

VALLEY & STATE

Into the mind of...

Richard Picciotto

Retired New York Fire Department Chief Richard Picciotto, the highest-ranking firefighter to survive the World Trade Center collapse, described his experience in the book "Last Man Down."

1. You were in the North Tower when it collapsed. What images stick with you from 9/11?

Not many images, because when the tower began to collapse, it went completely black. What I do remember is the sound. I heard the same sound approximately 30 minutes earlier when the South Tower collapsed, so I knew what was happening.

2. The World Trade Center attack killed 343 New York firefighters. How have you personally, and the department as a whole, dealt with such a loss?

Personally, it was devastating. To lose 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 20, 50, 100, 300... the numbers are just almost too great to comprehend. I went through severe emotional swings from happy to be alive to depressed at such a loss. The department also was devastated. We lost so many great people with tremendous experience, and in the few years the department also lost many of their senior members through attrition. But new members joining the department have the same drive and determination that has made FDNY the best fire department in the world.

3. What were the important lessons

for first responders?

Prepare and train as much as possible. And we now realize the importance of communication.



A former New York fire chief says communication is key in a crisis like 9/11. AP

4. What still needs to be done so we're prepared to respond to a terrorist attack or major emergency?

Better communication, especially radios. I also think that the best way to eliminate terrorism is to stop the terrorists no matter where they are hiding. We have to be proactive in going after terrorism.

5. How has 9/11 changed your life?

In so many ways. I try to appreciate the beauty in life and in people. Sometimes personal tragedy brings out the best in people.

6. What do you think of the memorial and reconstruction plans for the site?

I am all for a fitting memorial to those who lost their lives at the site, especially for first responders, who gave their lives helping others.

7. You're speaking at a Valley Forward lunch on Dec. 9, which is open to the public. What is the one point you hope to get across in such events?

You have to put priorities on your life. But, most people's priorities become very focused during or after a tragedy, either personal or national like 9/11.



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