



Patrick J. Dempsey Jr. '88

A September 11 Survivor Who Walked Away

with a Lesson in Life

by Kristin E. Etu '91

On September 10, 2001, **Patrick J. Dempsey Jr. '88** traveled to New York City to prepare for a presentation planned for the next day in the World Trade Center. As a sales director for Ingram Micro, a global wholesaler of technology products, his \$20 million territory demanded that Dempsey spend a lot of time on the road. But his hard work did not go unrewarded. Dempsey rapidly climbed up the corporate ladder. You might even say that Patrick Dempsey fit the classic definition of an American success story.

"I was your typical Type A personality who wanted the fancy sports car in the garage, the big house, and I worried about my stock options and 401K."

But Dempsey now says that his success came at a cost. Traveling for his high-power job meant spending a lot of time away from his wife, Lisa and their then three-year-old son, Ethan.

"I missed a lot of T-ball games and soccer games. I was traveling all around in pursuit of all the wrong things." When he wasn't traveling, Dempsey often spent 12-hour days in the office, and came home from work tired and stressed. "Your job is full of tension and pressure, so you're not always going to be the nicest guy when you get home. Do you want to go play with your son? No, you're too frazzled."

Back then, Dempsey's job responsibilities always came first. But those priorities were profoundly realigned on the morning of September 11, 2001 when he became caught in the middle of the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history. His work with Ingram Micro brought him to the 78th floor of the World Trade Center (north tower) for a sales presentation with his client, Quantum ATL. Dempsey arrived promptly at 8:00 a.m. The morning began as usual, with coffee and donuts with his clients. Before the presentation, Dempsey excused himself to use the bathroom. It turned out to be quite a distance from the office. Along the way, he noticed the beautiful



Prior to September 11, 2001, Dempsey worked 12-hour days and traveled frequently, leaving little time to spend with his wife, Lisa and their son, Ethan.

marble in the elevator lobby. The door to the stairwell also caught his eye, although, at the time he thought nothing of it. As Dempsey returned to the Quantum office, an explosion, like he never heard before, rocked the entire building.

"The whole building creaked and let out a moan. Then it rocked forward and I thought, 'we're going down this way.'" It was 8:46 a.m. and American Airlines Flight 11 just hit the north tower of the World Trade Center. No one inside knew

"The picture in my mind is so vivid I could tell you everything about it ... *It was like a war scene.*"

what had happened and the initial scene, describes Dempsey, was one of disbelief and confusion. He says everyone just stood in stunned silence, at first. Some people thought the blast was an electrical explosion. "When you looked out the window, you could see the fireball. Windows, glass, paper, everything just shot down, and ceiling tiles started to fall in."

Dempsey was among the first to run outside the Quantum office to get a better handle on what was happening when another man nearby yelled that the explosion blocked

the closest stairwell to where they were. At that moment, Dempsey recalled the back stairwell near the bathroom. Without hesitation, he led people in that direction.

"He led us to that stairway," recalls Sheri Leach, a former co-worker of Dempsey's. "He really took control, stayed calm and was key to people getting out of the building quickly."

As everyone made their way out, Dempsey was saddened to see the beautiful marble he admired, just a few minutes earlier,

now covered in soot. Once in the stairwell, the mood was calm, until they approached the 45th floor at about 9:03 a.m. That's when United Airlines Flight 175 slammed into the south tower. Dempsey says the north tower rocked again. Seconds later, smoke and the smell of jet fuel filled the stairwell, and people started to panic.

"This was the only time I thought it was going to be bad because I realized that many people might die of smoke inhalation." But because the tower managed to withstand the initial impact, Dempsey says he "never

"If I could tell them not to fall into the trap I fell into, to give back to the community, maybe they would see things differently."

had any doubt about getting out of that building." He recalls the encouragement from firefighters who were making their way up into the inferno. "They kept telling us, 'You guys are almost there. Just keep moving.'"

Those words helped to ease the enormity of the horrific events Dempsey was witnessing as he made his way down the stairwell. The images of badly burned people who escaped from the floors above him are seared in his mind. He remembers one woman, in particular, whose clothes were burned to her body. Others, he says, were missing body parts. But the worst scene was yet to come. As the courtyard between the two towers came into view, the magnitude of the situation also came into focus.

"The picture in my mind is so vivid I could tell you everything about it," says Dempsey, as he describes a graphic scene that included bodies, body parts and the fuselage from one of the planes. "It was like a war scene."

Once they made it out of the building, Dempsey and his associates had to fight the urge to watch the terrifying scene unfold. "It was like a towering inferno. We could hear people screaming and jumping from the building."

The group ran, for what turned out to be six miles, back to their hotel. They never looked back. It took Dempsey a long time to come to terms with what happened and even longer to speak about it.

"There were a lot of things I had to clear up internally with regard to my feelings about what happened that day. I was angry for a very long time."

As the first anniversary of the attacks approached this past September, Dempsey became upset about what he felt was the "romanticizing" of the event.

"The hardest part now is you want to heal and move on and it just keeps being brought up. It's difficult," says Dempsey, who refused requests by the media to tell his story and instead called his *alma mater* on the first anniversary of the event to tell his story to *Canisius College Magazine*.

Another significant event affected Dempsey's life this year. In July, he was laid off from his job. But Dempsey describes it as a positive step in his life and one that has also

Dempsey made it out of the World Trade Center unharmed on September 11 — and so did his ID card from that day. He refers to it as his "lottery ticket."



forced him to slow down and re-examine his priorities. When Dempsey does re-enter the workforce, he vows it will be a job that is compatible with his values and one that will enable him to spend time with the people who mean the most to him. In the meantime, he is taking full advantage of being home with his wife and son. Dempsey is also becoming involved in volunteer work and reconnecting with Canisius. In addition to serving on his class reunion committee, he has offered to share his experience on campus and in the college's classrooms. Dempsey wants students to know "not so much the message of the Trade Center and what actually occurred there, but how something like that changes your life." He adds, "If I could touch one person and tell them not to fall into the trap I fell into, to give back to the community, maybe they would see things differently."

The "trap" Dempsey is referring to—working long hours, chasing the big bonus, buying the bigger house—is one he might still be in if he weren't in the World Trade Center on September 11. And that is why he feels it is so important to share the message he learned that day with others.

"Live every day like it's your last. Understand what's important and understand who is really there for you. Jobs come and go but people last and make an impression on your life." ■

Dempsey says September 11 and the loss of his job in July forced him to re-examine and realign his priorities.

