

ELIZABETH DAVIS: CES ALUM AT GROUND ZERO ON 9/11 2001

On September 11, 2001 at Ground Zero in New York City, Elizabeth Davis CES'81 thought that her life was going to end as she dove under a city bus with tons of concrete and steel cascading down around her.

The road to Ground Zero for Liz was a fascinating journey. After graduating from CES and attending high school on the East Coast, she majored in sociology and minored in political science at Barnard College. She then went on to earn both law and masters degrees simultaneously from Boston University. The master's degree was through the School of Education in the deaf studies program and focused on a socio-bicultural study of deafness and American Sign Language. Doubling up on graduate studies is burden enough, but to add to the struggle, Liz is dyslexic.

Liz first knew something was different about her learning process while at Convent Elementary School. "When I was in elementary school, learning disabilities in general and dyslexia in particular were not diagnosed as often as today," she said.

She was so frustrated with her inability to learn French that she sought a new language she could learn. "I picked up signing in elementary school. It wasn't offered as a

course, but I'd go after school twice a week to St. Joseph's School of the Deaf and take classes in the late afternoon," she said.

Liz also lost her father during those years but felt completely supported by her teachers and classmates in all her struggles. "I can identify the people in my life who have had an impact on my sense of self worth or commitment ... that includes my teachers. I think I can name all my classroom teachers (at CES) and most of my class members."

Liz felt her years at CES were crucial to her later development and bolstered her self-confidence "in my ability to take what might be seemingly opposite or unrelated issues or topics and bringing them together in some way. That ability was always fostered



at Convent through the teachers and the philosophy, by recognizing me as an individual and letting me work it out and let's work together to get a solution," she said.

After completing her graduate studies, she got a job in New York City with the Mayor's office as senior policy advisor and assistant to legal council to the commission that deals with people with disabilities. As the on-call person for her department, one night in 1996, she was awakened by a call at 3 a.m. to assist the Office of Emergency Management: 64 deaf Mexicans enslaved in Queens had been rescued and Liz was brought in to oversee the city's integrated response to the situation.

She helped advise everyone from Federal prosecutors to the Immigration and Naturalization Service on how to best look after the abused workers. At that point, the Mayor moved her to the OEM to act as special needs advisor to the commission and mayor's office. "And there I stayed through the events of September 11," she said.

Mike Byrne was first deputy director of the OEM before and during the 9/11 crisis and worked with Liz regularly. "She was my special needs conscience--she was such a strong advocate for the special needs population," said Byrne. "When I first introduced her to the staff, I called her the best pain in the neck I've ever had in my life. She was a pain in a good way, in the sense that what she brought to you was meaningful and would save a ton of aggravation down the road if you paid attention."

The incident with the deaf mute Mexicans was the first long term incident that Byrnes worked with Liz on. "She had also been very strong in writing plans, including a severe heat plan, severe weather plan, chemical terrorism plan, and the components within those plans that addressed special needs were all Liz," Byrne said.

Byrnes was most impressed by Liz' thoroughness. "The more complex the requirements of the coordination, the more engaged she gets," he said. "She's a person who does not like simple problems. It has to be complicated and have a lot of different facets, and she has the ability to grasp all of them and get all issues resolved.

On the morning of September 11, Liz just happened to be in Lower Manhattan. She arrived at Ground Zero just after the aircraft had hit the buildings. Normally, fire, police and logistics personnel handle emergency services, but nothing went as planned that day. Number 7 World Trade Center, adjacent to the crash site, housed the city emergency command center, the second seat of

government during an emergency. With the twin towers next door ablaze, the emergency command center was evacuated. Mike Byrnes was there and glad to see her. "Many of the planning staff and command structure were sent to the secondary locations - I was sent back to the site," Liz said.

"... That ability was always fostered at Convent through the teachers and the philosophy, by recognizing me as an individual..."

"When that first building was coming down, I was feeling the vibrations of the collapse through the ground and up through my body. Without thinking - because you didn't really register that a 110-story building was collapsing right in front of your eyes - in those moments right then and there, I chose to make that split-second, gut decision that I wasn't going to be able to outrun a 110-story building. I'm going to duck and cover.

"I ducked and covered just like diving under the desks when we were taking our fifth grade religion exam. It came instinctively because I grew up in an earthquake-prone city. I ducked under a bus while it was shaking and rolling and moving and getting pelted by concrete and steel and goodness knows what else. It's at that moment that you take your last breath and you say in your head, 'Well I guess this is it and I hope it doesn't hurt,'" Liz recollected.

After what seemed like "a really long time," Liz tried to open her eyes but "couldn't see because the cloud of dust was so thick and couldn't breathe due to all the debris." Gasping for air, she realized she wasn't dead yet. "So on you go," she said. "I'm convinced that the reason

I survived, given where I was standing at the time, is that I grew up in San Francisco."

Liz then turned to trying to help others. "There was nothing normal about this and we didn't have our usual assets available. I was breaking windows, taking batteries and cell phone chargers to maintain communications. I didn't have my Rolodex or computer but I knew which buildings had a large percentage of folks with special needs.

"This is where learning at Convent to figure out a creative alternative came in handy. ... My approach to things is that if I can't get in the front door, let's try the back door, and if there is no back door, let's get in through the window, as long as we end up at the right place," she said.

Liz has since left city service and now runs her own consulting firm specializing in emergency management and special needs planning.

One of her major clients is the national Organization on Disabilities in Washington D.C. She has also worked with the Federal Emergency Management Administration, various state emergency-planning offices, private nursing homes and with the Department of Labor.

"What makes it exciting is that I get to do the same work, but not just for one city office. I get to work with different states, different municipalities and different parts of the Federal government, including the Homeland Security Department, on special needs planning," she said.

Liz and her husband Luis Penalver have one daughter, Madeline, and are expecting another.

The Bulletin is published by the Development Office for the parents, alumni, friends, faculty and staff of Schools of the Sacred Heart.

Correspondence and Change of Address:

2222 Broadway
San Francisco,
CA 94115
(415) 563-2900
fax: (415) 292-3183
www.sacredsfs.org

Editor

Jo Ann W. Shain

Alumni Editor

Yukiko Michael Meadows '90/86

Campaign Editor

Marti Sullivan

Contributors / Photography

Jeanne Vecchiola Asdourian '79
Noah Berger
Bill Cracraft
Pat Gallagher '76/72
Patricia Glasser '83/79
Courtney Glenn
Clare Golding CES-7
Pamela J. Hayes
Wikki Jacklich
John E. Kelly
Barry Murray Kuhn CES/'77
Ken Lou SHHS'04
Jill Lynch
Kathy Matonchi
Paula March
Kathy McKenna '64/60
Jeanne McPhee CES-7
Virginia Murillo '48/44
Jennifer Pineau
Shirley Raitzsch
Mary C. Rhoades
Lori Salvetti
Tracy Sena
Kyle Sereida SHHS'04
Lisa Tealer '79/73
Serene Williams
Robert Windle
Zoe Ley

Design & Art Direction

Richard Leon
Creative Marketing Alternatives

Don't forget that we are online!
Get the latest scoops and news.
Go to the Alumni website at
www.sacredsfs.org/alumni
and register to be part of the best
website in town!