

Freedom, Two Years Ago

Mark Russell, OAWU Office Manager

Where were you, two years ago?

I took my 16-year-old son out of high school to take him with me on a week's vacation to the east coast prior to the NRWA Annual Conference in Philadelphia. We arrived on September 8th and tentatively planned on driving up to Boston, MS, over to Gettysburg, PA, and back to Philadelphia, where Gregg was to catch a flight back to Salem, OR on Thursday, September 13th.

On Sunday, the 9th, our travels took us to Liberty State Park where you catch the boats that take you over to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. We figured since we were this close it would not be right not to stop and visit these sights, so we did. While waiting in a long line to climb the stairs to the base of the statue, a German tourist convinced us to leave our car at the park and take the water taxi over to Manhattan Island where we walked two blocks from the pier to Trade Tower #2. The view from the 107th floor indoor observation area was stunning, but it was spectacular from the 110th floor observation deck, nothing but sky above you. After watching the sun set, we caught the water taxi back to the park, drove under the Hudson River to get back to Manhattan Island so we could drive down Broadway (we never found Park Place) and Times Square.

On Monday, the 10th we drove up Hwy 95 through Connecticut and Rhode Island to Boston, Mass. We walked part of the Freedom Walk and saw the old North Church, Paul Revere's home, Old Iron Side's ship, and much more. We continued to drive to the New Hampshire border and crossed it just so we could say we had been there, then came back a couple miles to camp on the Atlantic Ocean at Salisbury State Park.

The morning of the 11th, we broke camp around 8:30 am and started the all day drive through Massachusetts, New York, and most of Pennsylvania where we spent the night in Harrisburg. Once on the highway, the radio announcer was telling of a big fire from a plane that had crashed into the Pentagon. I told Gregg not to worry, that it was not a traffic problem for us. Then

we heard about the first plane crash in New York. I was stunned. We had just been there 32 hours earlier. After the second plane crashed into the Towers and the events of what may be happening set in, I realized we hadn't checked in with my wife since Sunday. For the next two hours we stopped at rest stops along the way, waited our turn in phone booth lines until we could get through to let her know where we were and where we were going. Many people were talking about changing their travel plans and anxious about where to go next. By this time, signs all along the turnpikes were announcing "All roads to NYC are Closed". The rest stops started filling up with truckers who didn't have anywhere else to go. The tollbooths between turnpikes opened their gates and stopped collecting tolls all day. As we traveled, every radio station was covering the unfolding events of the day. After arriving at our hotel in Harrisburg late that night, we saw our first television pictures. An hour later, we tried to get some sleep.

Over the next few days, our lives and original plans were changed. Plane flights got canceled, the NRWA Conference was canceled, and we became a part of the many people who were stuck a long way from home. We ended up keeping the rental car and drove across our United States to get home. We drove through 23 states during those 10 days and saw how big our beautiful country is.

What were you, two years ago?

Two years ago, I had the freedom to take my son out of school for whatever purpose a parent chooses. I had the freedom to travel anywhere, anytime, freely throughout our country. I had the privilege to visit some of the sites that make our history. I had the freedom to print and say anything I want to about how I feel about our country. I took advantage of the freedoms we share being a citizen of the United States. Just like pouring water from the tap, not thinking much at all about what took place to make it and keep it drinkable, I will admit, it is easy to take these freedoms for granted.

Where are you, since then?

My son has graduated from hi school. My wife created a beautiful scrapbook of our "East Coast Trip". We will be celebrating our 21st wedding anniversary in November. I have a beautiful one-

year-old granddaughter with another on the way and I really enjoy being your Office Manager for OAWU after 3 and a half years.

What are you, since then?

Two years ago since then, I am different. Today, I still have the same freedom to take my son out of school, to travel freely in our country and do all the things that true freedom allows. I don't take it for granted as much the freedoms we enjoy. I am greatly appreciative of our freedom we have today. I am still deeply saddened over the events of September 11. But yet, grateful we are still the same great United States of America. Free.