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The Restaurant That Fed the World

Windows' general manager reflects on emergence of a dining community

Andrew Freeman

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I landed in New Orleans just in time to make a quick dinner with chefs Michael Lomonaco and Susan Spicer on the night before they would create a 90th birthday meal for Julia Child. As the restaurant marketing guy for Kimpton Group, it made sense for me to be there, but I also had a personal agenda.

Michael and I had worked together for about a year at the World Trade Center's Windows on the World restaurant in 1996-97. Shortly after that, I came to San Francisco and Michael went on to gain major acclaim at Windows.

That steamy night in New Orleans was the first time we had seen each other since the tragic events of Sept. 11. In a lucky twist of fate, Michael's life was spared when he stopped at an optometrist's, and was there instead of in the restaurant when the plane hit the tower.

I couldn't help thinking about what would have happened to me if I still worked at Windows. Would I have died that day? Would I have been late as usual -- and survived?

It forced me to think about the impact this year has had on my life. Professionally, I never thought the restaurant world could be rocked so hard. Personally, when the Towers went down with my friends inside, a big piece of my life went down with them.

THE NEW WINDOWS ON THE WORLD

On June 26, 1996, the new Windows on the World re-opened following a \$20 million renovation stemming from the terrorist bombing of 1993. I was responsible for the public relations and marketing campaign for the re-launch. Each day when I arrived at work, I felt extremely secure. We had been assured that the building was the safest place on earth.

Opening night was a triumph. It was a clear night and the views were breathtaking. Six hundred guests dined and danced the night away in the space that would become the nation's top-grossing restaurant within a year. The success of our opening was what I left with when I moved to San Francisco. I had no doubt I would be back there to spend many more happy occasions.

THE DAY THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

I turned on television just as the second plane hit the South Tower. I immediately called my close friend Jordan Schaps, who was on the roof of his Greenwich Village apartment, and listened to him describe what was happening. He was strangely calm as the shock set in. Then we lost our connection, and I went to the office, to my extended family. As the day progressed, we worked to make special arrangements for our hotel and restaurant guests. Televisions were placed in all the hotel lobbies and coffee stations were set up. It became clear that people -- locals and stranded visitors alike -- wanted to be together.

I was frantic. I still had a lot of colleagues working at Windows and my closest friends all live in Manhattan. I wouldn't find out until days later that I lost several close co-workers. I knew about 50 of the Windows employees who died.

MEMORIALS AND TRIBUTES

Three days after the attack, I was in Scala's Bistro with my friend Denise. It was packed. At about 7:15 p.m., each guest was handed a candle and asked to join the managers outside for a candlelight ceremony.

The scene was extraordinary. Clusters of people held their candles and each other in front of each Union Square restaurant. We stood there quietly for about 15 minutes honoring the victims of the tragedy. It was still too early for me to be angry, but I did feel a sadness that I had never known before.

The next few months were intense. Reality hit hard. The 3,000 miles that separate San Francisco and New York disappeared -- it seemed everyone knew someone who had died that day.

The party for San Francisco restaurants was over. Businesses were already feeling the dot-com bust and now tourism had come to a halt.

My days were filled with memorials, visits with survivors and developing strategies to help our restaurants survive. We cut costs where we could and introduced new promotions, such as the \$19.95 prix fixe lunch menus for San Francisco Restaurant Week in January.

Despite all the trials, the magnificence of the restaurant industry came to light with its unyielding support for the Windows of Hope Family Relief Fund, created by Windows owner David Emil and chefs Michael Lomonaco, Tom Valenti and Waldy Malouf to support the families of victims who worked in food, beverage and hospitality professions. In less than a year, Windows of Hope has raised more than \$19 million, with more than \$4 million of that coming from a nationwide Dine-Out on Oct. 11. Bay Area restaurants raised more than \$675,000 that night.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

I visited Ground Zero on Dec. 31. It was a bitter cold and clear New York day. I kept looking up, hoping somehow to see the Towers and my former office on the 106th floor. There were makeshift memorials everywhere.

As I walked the site, I saw many photos of my former friends and colleagues,

and the reality set in. In need of relief yet again, where did I go? To a restaurant. I spent New Year's Eve just a few blocks from Ground Zero at my cousin Danny's hot new place, the Harrison. There with six of my closest friends and a room full of resilient New Yorkers, we gladly welcomed 2002 and toasted better days.

And that brings me to this week, the one-year anniversary of a tragedy so horrible and so unreal that I keep thinking the movie is going to end and the lights will come up on the world as we knew it.

I know it won't and I know our industry will continue to be challenged. We are reading about restaurant closures every week. We have a great night of business and cross our fingers that things are getting better and then open the paper the next day to find the stock market has dipped again.

As for me, I am finally angry and still pretty sad. I am thankful that I still have my job but exhausted from the volume of work and daily challenges that I face with decreased staffing and volatile sales. Just about every day, I think about a friend who died on the 107th floor or talk to a survivor of the tragedy.

This week, as we mark the anniversary, people are deciding for themselves how best to observe the events.

I'll be eating out. After all, restaurants are places where we gather to seek the comfort of friends and food, the dining rooms where we celebrate and remember the joys and tragedies that make our lives so wonderful and wacky.

And I'll be toasting the future of a bright new Windows on the World. I hope to see you there.

Andrew Freeman is the former vice president of public relations for Windows on the World, and is now vice president of restaurant marketing for Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants. He eats in a restaurant at least once a day, every day.