

GELABERT, Maria
INTERVIEWEE

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Abstract: In her interview with Andrew Russell, Maria Gelabert discusses her experience during the September 11, 2001 attacks. Ms. Gelabert details her experience living and working in New York City both on that day and the period following. She discusses the City's immediate response to the terrorist attacks as well as the effect these events had on the citizens.

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

Time	Keywords
00:00:03	<p>AR: Today is October 14, this is a 9-11 Oral History interview with Maria Gelabert. Ms. Gelabert, I'm going to go ahead and have you state your full name, where you were born, and where you grew up if you don't mind.</p> <p>MG: My full name is Maria Gelabert. I grew up in Houston, Texas.</p>
00:00:21	<p>AR: Nice. So what brought you to Winthrop from Houston?</p> <p>MG: So, I went to undergraduate school at a small liberal arts university in Texas then I moved up to upstate New York for graduate school. There is where I effectively stayed in the New York/New Jersey area for I guess, 20—let's see...early '90s to—I guess it ended up being like 20 years or so. Between upstate New York and then later metro New Jersey/New York.</p>
00:01:02	<p>AR: Got it. Can you give me some information about where you were before 9-11, before the attacks?</p> <p>MG: Me and my husband and son, who was 3-years old at the time, were living in Fanwood New Jersey. Which is about 45 minutes from my commute to the job that I had at Wagner College in Staten Island. So, that particular morning it happened that my son, Robert, was starting preschool at the pre-k center at</p>

Wagner College. Similar to Winthrop's MacFeat [Early Childhood Laboratory School]. So it was kind of unusual to be taking him into Staten Island and going over the bridge and stuff. So that particular day we were scheduled for my son to have preschool, I think it was only the morning, so my husband had agreed to come in to Staten Island to pick him up and bring him back home because I had to teach in the afternoon or something like that. We were at the exact time that the first plane hit, I was on my way to Staten Island. We were...the geography is such that we were going over the Goethals Bridge which connects Elizabeth New Jersey, close to Newark, over to the western shore of Staten Island. So for that—it turns out there is a pretty nice view of Lower Manhattan when you are at the top of the bridge. So that particular day I remember pointing out the Towers—or pointing out Lower Manhattan to my son. He was in the back seat. You know I'm over here playing music whatever, not listening to the news. I pointed out 'Oh look, look over there Robert. There's the skyline.' You can look—it's tiny from that particular spot but you can definitely see it, it's pretty cool. I guess it was later I realized 'oh man, that must have been a few minutes before the first plane struck.' So by the time I got to Wagner College, dropped off my son at the Preschool, one of my colleagues let me know about what had happened with the first plane. He was already internet streaming to—you get that constant news. So for those few moments we didn't really know, you know, we figured 'oh what a terrible accident.' That kind of thing. Then the second plane struck and then it was all abundantly...more clear that this was not an accident. So, Wagner College that day cancelled classes for that day of course and then I believe it was just through that week... Yes. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Then that particular day the campus held a on-the-spot vigil around noon at the central part of the campus outside the Student Union.

00:04:34 MG: So throughout the day it was pretty much just—ugh, pretty much just a slurry of shock and...obsession with news. Just connecting with other people about all of our—everything going on. At one point a bunch of us faculty, I guess students must have done this too and staff, we went up to one of the dorms which on the top floor you can—Wagner College is nestled in where you can see—nestled near the harbor, so in the top floor of one of the dorms you can get a really nice view of the harbor. When we went up there to the top, I guess it must have been some time maybe late morning, before my son was out of preschool perhaps. We had gone up and all we could see was smoke. Just the two pillars of smoke. I don't recall exactly when the buildings collapsed so it must have been after the collapse. So maybe it was more early afternoon or something.

00:05:55 You know my husband had come in and picked up my son. At the time we were in the middle of a divorce so we were separated. We weren't clear at all what the deal was with the bridges, if we could get back home. If we could get back to New Jersey [voice shaken] that day or what or when. [voice normal] So we kind of stayed together through the afternoon, I remember having a meal with my son and my now ex at a tiny little Italian restaurant with blue checkerboard tablecloths. It was this really, really casual little lunch spot. And it's really close

to the elementary school that my son later went to. Just right across the street, very close to the College. There's a playground right there too so we also spent time at the playground. I remember getting on one of those—they had one of these heavy duty swing sets. The really tall ones. So as an adult I felt really comfortable on them. [chuckles] I'm sure I must have swung on that thing that day for sure. While we were just hanging out waiting for when we'd be able to go back home.

00:07:19 MJ: Now he had a separate car. I had my car, so what we decided is for—that my husband would...venture over first to see how things were and then he gave me a call and let me know, 'Oh yes.' that the bridge was open at least in that direction. [laughs] So it was really, really clear in that day and the days thereafter that...you could not get in to the City. Like getting into the City was almost—like you could not get in. Getting out probably wasn't too difficult because that direction was [laughs] not as much of a problem. But all the traffic was amplified by what seemed like a factor of 10 to 20. It was just—there were a couple of days, I guess it must have been maybe later in the week, where I felt like I needed to go to work to do something even though classes were cancelled. That I tried to go to work. I thought the bridges were open via radio but they weren't. So I had to turn around in the traffic, go back home. I think it was—I believe it was the following Monday or Tuesday that I finally—we were finally able to, you know, really encounter an open Goethals Bridge. That commute, it must have been—well it was long enough that by the time we—what's normally say a 45 minutes, I think it was maybe 2.5 hours. It was so long that we got over the bridge and then the, I guess, 5 or 6 miles -ish to get to Wagner College from the bridge took another at least an hour. We had to stop because my son is 3-years old. [laughs] Like for a potty break. I think we got some food too, McDonald's whatever. But even that, even the secondary roads were like this crawl. Snail's pace. Nothing. It was just not moving.

00:09:23 MG: So emotionally that's the day that I think it really came to a head and I broke down in tears. After dropping him off at preschool, finally got to work, finally got to campus. Dropping off at preschool is a short walk back to the science building and that did it. It really...gosh, the first real...really strong emotional release that I had, post 9-11. So it seemed to me that those—it's symbolic, metaphorically anyway, the City was clearly closed. Almost like the entire—even though the epicenter, of course Lower Manhattan and exactly the World Trade Center, but there were concentric circles of police lines. [chuckles] Just drawn, the police tape, around the entire City and you just—that's the injury. The injury—at least the geographic was this sort of—so immense. When I think about the mileage. You know just mileage from—I'm a scientist so I—mileage from Twin Towers to the say...the edge of Metro, I guess, that's a pretty large amount of mileage. When you dip out to New Jersey or to upstate New York or Connecticut. That's a relatively big radius. So to think about how—the impact is just pretty incredible.

00:11:20 MG: I lost my train of thought a little bit... In the—traffic was definitely bad, bad, bad for a while. Like weeks, because some bridges even remained closed. They were a threat. The day of 9-11, I remember hearing from some of my colleagues who were actually on the Verrazzano[-Narrows] Bridge from Brooklyn to Staten Island and as the planes were hitting he was stuck on the Verrazzano Bridge [chuckles]. He shared later, ‘I thought we were next.’ He was just—because it would be a target any major, I guess, visual landmark. Such as a really famous bridge, or the Twin Towers of course, or Empire State Building, etc. Anything could be a target that day. So I think everybody was a little more on edge about what could happen. ‘What could happen next? What other major landmark is next?’...

00:12:33 **AR: What was the response of, I’m sorry I forget the name of the College you were at.**

MG: Wagner College.

00:12:46 **AR: Wagner College. What was their response? I know you said they cancelled classes and there were on-the-spot vigils that day. In the weeks after, once classes resumed, what was the campus like then?**

MG: [pause] I would...I’m sure that there were support systems put in place for students. In terms of—especially—they had just come to campus so I think probably the freshmen were especially—vulnerable because they had just arrived. How bizarre, you know, and horrific. I remember the campus kind of responding no differently than the rest of the City. In the sense of just continued...continued sadness...that’s really—I’m trying to think of something logistic to share. I can’t think of anything. I know the vigils must have continued. For sure. Maybe weekly. Maybe monthly. Certainly annually. I’m sure that continues to this day. I was in the middle of moving to Staten Island so that was my other major circumstance. I was going through a divorce and I was under contract to buy a townhouse in Staten Island. To be closer to work. At the time I reasoned that’s one way to simplify my life. To live close to work. ‘Yeah, right.’ I still agree with that. [chuckles] If you can, you do. It turned out—I was buying from a couple where the father was a firefighter. He is a firefighter, a New York City firefighter. He apparently was there. He was at Ground Zero at some point. I totally expected them to ‘I need to not’. He was fine, I mean he didn’t die. Who knows what health issues he has now because of that but I was really surprised they didn’t break the contract. I know a part of me was concerned ‘Oh gosh. Am I making the right investment by actually moving?’ But I had to move and it was still a good investment. So I went ahead and bought the townhouse. But Staten Island especially in the years I lived there after. I guess it must have been 10 to 11 years I actually lived there. I didn’t see this so much while I was living there but it was sad for a long time. I felt like the whole place was in this gloomy...To some degree the whole City I’m sure, but Staten Island because it has a high concentration of City workers including firefighters and police officers because

the cost of living is lower on average compared to the rest of the City. If you work for the City you have to live in the City, that's a rule. [Chuckles] So you can't jump over to New Jersey and be a New York cop. No you can't do that.

00:16:14 So Staten Island is often—it is very well populated with firefighters and police officers. So they had an unusually high amount of loss from that day because of that. So Staten Island was affected greatly. I think it did—I think I did—must have felt it. I'm sure I did. I don't think it was just my own personal 'Oh I went through this.' You know. Just proximity. But the Twin Towers—there were these stickers that people got for their cars, maybe there are some around here too, that have some memorial to the Twin Towers. It might say nine and then the one, one are the two Twin Towers, oh one. So those are—what do they call those, the stickers you put on the glass in the cars? I want to say they are gel stickers but I know that's not right. Those never went away. Flags outside of houses. People mounted their flags forever. Forever and ever and ever. They never took them down at night like their supposed to. Rain? Forget it. They stayed out forever. *Because of September 11th*, I mean that that happened. I did it myself, you know. Just...done. I don't remember that being so prominent before. So in that region it was really highly effected. Lot of trauma. Collective trauma for sure.

00:18:04 **AR: Yes. The last question I have for you is how did your experience during the attack effect you overall in your outlook on life?**

MG: It changed my view of the United States for sure. My parents came from Cuba so I'm a first generation Cuban American. They left Cuba in the '60s, right after the revolution. So they were essentially escaping a regime that was becoming—was already communist, really, by the time they left. Authoritarian for sure. Where businesses were being taken by the government, personal freedom...no, not really. [chuckles] Go to jail for saying the wrong thing, that kind of thing. I think they always inculcated in me and my siblings this idea, and I think it is some truth, that the United States is this really solid haven for freedom, democracy, opportunity. You work hard, you'll do fine in the United States. If you're willing to work hard and just make your opportunities. Now—and security. Yes. I guess that was where I was going with that. And a very secure place to live. Because of that freedom. So I guess—I know 9-11, like so many others, helped me see that the United States was much more fragile. Fragile physically. In a way that I hadn't really imagined before. At the time it was being—I'm sure it's at least compared to—the only thing—the last thing before it was Pearle Harbor. Like on soil and that was Hawaii. Until the—in the continental U.S. thing it had been a long time since Pearle Harbor but also right here in New York City. In this mecca, you know. In this humungous metropolis center. I definitely—I since do not think of the United States in the same secure kind of way. In a way though, it's—that's not a bad thing, it's just—it's unfortunate that we don't feel as secure as we did as a country. It's kind of good to acknowledge that the rest of the world by and large is not as secure as the United States. So in a way we're sort of this strange—you know. [chuckles] The

western world is sort of this little bubble of relative security for citizens. There's a reason for that. You know? That's been built. It did not happen...It did not happen because a bunch of people decided to inculcate personal freedom and work hard. You know, do all the things. Take personal responsibility, etc. It was—there was a lot more behind it. I think we're still clearly struggling with that now as a country. Those ideas. I think many of us still want to think of this country as being this super secure place. It is relatively. But...you know. We're not invulnerable. We're...yes. I guess it's more like this is reality sort of so in a way this is what I think is good. This is more—this helps us see the reality of the rest of the world. I think that can't be a bad thing. We've come to the truth about that then. I think we can better handle how to move forward with a fuller picture.

00:22:51 **AR: Right. That's all the questions I have for you, did you have any for me?**

MG: No. I think that's about it. I hope my story helps to texturize what's out there and adds as a positive addition to the Archives that you have put together. Thank you for inviting me.

00:23:11 **AR: Thank you for volunteering. I will let you go so you can get on with your day.**

MG: Thanks so much.

00:23:20 **End of Interview.**