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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

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Fifth public hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

Statement of Monica Gabrielle to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon The United States November 19, 2003

Good Morning.

My name is Monica Gabrielle. I am Co-Chairperson of the Skyscraper Safety Campaign and a Widow of 9/11. I would like to thank Governor Kean, Congressman Hamilton and the Commissioners for allowing me this very important opportunity to provide testimony regarding 9/11.

On the crisp, clear morning of September 11, 2001, my concentration was abruptly shattered by the extremely loud and out of place sound of an airliner careening down the island of Manhattan. Minutes later, in my office, I was facing the inconceivable scene being watched by

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millions of people around the world – black smoke pouring out of one of the World Trade Center towers. What separated me from the millions? My husband was in one of those buildings and I couldn't remember which one. At 9:02, it would make little difference as I watched the second plane swing around and slam into the second tower. Now both towers had been hit and were burning.

The shock setting in would be completely embedded into my being as I watched the first tower fall – now knowing it was Rich's building. It would be 3 days before I would get any information regarding what Rich had endured. He, along with a group of colleagues, was waiting on the 78th Floor Sky Lobby for one of the express elevators when the second plane hit. The group and approximately 200 others in the Sky Lobby at the time were thrown around as the building swayed from the impact. Rich was hit by the marble from the walls, which fell on his legs breaking and/or crushing them. He was pinned under the marble debris and unable to move. He was waiting for rescue, most likely under the most horrific conditions imaginable – fire, smoke, dead, dying, injured, and quite possibly the sound of the building around him falling apart. Imagine their relief when Battalion Chief Orio Palmer and Fire Marshall Ronnie Bucca appeared - like angels - to help them to safety. These unbelievable men were in the process of coordinating the evacuation of the injured when the building collapsed, stealing their last breath, crushing every person still in the building to death – only 59 minutes after the initial impact! They never had a chance.

Let my voice be the voice of all the victims of this needless, horrible murder. Let my voice, on behalf of all the victims, implore you to listen and listen well. The families who have been left behind to suffer from the memories of this horror are too many. We have an obligation to the victims, the families and the citizens of this country to take a critical look at what went

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wrong and to make sure we do everything in our power to ensure safety and security in all buildings.

We must first separate the events of September 11 into two categories: the terrorist attacks and the subsequent building failures, which alone encompass a variety of horrifying conditions. Unbelievably, evacuation and emergency preparedness were sorely lacking or totally non-existent on 9/11. This, along with critical flaws in the design and construction of the buildings, contributed to the ominous conditions occupants found themselves in, which ultimately claimed the lives of thousands.

I am here today to speak about issues relating to evacuation and emergency preparedness. On September 10, 2001, I, like so many of you, had little to no knowledge in these areas. I, like so many of you, entrusted my family's safety to others. That ignorance began to change one day later. During the course of the past two years, I have been shocked to discover how very deadly that decision was.

In order to properly move forward, we must first go back. As the World Trade Center began to take in tenants in December of 1970, it was fairly common knowledge among those close to the project that there were inherent problems, safety issues if you will. The construction of the buildings would be termed "fragile" by their critics – the Fire Service, the very service commanded to protect it. The towers shot upward into the sky to the height of 110 stories – a quarter mile. They contained lightweight floors, acre large expanses of open floor space, substandard fireproofing, and the lightest, thinnest steel would be found at the top. Worst of all, these innovative, experimental buildings were constructed and opened without any automated sprinkler system installed in them! Subsequently, in any major fire, the risk would be great. There were no fire barriers on these acre spans of open floor space. No water – still

the best measure against fire. Any fire was free to spread and spread quickly.

The potential occupancy of each tower was 25,000. Each tower had only three staircases, clustered around the center core of the building along with the elevators, and contained no cement or masonry. The only protection afforded any emergency or evacuation, whether stairways or elevators, were two layers of fire-rated gypsum board or drywall.

The World Trade Center, over the course of its life, would have a number of incidents that would give the Port Authority the opportunity to address the very serious issues of the safety and security of their tenants. As would become all too evident, the strategy of "defend in place" would not work for any major fire in these buildings. Their inherent design flaws and most importantly, the inadequate, untested fireproofing would require full evacuations each time. Unbelievably, with all the warnings, the Port Authority, in its arrogance claiming that these were indestructible buildings, never prepared the tenants for this eventuality. On September 11, this negligence would cost the lives of thousands and the faulty fireproofing would play a major role in bringing the buildings down.

Just before midnight on February 13, 1975, an arson fire was started at the World Trade Center inside a closet filled with telephone switching equipment, cabinets filled with paper and alcohol-based fluid for mimeograph machines. This, combined with the insufficient fireproofing was enough to cause a fire to get out of control quickly. It would take 132 firefighters three hours to finally put it out. Fire Commissioner O'Hagan stated, "Had the building been [fully] occupied, and given the stack action that exists in this 110-story building the rescue problem would have been tremendous." Although it was night, everyone in the building, maintenance, cleaners, security, etc. had to evacuate. There

were other smaller fires set in May 1975. Pressure was applied and the Port Authority made some concessions. They installed more walls and doors on open floors, improved alarms and communications, installed more smoke detectors. Yet, the one sure thing to help control a fire was ignored. Water! The automated sprinklers were too costly to install!

In February of 1981, the World Trade Center towers had another scare. An Aerolineas Argentinas Boeing 707, on its way to JFK International Airport, missed hitting the North Tower by a mere 90 seconds. The already known dangers of fire in these towers became compounded. The event of an airliner crashing into the buildings changed from a perceived threat to a very real and pressing danger!

Some time during the 1980's, Peter Goldmark, executive director of the Port Authority, set aside funds to finally install the much-needed sprinkler system. This project of retrofitting the building would be done over the course of years.

In 1984, with the growing concern about the change in global climate and the increase in terrorism, Mr. Goldmark ordered a report on the vulnerability of the World Trade Center. The Office of Special Planning (OSP) was born and charged with this task. Appointed to oversee this project was Edward O'Sullivan. After speaking with many domestic and international intelligence agencies and a top to bottom assessment of the World Trade Center itself, it was obvious that the vulnerabilities were numerous and included the danger of a potential bomb being placed in the underground parking garage or the possibility of a plane hitting the towers. A grave concern was a collapse. When Leslie Robertson, the original structural engineer, was confronted with the concern of a collapse, he boldly claimed that the towers were "a Gibraltar." Also, unfortunately, the person who commissioned the report, Mr. Goldmark, had by this time left the Port Authority for

another position. Therefore, the excellent recommendations of eliminating all public parking or at the very least, conducting random inspections of cars entering the garage, dispersing emergency operations centers, installing better internal radio systems, battery powered lighting in all the emergency stairwells, more video cameras, were largely ignored.

The poor decision-making regarding the recommendations made by Mr. O'Sullivan would come back to haunt the Port Authority and its tenants on February 26, 1993, when a bomb went off in the sub-basement as had been feared. The lack of additional security in the parking area allowed the van loaded with explosives to enter. The lack of emergency lighting made the evacuation of thousands a horrifying experience. The lack of proper venting of the smoke – the stacking effect – posed a life threatening risk.

During the 1993 evacuation, the lack of preparedness was blatantly evident. People didn't know what to do. They didn't know where to go. The evacuation lasted over 10 hours. The buildings quickly filled up with black, acrid smoke. Everything went out – lights, ventilation, elevators stopped, trapping people inside them as the cars filled with smoke. Some tried to walk the stairs to safety only to return hours later covered in soot – it was too smoky to go all the way down. People were terrified. Those who knew the building's construction well – the Port Authority engineers – were able to dig their way through the flimsy gypsum board with keys and nail files and escape from a stopped elevator. Others went down through dark, smoky stairwells holding on to the shoulder of the person in front of them. The stairwells quickly became crowded as people from other floors entered. Several were rescued by helicopter off the South Tower.

After the 1993 bombing, some safety improvements were made. Battery-operated

emergency lighting was installed in the stairwells, luminescent paint was added, and a separate emergency command center was put in each building. The ever inadequate fireproofing was finally to be increased to one and a half inches – three times the amount currently on the bar joists. This was to be done as tenants moved out. It would set a potential time frame for completion at over ten years! On 9/11, it had not yet been completed.

The years following the 1993 bombing resulted in more complacency, or, as was the case with Morgan Stanley, more vigilance. This company took the initiative to make sure that its employees would know exactly what to do if there were ever another emergency. The only way to accomplish this was to practice, practice and practice. As a result of this constant drilling, on the morning of 9/11, the only casualties that Morgan Stanley sustained were as a consequence of their employees returning to help others who were in trouble.

So far, each and every incident that occurred at the World Trade Center was an opportunity for an honest, critical look at the safety of the buildings, at the evacuation of and potential problems with getting nearly 50,000 occupants to safety – quickly. It was an opportunity to address these things in order to minimize injury or death. The bombing in 1993 was a major indication that evacuation of these buildings was a very real problem and a comprehensive plan needed to be drawn up, fine-tuned, disseminated, implemented, and practiced. An enormous task to be sure – but, these were enormous buildings and brought with them enormous responsibility!

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the first day of school and primary voting would delay many who worked in the World Trade Center, saving their lives. Unfortunately, many – too many – were at their desks. As with most mornings, occupants of the towers consisted of

the usual diversity. Employees, people from sister offices for day meetings, companies conducting breakfast meetings at Windows on the World, visitors, and messengers.

When the planes hit the towers, they virtually sliced right through the buildings, penetrating the soft curtain with little to no resistance, taking with them all means of escape above the impact zone in Tower 1 and leaving a lone, and barely known about stairway open in Tower 2. What happened in those towers is unforgivable.

Untold numbers were instantly killed because they were in the direct path of the planes. Those at and above the point of impact in Tower 1 endured unimaginable conditions as is evident by the number who chose to leap to their deaths. Others tried frantically to escape only to learn that every potential access to safety was closed to them. The stairways were gone and the elevators were gone. Unable to go down, the soon-to-be victims went up. Up to the roof, where they encountered locked doors. No one had bothered to tell them that roof top rescue was no longer an option. Their only escape, and chance at survival, would have been a roof top rescue. They waited for help that would never come – a quarter mile above ground level. These innocent souls stood at windows waving whatever they could to attract attention, hoping and praying that someone would reach them in time. Last calls were made, final messages were sent – too smoky, can't breathe, should we break a window? What should we do? Where should we go?

In Tower 2, similar events were occurring. The difference – Tower 2 had a critical 15-minute window of opportunity to evacuate – a missed opportunity to minimize the casualties. Instead, occupants were told to stay, to go back. Many, already in the process of leaving the building turned around, trusting the announcement that the building was secure. That decision would cost them their lives. Once again, untold

numbers were killed upon impact by the second plane. Once again, others would find themselves searching for a way out only to be met by locked doors, stairwells that were destroyed, elevators that didn't work. Again, the roof was sought as a point of rescue. Again, locked doors, wasting precious minutes going up instead of finding the one open stairwell left, never having been told that roof top rescues were no longer an option. Again final messages went out: too smoky, can't breathe, the ceiling is falling in, the stairwells are blocked, the stairwells are gone. Some of these soon-to-be victims were on phones with loved ones pleading for information and options. No communication from the Port Authority was forthcoming. Innocent victims, sitting in offices, waiting for instructions on what to do. All of them perished, many while still on the phone with loved ones. Those memories will haunt them forever.

At present, there are two major investigations of the World Trade Center being conducted. Congress has charged the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) with the daunting task of conducting a federal investigation into the building failures. Columbia University, in conjunction with the Center for Disease Control, is conducting an evacuation study. These investigations, along with others around the world, will hopefully come up with very clear recommendations, which will address the safety and security of occupants in buildings. It is our hope that this Commission will push to make sure that those recommendations end up fast-tracked into best practices. It is our hope that this Commission will make a clear statement that it is highly important that everyone comes willingly to the table to ensure that recommendations become a reality. It is my fervent hope that the first obvious recommendation issued by this Commission is the immediate removal of the immunities to critical building and fire codes currently still enjoyed by the Port Authority in conjunction with the new World Trade Center

construction going on as I speak. Self-certification should be banned. Safety concerns need to be addressed before construction begins not after. Economic gains cannot be allowed to dictate what those safety measures will be. Emergency preparedness cannot be allowed to remain a passive notion. We must educate everyone on the need to be able to get out of a life-threatening situation quickly. We must provide them with the tool – knowledge. This responsibility must rest with all parties potentially affected: building owners, building managers, tenants, employers and employees.

In closing, I would like to say that prior to September 11, 2001, I was just a wife and mother. My life's goal was never to be a public spokesperson or advocate. However, that horrible day has changed my life dramatically. I am honored to be heard on behalf of all the families whose lives will never be the same as a result of September 11, 2001. I sincerely hope that this Commission understands the need to leave a legacy of truth, accountability and reform as a tribute to all of the innocent victims of this tragedy in order to provide a safer environment for our children and for all of America. We now look to you for leadership.

Thank you.

Monica Gabrielle is a Co-Chairperson of the Skyscraper Safety Campaign. Her husband, Richard, an insurance executive for the Aon Corporation, was located on the 103rd floor of the second World Trade Center tower at the time of the terrorist attacks. Until September 11, 2001, she worked at Morgan Anderson Consulting, marketing communications management consultants. Since then, she has devoted her time to writing and public speaking as well as media presentations on behalf of the SSC. Her work was a major factor in the 2002 Fund for the City of New York, Union Square Awards Program, for the SSC. Her activism is devoted to making the changes necessary to

prevent a repeat of 9-11.

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States
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