

A Picture of Hope from 9/11

The rubble pile at Ground Zero was 10 stories high.

Yet nothing was identifiable.

Three weeks after the 9/11 attacks and the scene in lower Manhattan was defined by this enormous mound of smoldering destruction.

Anne Bybee struggled to find one thing of significance.

"It was just this mangled rubble pile of nothing," Bybee said. "I kept looking at the pile, thinking I would recognize something. A computer monitor. Or a chair. Or anything."

Bybee was on her third day of work as part of the National Disaster Medical System Mission Support Team, providing logistical support to the Disaster Medical Assistance Teams who cared for rescue workers at Ground Zero.

Walking the Ground Zero perimeter for about 16 hours a day, she found herself almost numb. A sense of hopelessness had kicked in as she kept staring at this pile of madness.

But then, out of nowhere, she finally saw it.

'I've never seen that before'

Bybee stared at it for a few minutes. Or maybe it was an hour. She lost track of time.

She noticed a worker standing nearby and asked him a question.

"Did they do that on purpose?" Bybee said.

In his thick Bronx accent, the man quickly responded, "Yeah, they hit it with two planes."

That wasn't Bybee's question.

A cross had naturally formed from the mangled remains of the Twin Towers and despite walking past this spot many times on the backside of Ground Zero, Bybee had somehow missed the imagery.

As did the worker: "Oh, man, I've never seen that before."

'You are not alone'

The image of the cross was more than a coincidence for Bybee, more than two fallen beams.

The voice of the Lord was speaking to her.

"As I was staring at that, I got a sense of peace," Bybee said. "I got a very strong message. That message was 'You are not alone. I am here.'"

The longer she looked at the cross, the more she was moved. There was other material wrapped around it that resembled the clothes Jesus would have worn.

The steam in the background represented the devastation for the 9/11 families, while Bybee saw a ray of light coming in from the left, which was actually a stream of water gushing in.

"I couldn't move for a long time," she said. "I felt that message was not only given to me, but also the people that I was working with and in contact with."

'I was just speechless'

Opening the envelope from Long's Drug Store near her home in Roseville, Calif., Bybee braced herself.

Five days earlier, she dropped off that film to be processed. More than three weeks had passed since her encounter with the cross in the rubble.

Would the picture do it justice? Would the image be as powerful as she remembered?

Had she embellished it in her own mind?

This was a disposable camera, after all, long before digital cameras became mainstream.

"I went through the photos and was just speechless. I really was," Bybee said. "The more you study it, the more you see."

The iconic photo was picked up by , and a megachurch in Seattle used the photo to recreate a real-life 9/11 stage for their Easter service that reportedly drew 25,000 people.

"I didn't realize the photo had caught as much as it did," Bybee said. "It brought me right back to that moment."

'The Memory of the Smell'

Of all the images seared in Bybee's brain from her two-and-a-half week experience at Ground Zero, the first thing that pops into her mind isn't always this image of the cross.

In fact, sometimes it's not an image at all.

"The memory of the smell is still with me," she said. "That smell was constant. You knew what the smell represented."

Bybee also thinks about the owner of the deli, who was just staring into space.

"He was just standing there and I asked if I could come in," she recalled. "His name was Steve. He shared his story with me."

Steve had sent all his employees home after the plane hit the first tower and shortly after that, a beam—"25-to-35-feet long"—crashed into his building.

"He said 'What am I going to do? What am I going to do?' " Bybee recounted. "I wonder what happened to him and his business."

'So Much Has Changed'

Growing up in Nevada as the sixth of 10 children, Bybee knows a thing or two about chaos. But as an experienced Emergency Planning Analyst for the state of California, she also knows what it takes to handle an emergency situation.

Bybee is a firsthand witness of how impactful 9/11 was to the nation.

“So much has changed in our country because it happened,” she said. “We are much better prepared for disaster responses than we were then.

“Every aspect from small, local communities to the Federal Government has learned from it.”

Bybee has traveled around the country giving lectures on emergency preparedness, using her 9/11 photos as training tools, especially in the years immediately following the attacks.

“Part of me felt like it wasn’t appropriate to take pictures of things I saw there,” she said. “It’s interesting, I was looking at another 9/11 presentation and so many of the pictures that are published are from a distance—the building on fire, the building collapsing, the smoke, the skyline ...

“The photos that we took are literally up close and personal.”

And the photo of the cross? That’s still in her PowerPoint.

And whenever she comes across that image, Bybee pauses, if only for a second.

“I almost feel like I was a medium to capture this image,” she said.

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