandparents felt this way years ago. So I can definitely create that sense of empathy.

00:09:03 **AR: Ok. We talked a little bit about what you and your family did to ensure your own safety. Can you go into a little bit more detail? I know you said you were basically locked down and you all didn't go anywhere. How long did that last for you and your family as a whole?**

ZS: Really it was about that first 48 hours. After that it was—we really relied on the military base for—to go grocery shopping and everything like that. We stayed away from the military base until we figured out... Because everything was under high security until we figured out the best way. I remember we limited our access there. Really it was just school, for my parents work, back home because there was this uncertainty would another attack happen? How it would happen? Just making sure we communicated. For me being in extracurricular activities ok, I have Youth Commission on this day, dance on these days. It was one of those things just do that, come back home. I remember a part of President Bush's remarks that day was 'We are a strong country. We are resilient. We will find out who did this and go after them. The weapons of mass destruction, we're going to find them.' That gave me a sense of security and safety. I just didn't know what it would look like. I think for me, in a seventeen year old mind, I was still wondering and thinking 'would those attacks happen—would a war break out on American soil? How do we keep Americans safe? What does this look like? [unclear] weapons here? What was happening?' [laugh]

00:10:48 **AR: You have some really good memories of that day. When you hear 9-11 what is the most vivid memory that stands out or the biggest image in your mind?**

ZS: Actually, it's six months later, March 2002. That same group that I mentioned earlier, Chatham County Youth Commission. I had the opportunity. We do an annual legislative—and still speak of them present day even though I'm not affiliated with them, they still do this trip. It's an annual legislative trip where they go to Washington D.C. and New York like clockwork. Coincidentally, we were still going to New York six months after it happened. Our director, who is now the Mayor of Savannah currently so go figure, he said we're going to ground zero. I remember going to ground zero and despite being in the vicinity of Times Square and the hustle and bustle of New York. You know you always think of New York as being this loud place, It was *quiet*. You could hear cars and everything in the distance but it was just... almost like everything—like in a movie and everything around you gets—it was just silent. I could still smell the smoke from the burning. They were still doing recovery efforts. So not only was it the smell of buildings but it was also the bodies. They were doing recovery efforts and it was *so* quiet and solemn. Here I am six months later still that high school

senior. Just still not understanding...violence to *that* extreme. On a global way but it definitely...Yes. That's the one thing that just still shakes me to my core. To really remember that and to hear that silence. The only thing you could hear was the forklift and the crane. That little beep beep but everything else was just silent.

00:12:50 **AR: So it wasn't even the memorial at that point. It was still rubble when you went.**

ZS: Yes. It was still rubble. You still had the signs up of 'I'm looking for my niece, my sister, my daughter, my son.' The memorials. It was still brand new. They did have a little hub for if they were able to find anything. To direct you and say 'if you're looking for so and so call here.' They were still doing the recovery to be able to say where they would match DNA as they were locating everything. Yes. It was still brand new. That was the one thing—when we set up this interview I was hoping—I really think those pictures and everything are stored safely but up in the attic at my mom's house.

00:13:37 **AR: Well if you can get to them, and you want to send me scans I would be happy to take them. You have my email. Obviously since you weren't here at Winthrop, what was the response of Savannah and Chatham County and Georgia in general after the attacks?**

ZS: I was thinking about that and I don't quite remember. I remember it being more on a national level. I remember the local response. I remember one of the mosque leaders at the time. He was interviewed a *lot* with the local news to speak out on it. To really talk about how the Muslim community are banding together and strengthening. 'This is not a depiction of who we are and our core and our beliefs.' But other than that it was definitely...I guess my memories are more so the military community. Banding together and supporting, because while my dad was retired, I had friends whose parents were still active duty. It was that moment of banding together. My sister was involved with the Girl Scout troop on the military base. So it was more so of banding together and what we can do to support our troops. Making sure that they were ready. Checking in with... I had cousins who are in the Army and military. Making sure...deployment ready, everything like that. Being a military community it was more strengthening to make sure our troops are ready to go. Just that connection to say that we are more thankful for things. Almost... I really haven't felt a greater pride of being thankful for the moments of family, of community, since 9-11. I can almost draw parallels to what we are experiencing now with Covid-19. That sense of community and strengthening together. Of 'we can get through this.'

00:15:46 **AR: What changed not only for you personally but for your friends at school, your friends in the youth community. What changed in the aftermath of the attacks?**

ZS: I would say for us it was an ability to be able to express ourselves more. To be able to understand the meaning behind a terrorist attack in a global perspective of things. Because high school student we're just focused on the right now: new car, prom. It allowed us to be able to now think of things that we are global citizens how is this going to carry us into college, our careers. Now to be able to have those conversations. For me, it made me feel more comfortable to be able to reach out and form that ally with an individual who I may not share the same political beliefs with, spiritual beliefs with, religious beliefs with. They may not look like me but I can just stop and say 'How are you doing today? How are you feeling?' and not just say it in passing. You know you just say 'I'm fine' and move on. No, how are you really doing? Then that really helped me form my career path. I knew I wanted to do something community relations related so I chose social work. I always did community social work. I did community organizing not so much the clinical woowoo. [laugh] I did the more so community work so then that was able to really do more community development. To really be able to work with different groups and populations to now really do those focus groups. Kind of like what we did those focus groups to be able to ask those questions, create a safe place where nothing's off limits and let's just have a real talk to get your questions answered.

00:17:48

AR: That answers the last question that I had. Do you have any other memories that you would like to share with me? Obviously that was... a very somber day. A very somber week afterwards. Anything else that you have that you would like to share?

ZS: I think, although... I'm quite sure for those who live and work in New York and at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania for them it hits more to the core but as I shared, with the Youth Commission their annual legislative trip. So after I finished graduate school I went back and I worked with them as an advisor. We still go to ground eleven although I'm no longer affiliated with the organization. They still go to ground zero every year. Every now and then they've gone to the Pentagon. I actually went with them to the Pentagon around 2009, 2010. Now to see the memorials. I did find pictures of the memorials. I couldn't take any pictures of the memorials at the Pentagon of course [laugh] but to see the growth and how this will forever be a part of our memory. How policy has now changed. I think what we most rely and talk about is TSA now. Just how we function, how we move. For me it's the awareness. My blinders are off. No, I'm not taking my purse and move it to the side while I'm flying and giving someone the second look. Definitely not for me. I'm more comfortable now because having that conversation back in high school. But again to see that growth and to know that we as a country, we're resilient. We can depend on each other. Is just... for us overall being able to handle uncomfortable conversations to make us comfortable again. That's something that we need to do more often and not just in a time of crisis.

00:19:57 **AR: Absolutely. It's been said America has never seen as much cohesiveness as we did in the days and weeks after 9-11. I wish we could go back to that. That's all that I have for you today.**

ZS: Exactly

00:20:20 **End of Interview**