

WHEN IT HAPPENED



Piscataway Residents Reflect
on Global Events

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These are the reflections and reminiscences of local residents collected in 2022

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PISCATAWAY
public library

The Piscataway Public Library would like to express our sincere gratitude to the individuals who contributed to this work by sharing their recollections and reflections on historic events.

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IN AN EFFORT TO DEEPEN OUR UNDERSTANDING of our community and the world, Piscataway Public Library embarked on a year-long community history project culminating in this book, written by the local residents. Our mission was to gather stories from the community about their experiences during major historical events of the late 20th and early 21st centuries and to preserve those stories at the Library.

The involvement of current Piscataway residents has helped the Library to engage in an ongoing effort to enhance our local history collections and add information and materials that reflect contemporary Piscataway.

History is always happening, and we hope this book sheds some light on the stories of the individuals who lived it.

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1991 - The Gulf War

Why War?

By Douglas Johnston

I remember being in the deli with my friend and his uncle. My friend and I were still teenage boys at the time. I recall asking my friend's uncle why we were going to war. I really admired him because he started a wonderful nonprofit organization to help people all around the world and had been traveling for much of his career. I asked him if he thought we were really going to go to war. He did not hesitate. He said, "Yes we will." And of course, I naïvely asked him, "Why?" He said, "It is much easier for nations to start wars than it is to end them."



2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

Another Day of Infamy

By LeRoy Gibson

It was a Tuesday morning. I was getting up to go to the soup kitchen at Ebenezer Baptist Church. This was a volunteer program I had participated in. All the news stations on television were covering this story of a plane crashing into one of the World Trade Center buildings. Mass confusion had set in because people had nowhere to go. The building was on fire. People were trapped on upper floors. Stairways were clogged with people unable to get up or down. Police and firemen worked hard to help, with little success.

A second plane crashed into the other building. Debris was falling from everywhere. Some people from upper floors were jumping out of windows to their deaths.

A man jumped from an upper floor holding his briefcase against his chest. He must have known before he hit that he was going to die because he was so high up. I've seen death before, but I never saw people take their own lives.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

One newsman, reporting on people fleeing the building from street level, announced, "This may be the last time I talk to you," as people fled the area. He looked death in the face, not knowing if he would be able to get away.

I left home to go to the soup kitchen. I made it to the soup kitchen, but that was it. Everything was too confused.

President Roosevelt spoke of a day of infamy. This was another day of infamy.



2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

This Could Have Happened to Us

By Yi-Hui Li

My son was three years old when the 9/11 terrorist attack occurred. Actually, he was the oldest among a group of four kids watching TV that sunny morning. Back then, two families from Taiwan had been living with us for months so I was often very busy doing all kinds of house chores, especially in the morning.

That day started as one of the usual weekdays with kids watching children's programs on TV while I was doing laundry and some house cleaning. Then the news broke with a clip of a video showing a passenger plane crashing into a skyscraper in NYC, with the building crumbling down afterwards. Even though I heard the news, that still seemed surreal to me because the picture looked very much like a scene from some sort of action movie. When my husband got back from work late afternoon, we found out that UA 93 was also among the four planes hijacked by the terrorists, with the intention to crash another target building in Washington D.C.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

The plot was deterred due to the brave acts of the passengers aboard. However, the plane crashed in a remote area in Pennsylvania and no one survived.

UA 93 had always been the flight we took to San Francisco to transfer to Taiwan ever since we came to the U.S. decades ago. This could have happened to us if we had decided to travel on that beautiful autumn day.



2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

It's Going to Fall

By Douglas Johnston

On 9/11 I had just arrived at my office before 9am. I walked into the office and my colleague Hendrick said that something happened. A plane had hit the World Trade Center. Honestly, I didn't think much about it at first, but I went to my computer and logged in to check my emails as usual. My Director and I were supposed to go into New York City that morning for a company event and I was hoping to go in early to enjoy the nice weather and walk around a bit before the event started. It was a beautiful sunny day. My boss wasn't ready to go yet and I guess I should be glad of it. After the second plane hit of course we were all glued to our computers, looking for news. And when it dawned on me that it was really, really bad I walked down the street to the Hilton hotel to watch their TV in the lobby. People were gathering there, watching.

Shocked.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

I remember very specifically seeing on the TV where the building was starting to crumble and I immediately thought to myself, "Oh, no. It's going to fall."

I returned to my office after they fell. I got in my truck and drove home. As I was driving on Route 1, I glanced over at the car next to me at a stoplight and a woman was crying. Police cars and fire trucks were all rushing north. When I got home I hugged my wife and cried a bit myself.



2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

Waking Up to a Nightmare

By Alma San Juan

I was retired and was in bed. I woke up and turned the TV on to get the news of the day.

I can't forget seeing the second terrorist plane hit the building. Later, I heard news from friends who were in the building and their experiences of fleeing the building, walking down the long stairs, walking in the street, and not knowing where to go.

I heard some people missed the incident because they decided to stay home. Much later, friends who were in the building told me that they had nightmares and still couldn't have a peaceful sleep.

Later in years, whenever the anniversary of 9/11 comes, I always go back to that day when it happened; me in bed looking at the TV, seeing that second plane hit the building.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

The Children Knew Something Was Wrong

By Carol Page

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was teaching in my 4th-grade classroom in the front part of the building at M.L. King School in Piscataway. After taking my class to Physical Education class at about 9:30am, I stopped in the office and was told by the secretary that a plane had just flown into one of the World Trade Center buildings. It was unknown whether it was an accident or not. Shortly after that, a second plane had smashed into the other tall World Trade Center building. It was obviously purposeful but many questions remained.

At lunchtime the faculty room had a TV pulled into it. We saw repeated views of the planes smashing into the buildings. The devastation and chaos were obvious. We saw many horrible sights and heard about the hospitals waiting for a massive inflow of victims that never arrived. We were told by the principal that we should not tell our students anything about what was happening.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

During the afternoon my students could see many cars pulling up in front of the building. I was asked why so many parents were coming since the weather was fine. It was hard to come up with anything that made sense. Shortly before school ended the principal's voice came over the loudspeaker to announce that there was a big fire in Manhattan. If anyone in the school had parents who worked in Manhattan they might get home very late. If any students had no arrangements to stay with someone in the neighborhood, they should stay at school in the after-school program. One boy in my class said, "My dad used to work in the World Trade Center until two months ago when he changed jobs." How lucky he is, I thought.

That afternoon and evening my husband and I spent most of our time watching the news. It was so unbelievable that such a thing had happened. One of our nieces, who worked in Manhattan, spent hours getting home via walking, a ferry, and being picked up by car in New Jersey.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

The next morning in school we all sat in a large circle in the classroom to try to process our feelings. One big question was “Why didn't you tell us yesterday?” They felt that I should have broken the news. However, the principal may have been right. Talking about it with peers before getting a chance to talk to parents and know the parents were alright might have been worse. It turned out that in my class some relatives were working in New York City on that day but got home safely. None of the parents in our school were among the dead from that horrible event. The families in some of the other Piscataway schools were not as lucky. A Knollwood School teacher I knew well lost a son that day. A King School teacher I knew well had a son who was working in the World Trade Center that morning, but he survived. There were lots of stories about aunts, uncles, etc. having a lot of trouble getting home. The children had some idea of what a horrible event had happened.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

Waiting for the Call

By Donna Kozub

I was a Nurse Educator, working at JFK Medical Center in Edison. On the morning of 9/11, the secretary and I heard people yelling in the hallway outside our office. We couldn't make out what they were saying, but it seemed to be about something outside the hospital. We turned on the TV and saw a plane hit the World Trade Center, which we soon learned was the second plane. What was going on? Was it an accident? Certainly not a deliberate attack. Why would it be? We all knew that the U.S. hadn't been attacked on its own soil since Pearl Harbor. We couldn't comprehend this. We just knew something was very wrong.

I had planned to take my sister-in-law on a bus trip to Inner Harbor the next day. I called her and said maybe it will be canceled. She said she just got a call from her son, who was in an airport in Canada ready to fly home. The airport announced that all flights are canceled.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

No planes could enter U.S. airspace. I now started to realize that this was more than an accidental crash, but never thought for a moment that it was an attack by terrorists.

A few minutes later, the office phone rang. A hospital director told me to run across the street to our conference center and tell the attendees in our Advanced Cardiac Life Support course to immediately return to their departments. ACLS is an intensive and expensive two-day class attended by doctors, nurses, and paramedics from all over the area. It is understood that this class is not to be disturbed. The director said she already called the conference center, and no one picked up. She said “go” - this was an emergency.

So, I ran. Cathy Pelican, an RN colleague, was running this course. She stared at me as I hurried to the front of the room. I interrupted her lecture and gave her the message. In total disbelief, she said something like “Can’t this wait until lunch?” No one in the room had any idea what was happening outside. None of us had cell phones in 2001.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

However, most of the docs had pagers. Just as Cathy made the announcement, the room was filled with the chaotic sound of roughly 50 pagers beeping in unison. Everyone ran out.

I thought of my husband's Aunt Arge, a secretary in a building a block away from the World Trade Center. She was a fearless, energetic 78-year-old who commuted daily by bus from Hunterdon County to Manhattan. I called the family. Did they hear about the planes hitting the World Trade Center? Yes! Was she OK? They didn't know. Nobody had heard from her.

Several of us educators called the ER to volunteer with the expected casualties. We waited. Nothing. At home, I stayed up late waiting for the call telling me to come in. It never came.

I was off the next day. I called the hospital as soon as I woke and heard the awful news. We didn't get patients because there were almost no survivors.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

It's hard to explain, but I felt like I was going to jump right out of my skin. I felt utterly useless at home. Adrenalin was surging. I had to do something - anything. I grabbed a stethoscope and raced to the hospital. There was an emergency blood drive. I went to help.

It was around 8am. I saw what must have been a hundred people already in line to donate blood. Just like me, they had to do something. The line of donors grew longer every minute.

I was assigned to get the donors on a stretcher and swab their arms with Betadine. The lab tech would then draw the blood. Under normal circumstances, this takes about ten minutes. Usually, after the blood is drawn, the donor rests a few minutes while staff watches for any lightheadedness. Then the person is escorted to a waiting area and given snacks. Not on this day! Techs took about 3 minutes from needle in to needle out. I slapped the band-aid on and rushed them off the stretcher. With one hand, I pointed to the exit. With the other hand, I waved the next person in line to the stretcher. I did this until 10 pm. No donor was turned away.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

That night I got a call about my husband's elderly aunt. She was safe. After the explosion, she exited her building. She was wearing sandals and walked up streets that were covered with ashes. In midtown, a stranger stopped and asked if she wanted a ride. He was headed to the Bronx. She had a family member there. She got in the car.

When I heard the Pentagon was hit, I remembered my cousin Peter, a U.S. attorney in Washington. I was relieved when his wife told me that his office was not in the Pentagon. He was OK. With all the uncertainty going on, it was important to just make sure.

A few weeks later, Rob Sklans, a management trainer at JFK, stopped in the office. He noticed my name badge and asked if I was related to Rich Kozub. Yes, Rich, who was with Middlesex County Hazmat, is my husband's nephew. Rob, who is also a volunteer first responder, told me that on 9/11 he was told to report to Jersey City-Hoboken. This was where the victims, after being ferried from New York, would be triaged, and then transported to waiting ERs.

2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

He said Rich oversaw the entire rescue operation there. Rob said he never saw anybody act so calmly under pressure, telling everyone what to do and where to go. Because Rich was calm, he kept others calm. They fully expected a great number of casualties. They had no way of knowing that their services would not be needed.

These are my memories of 9/11. I wrote them in a journal soon after the event. I am not sure why, but I guess so I wouldn't forget. I remember how we all came together at that awful time. Everybody seemed to really care about everybody else. We were all in this together as we struggled to come to terms and understand the events of that awful day.



2007 - The Great Recession

The Bubble is Going to Burst

By Bonnie Brunish

In 2007 I was running a children's gift store named Bonniebug with about ten part-time employees. We sold step stools, rocking chairs, toy chests, and the like, all decorated with children's names in bubble letters and various cute designs. My five-year lease was going to be up in July, and I had to decide whether to renew or not.

When I asked my daughter, Ezra, for advice, she told me that the economic outlook for stores like Bonniebug wasn't good. She went into a long explanation, citing financial news she had gleaned from the internet. "The Federal Reserve has been keeping the interest rate too low," she said. "Inflation is rising faster than wages. People look for risky investment vehicles because inflation eats your money. Companies are investing in mortgage-backed securities. There's a lot of sub-prime lending. Anyone can get a mortgage, even if there's no way they can pay it off."

2007 - The Great Recession

"This is fine when the price of housing keeps going up because if people can't pay their mortgage they can sell their homes to cover the loan.

"But the housing bubble is going to burst."

"When interest rates go up and the value of housing goes down," she said, "companies will die. People will lose their jobs and their homes. They won't have money to spend on the sort of things Bonniebug sells."

I decided not to renew my lease. I had to clear out the store by July. We ran sales. I decided to take a couple of the large furniture items home, as well as the umbrella tree that stood in the store window. I rented a U-haul, and my son came to help carry the heavy items. We made a party of it, with a cake.

A huge unstained wood armoire had been a store centerpiece. It was too big for my house, so I gave it to the owner of the mall's main restaurant, two doors down from Bonniebug.

2007 - The Great Recession

One of my employees decided to continue the business online, under a different name, so she took some of the stock.

Bonniebug closed, and I set off for New Mexico for a writing workshop to launch my new career. Just as Ezra had predicted, the recession hit, and a lot of people suffered hard times. My former employee's online business failed. My former landlord couldn't rent out the store I'd vacated. Eventually, he let his son, who owned the tile store next to it, use it for storage.

Sometimes I got together with my former employees for lunch at the restaurant that had taken the armoire. The owner told us his son had really liked the armoire and treated us to dinner. The woman who had laughed at my daughter's prediction expressed her amazement. How could Ezra have figured out what was coming?



2008 - First Black President

Did He Really Have a Chance?

By Joyce Coles

I had the privilege of meeting then-Senator Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle. Who would have known that this couple would become President and First Lady of the United States? This happened in New York City, at the headquarters of the 1199 National Benefit Fund. Who would have thought that I, an ordinary citizen and resident of Piscataway, New Jersey working in New York, would have had such an encounter?

It started when I attended a leadership meeting in the penthouse to hear a presidential nominee give an encouraging speech on supporting him for the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

My thoughts were that he was bold, confident, awesome, unbelievable, and delivered a catchphrase “Yes we can” that left clarity in my mind about America being headed for serious change. I was not sure how I would share this news with my staff, family, and friends.

2008 - First Black President

I couldn't repeat any of his speech other than "Yes we can." What confidence he had...

News traveled fast in the organization, and as he left, staff were lined up in the halls and elevators to get a glimpse of this man. Many were able to get him to take selfies with them. After winning the election, staff put those selfies on T-shirts. What a memory.

I had to ask myself, "Why am I so overwhelmed with this?" And after carefully processing my thoughts, I knew why.

We shared the same skin color. He was a Black man in America and a senator. A senator whom I had only heard of once or twice and there was definitely no mention of him or his wife in my township or local news.

Did he really have a chance?

I had participated on several campaigns before and decided I would be delighted to lend a hand in his election.

2008 - First Black President

His confidence, his manner, his powerful, soft-spoken voice forced thoughts that change is possible here in America. What it said empowered me to join his campaign. What did that mean?

So I became what was called a “shero” and joined others on the campaign trail.

Me, a woman from Piscataway, New Jersey, went places that no Black woman had gone before. But that’s another story for another day.



2012 - Hurricane Sandy

Rescuing Dad

By Ardys Sapchin

I remember preparing - praying that the reports may be overly exaggerated. My house is on a concrete slab which has cracked over the years. If the rain comes too fast, heavy water comes into the house.

I was up all night watching, listening, praying. As the rain came down, the wind began to pick up. I turned on the sump pump when I needed it, and thankfully the water did not come into the house.

The wind did cause power outages. I was blessed because I had a free-standing gas stove for heat, and a kitchen gas stove to cook. I had to put the refrigerated things in coolers that I had, and used all of the ice I had. I put the coolers outside.

Then it happened. A frantic phone call from my 92-year-old dad. Dad lived alone in his own apartment in Edison with his cat Phantom.

2012 - Hurricane Sandy

He said he had no power and he was told he would be taken to a hotel. But what about the cat? He pleaded with me to come and get him and the cat. He needed the cat to be safe.

I told my husband, "I'll be back. I have to get Dad and bring him here." My husband wasn't overly happy, but understood.

I was able to get to Route 287 South and drive to the Route 1 North exit with no problem. As I traveled on Route 1, parts of the lanes were filled with standing water. I had to get off by the Menlo Park Mall. Lots of large areas of water were all around. Somehow, I found a way to Dad and the cat.

We packed up and returned to Piscataway. My husband, my dad, the cat, and I spent a week together. My husband was able to return to work after a day or two. We all listened to the radio - battery-operated - for news.

2012 - Hurricane Sandy

I was able to cook because the gas worked. Ice was a problem. All the stores were out. Some were charging inflated prices, of course. I even had to cross town to get ice from my sister-in-law who lived at Sterling Village at the time. She was fine, only lost power briefly.

I also had a difficult time searching for gas for the car. Many stations were not open, and those that were had short hours. Once again I had to go all the way to Edison, Oak Tree Road, and wait in line. Once again, pray they still had gas when it was my turn.

We spent a week together with no electricity. The evenings were difficult because of the darkness and no lights or TV, of course. We all were in bed early; sometimes eating by flashlight for a bit.

I was able to get Dad home after seven days. He and the cat were fine, and there was no damage to the apartment.

I said thank you for all that was good.

2012 - Hurricane Sandy

Feeling Helpless

By Jody Gill

I was recently divorced, living for several years alone in my Piscataway home. I spent the first night of the storm in the autumn dark, hearing the noise of the hurricane overhead, the howling of the wind outside my large backyard property, and the final crash of a large oak tree falling down! In the front yard, toward my front steps, my neighbor's large tree fell, crashing into part of my kitchen window.

Communicating with my best friend in South River on the phone kept me going for a while, until we lost communication. I experienced strange, eerie feelings as I lay down to sleep - feeling helpless - not knowing what to do but hoping the night would soon end without any more casualties. I slept through the night knowing at least my family members not living near me were all safe.

2012 - Hurricane Sandy

I remember, the next morning, turning on my gas range with a match (lessons learned during the times living in my old NYC apartment) but I could not take a car out due to using up the little gas I had in my car and not being sure which gas station had gas. It was best to just stay home.

My next-door neighbor began chopping down the tree that fell on my front property with an electric saw and I felt so appreciative. I also remember my handyman coming by my house to replace broken glass from my kitchen window that same day, as well. I remember calling the Piscataway Senior Center and asking for assistance but not realizing I was of age. I was a bit insulted and was told that a Piscataway Senior Bus would pick me up and bring me and other seniors to the supermarket. They had a coffee maker demonstration going on in the back and everyone received a fresh cup of coffee. Never appreciated a "hot cup of joe" as much as that one!

2015 - Same-sex Marriage

A More Enlightened Humanity

By Bonnie Brunish

On May 9, 2014, I joined a small group of friends and relatives for a short hike in White Rock, New Mexico. My sister, Wendee, and her fiancé, Kathryn, led the way, closely attended by their two yellow Labradors, Calli and Abby. The dogs wore shiny green bows. Kathryn wore her beautiful new skirt.

We hiked along the edge of the mesa, looking down on the canyon and river far below. Blue mountains rose in the distance. When we reached the perfect spot among clumps of purple flowers we stopped. This was the place.

I recited the poem I had written to celebrate the couple's lives and their love. They recited vows and exchanged rings. Calli and Abby pressed close, ready to help with the rings, which were a tight fit.

There was music, provided by my brother, and dancing. There was a cake. And of course, there was paperwork.

2015 - Same-sex Marriage

The following year, when the Supreme Court affirmed the legality of same-sex marriage in the United States, I felt very happy for Wendee and Kathryn and for other same-sex couples I knew here in New Jersey. How wonderful that love in all its rainbow varieties now received equal respect from the law. Now that they enjoyed the rights and privileges of the married state along with opposite-sex couples, same-sex couples would find financial planning less worrisome. They could proudly announce their married status to one and all.

We had come a long way since the time when Oscar Wilde, Alan Turing, and countless others had been cruelly punished by Victorian-era laws for being the way God made them. Young people who found themselves drawn to others of the same sex would no longer feel outcast. They would no longer be forced to wonder if there was something wrong with them, if their loving feelings somehow weren't as real and valid as the feelings portrayed in the old Disney movies. They would feel accepted. Shadows that in the past had driven people like them to suicide would be removed. The future looked bright.

2015 - Same-sex Marriage

Today, in 2022, my hope for the future has been shaken. One of the Supreme Court's majority opinions has openly named Obergefell v. Hodges, the decision that legalized same-sex marriage, as one of their next targets for overturning.

I am saddened, and worried, for my sister, my sister-in-law, and my gay friends. In this time of pandemics, wars, and natural disasters everyone faces problems. Everyone has to deal with many concerns. There are always worries about health, employment, housing, elder care, traffic safety, and the many other variables of human life. It seems unfair that some people, through no fault of their own, should be placed under an additional burden. If only the threatening cloud of backward-looking bigotry would disperse, allowing Obergefell to stand as a beacon for a more enlightened humanity.



2017 - The Muslim Travel Ban

Just in Time

By Moji Dadras

When Executive Order 13769, also known as the “Muslim Travel Ban,” was ready to be signed by President Trump on January, 27th, 2017, I was living in Piscataway. This signature might have affected my life dramatically because when the ban was proposed, I was outside the U.S. That was due to my emergency trip to my country of origin, Iran, for dental surgery. During the days before and after the ban, I experienced a gamut of feelings, some of them incongruent with each other.

I became aware of this embarrassing ban on January 25th, 2017, when three of my friends met for a reunion in a cozy lounge café in my hometown, near the Caspian Sea. During the hangout, I was telling my friends about all of the positive aspects of living in the U.S. I talked about how individual freedom was pushing American society ahead.

2017 - The Muslim Travel Ban

Meanwhile, one of the friends at the table was surfing the internet and showed me the breaking news about the “Muslim Ban.” This rendered me speechless. I assumed that it was fake news at first, but when I checked my own reliable news sources, I blushed and felt embarrassed.

When I called my wife, I felt frustrated and fearful of not seeing her for a long time. When I left my friends and reached my parents’ home, I felt so naïve that I had trusted the terms and conditions of the visa which enabled me to travel to my country again. I was skeptical about the benefits my multiple-entry visa offered.

I decided to try to come back to the U.S. before the ban. I was so excited that I had a chance to join my wife without any problem. However, that was followed by 48 hours of anxiety and concern, because once the ban went into effect, people like me couldn’t enter the U.S. for at least a couple of months. Nobody knew what would happen next.

2017 - The Muslim Travel Ban

My fortune during this trip was that the first draft of the Executive Order was structured by unseasoned lawyers, so it had many legal defects. For instance, it would affect U.S. permanent residents who were born in the targeted countries, and that was considered explicitly unconstitutional. The modification of the order halted its signature for one day and provided the leeway I required to reach the U.S.

When I arrived in Piscataway on January 27th, it was almost noon. I was relieved because I would see my wife and my home again. Before this, I was awake for more than two days. I needed a break to rejuvenate both literally and figuratively.

On the evening of January 27th, President Trump signed the ban. The logic behind the travel ban, based on the Trump administration, was “to protect the nation from foreign terrorist entry” by targeting ALL the citizens of the seven countries mentioned in the ban, forbidding them from entering the U.S.

2017 - The Muslim Travel Ban

This meant that even the people of those countries who already passed all the security checks done by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and received their U.S. visa, had to be banned from entering the U.S. In other words, by this signature, President Trump rendered all visa security checks invalid, which was not sound.

When I revisited and talked to my friends and neighbors around Piscataway, I received unrivaled sympathy and support from them.

The news of the Women's March in Washington D.C., in addition to several federal court initiatives to challenge the travel ban, opened my eyes to the fact that all components of civil society back each other up. Later on, legal information from the Kennedy Library of Piscataway as well as talks organized by the faculty members of Rutgers University restored my damaged confidence.

The cherry on the top, though, happened four days after I arrived. That was about 2pm on a cold Tuesday, January 31st, 2017. It had snowed the night before and sidewalks were slushy.

2017 - The Muslim Travel Ban

I was heading back home from New Brunswick after doing some grocery shopping. While I waited at a Rutgers bus station, the sounds of three helicopters hovering around the town drew my attention.

Five minutes later I got on the bus. When the bus turned into College Avenue, it got stuck in a heavy traffic jam. Police cars were discernible at the Zimmerli Museum traffic light, and it seemed that they closed the lane the bus was in. I heard an unclear hubbub of cheers and chants from that location. All of a sudden, a line of hundreds of marching students showed up with huge signs of “No Ban, No Wall” next to the Rutgers red flags, plus rainbow flags and gender equality signs. A student asked the bus driver if he could get off the bus to join the protestors and a dozen followed.

Spontaneously, I did too.

The peaceful assembly lasted for hours around College Avenue. When I was leaving the crowd and heading back home, I felt revitalized spiritually. That was when I felt more than ever that I was a part of this society.

2020 - The COVID-19 Pandemic

Will It Ever End?

By Alma San Juan

COVID-19 will probably be the longest and scariest incident in the world. It affected the whole world in every way. The people, the economy, and it is still going on.

What I am most concerned with is the effect on people, especially the young ones. I have eight grandchildren and I am worried about the long-term effects of this pandemic on them.

I am affected, too. At my age (79), I still have mental concerns because of isolation. I am glad the Senior Center opened and I have contact with friends.



2020 - The COVID-19 Pandemic

Piscataway Cared for Us

By Luzinete Souza

When the COVID-19 pandemic began we went into quarantine and I thought it would last just a few days. I believed that the science was advanced enough to have a quick solution, but as time went by I realized it was going to take much longer for us. We started shopping online, stopped outside activities, stopped physical contact with others, and began remote preschool for our son.

Today we are still waiting for things to return back to normal so we can resume life as before. We remain hopeful that this will occur soon.

Living in Piscataway with COVID-19 has been a better experience than some of the other places I saw on the news where people are harassed for wearing a mask, unable to get hospital care and other services. Because Piscataway has everything that we need and modern conveniences, the COVID-19 experience here was better than expected even though it has been two years since this virus started impacting us.

2020 - The COVID-19 Pandemic

How Would I Keep Us Safe?

By Sheeba Hashmi

I was not expecting that one small virus could change the whole world when I heard about how a coronavirus in China was affecting people, and how the people were suffering from this virus, and how life was going to change there. I thought it would only be a story for a few days. I was surprised by how it spread from one city to another city of China, and after that from one country to another country, and almost the whole world was in its reach.

I was shocked and scared, too. How could I save my family from this virus? I tried my best to do healthy things at home like hand sanitizing, wearing a mask, washing groceries after purchasing, avoiding contact with people, and socializing. I tried my best, but unfortunately my husband caught this virus because he had to go to the office. At that time, his job required it. It was the start of COVID-19 in the U.S. and it was a very bad situation in New York.

2020 - The COVID-19 Pandemic

We were so scared. We kept my hubby in quarantine and kept him in complete isolation. At that time there was no vaccine and no medicine. I just put him on immunity-boosting stuff and a good diet, and he was just taking treatments for the symptoms.

The worst part of all this was that we couldn't talk to each other because he had a very bad cough. We had contact only through texting. I stopped watching the news and didn't go on social media because those things were making me more depressed. I was praying and just wanted to keep safe my other family members. Thank God we were not affected by COVID. When five days passed, my hubby went on to the recovery phase and then he improved day by day. Finally, after 13 days he recovered from his fever. After 15 days, he came out of quarantine. It was the happiest moment of our lives.

2020 - The COVID-19 Pandemic

Hindsight Is 20/20

By Douglas Johnston

In the early days of the pandemic before we all realized it was a pandemic and even before all the ridiculous denials, I remember being at the Piscataway Public Library Westergard branch and seeing the first person in public that was wearing a mask. I remember looking at the man checking out a book and thinking, "Oh, that seems a bit silly." Silly me, in fact! A few days or a week later I was back at the library watching all the other patrons, many of whom were typing away on the computers and I thought, "those keyboards are a germ festival and COVID-19 is probably dancing all over those keys." Not too much later we had our last meal out for almost two years with my family. We had dinner at a Bonefish Grill on Route 22 with two really great friends. The place was packed. I felt like a sardine waiting for the table and then sitting at the table. The people were pretty much elbow to elbow at our tables.

2020 - The COVID-19 Pandemic

I remember very clearly looking around and thinking that this might not be such a good idea. It certainly turned out to be the case. It felt like another era, another historic time and place.

During the pandemic, when the schools went full Zoom, my son adapted well but me not so much. I missed meeting friends for dinner or at the libraries for chats. I missed teaching English as a second language each Saturday morning to intelligent, eager, and interesting people from all over the world. They had broadened my world and mind. I really missed school day mornings and afternoons walking to and from school with my son. Those were joyful walks when I got to know who my young son was and what he was thinking. I remember listening to him in his Zoom classes and thinking about how incredibly difficult it must be for the teachers. My family and I didn't suffer but I'm sure in many households it was a serious struggle.

2020 - The COVID-19 Pandemic

Driving around town after 6 months or a year it became painfully clear that many businesses - especially restaurants - were going out of business. It was sad to see. Even when the libraries finally reopened, the chairs and tables were stacked up and blocked from use. Plexiglass shields separated patrons from staff. It felt like a cold, lonely new world. The new Piscataway Community Center was a real blessing to see open. It did the job providing openness, brightness and festive opportunities.



2020 - The Murder of George Floyd

We Need Self-Care More than Ever

By Joyce Coles

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” - words written by Charles Dickens. And we were living in it. The Pandemic and civil unrest.

The best of times for me was when I was able to connect with my loved ones after a year of separation and social distancing. We were slowly coming back to what I call a new norm, learning to live in it. We were using all types of communication tools and creative ways to keep fit and mentally healthy.

However, there was still the worst of times, like losing loved ones to the Pandemic and listening to the news giving headlines that contributed to seasons of darkness and negative issues.

Are we really in an age of foolishness, unbelief and serious mental illness?

2020 - The Murder of George Floyd

Here I am living in Piscataway, New Jersey, attempting to learn more about the people in my community. People of different races and cultures.

The George Floyd story screams out the need for healing in this nation at every level. The people we rely on “to protect and serve” ignoring the cries of onlookers as well as George Floyd as the officer kneeled on George Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes.

I cried for George Floyd, the onlookers, the store owners, the neighborhood residents, and the officers. I asked myself, could this really be happening, here in America, in a place called Minneapolis, Minnesota? I am thankful for Piscataway.

This epidemic and the Floyd murder made me recognize why self-care is so important. Our community may not be perfect, but I see the programs developed in the community allowing me to take care of myself and permitting me to be better when meeting the needs of others.

2020 - The Murder of George Floyd

I am a member of the Piscataway Taekwondo Seniors and recognize that this program allows for growth in understanding various races and cultures.

This is one of my forms of self-care.



2020 - The Murder of George Floyd

The Silence of Our Friends

By Candace Waller

Racism is still very prevalent. It was on May 25th while I was at home channel surfing that I saw the news report on George Floyd, an unarmed Black man who was murdered by police officer Derek Chauvin. My eyes were glued to the screen as the horror unfolded.

In a true act of heroism, 17-year-old Darnella Frazier filmed the murder. My heart broke as I watched the video that showed Chauvin with his knee on George Floyd's neck, Floyd's life slipping from him. I could hear George saying he couldn't breathe and the officer, ignoring those pleas, appeared, to press down harder. Tears streamed down my face as I heard George call for his mama in his last moments on earth. The other officers around did not intervene even after George stopped moving and Chauvin still applied pressure. I realized that this was not only the act of violence that is so poisonous in this world but also the inaction of others when they see wrong and fail to act.

2020 - The Murder of George Floyd

Along with racism, the silence of our friends, co-workers, family, and those in positions that interact with the public also put us at risk.

Why did this officer think it was okay to take someone's life? He didn't appear to be concerned that people were watching as he applied pressure to Floyd's neck. This video shocked a nation, but is a common story in the history of Black people living in America. It was not uncommon to see an entire town come out for a lynching where the person was deemed guilty on the words of an accuser. None of those people spoke up when they saw this injustice. Reminiscent of those times, George Floyd wasn't tried in court as our Constitution requires. He was tried on the streets of Minnesota and the judge was Officer Chauvin.

The U.S. has laws in place to handle the accused. It says in the 5th and 6th amendments to our Constitution that a person is innocent until proven guilty. There are also rules and guidelines about how officers are to handle those accused of a crime. None of these laws or guidelines were followed in George Floyd's case.

2020 - The Murder of George Floyd

Black people are subjected to devastating violence in this country. When Emmet Till was killed by some white men in August of 1955 because it was alleged he whistled at a white woman, his mother Mamie Till-Mobley had an open casket funeral because she wanted the world to see the brutality that was done to her son. His body was beaten so badly he wasn't recognizable. It was far beyond the mastery of any funeral professional to fix. The voices of outrage, in that case, did not overcome the silence of our friends, as anti-lynching legislation wouldn't be passed for decades after Till's death.

When George Floyd's murderers were sentenced, I rejoiced that those crying out for the weaker and less fortunate were finally being heard over the silence of our friends. But I was also sad that, with so much still to be done in the area of inequality, there weren't more allies willing to stand up and speak out.

America was built around wonderful principles. I am proud to be an American, and all the opportunities that I have.

2020 - The Murder of George Floyd

As a Black woman, I know that the rights and privileges that I enjoy today have come at a huge cost. My ancestors, through the exploitation of their labor, were instrumental in building the wealth and greatness of this country. These enslaved people, originally from West Africa, had to fight, often giving their lives, so I can enjoy the freedoms I have today. Racism was the main factor, but it was also the complicity of people afraid to speak up, to take a stand against this racism, that allowed the chattel slave system to flourish here for so long. A system that dehumanized Black men and women's rights, forced indigenous people onto ever-shrinking reservations, and denied non-white immigrants the same rights and privileges given freely to white people living here.

"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends," said Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a 1965 speech. His prophetic words still ring true, and I hope that the changes that began after George Floyd was murdered that highlighted the injustices many Americans still face will continue.

2021 - Insurrection at the Capitol

Rising From the Ashes

By Erick Quijano

I am a Mexican who was in New Jersey on January 6, 2021, so as a foreign person I had always thought of the American people as people who believe in democracy and respect the votes of others no matter if their party won or lost. But I saw that day how a group of people could be manipulated by hate speech. And more importantly how this hate speech could be understood and acted on as patriotic speech.

I remember perfectly January 6th, 2021, because two days before I was at the U.S. Capitol for the first time in my life. I remember that when I was walking down the Washington D.C. streets I thought “Oh my god, the federal authorities of all the country reside here including the President in the White House, the senators in the U.S. Capitol, and the justices in the Supreme Court.”

As a lawyer, I was impressed to be in this city of law, rights, and authorities.

2021 - Insurrection at the Capitol

Nobody, including me, thought that the anger, rage, and fury of some people would be able to violate the security of one of the most relevant buildings of the country.

I don't want to say if the people had or did not have the right to disagree with the election results. But I have always thought that all of us must respect the rights of others.

When I turned on the TV, the news was talking about how a group of radicals disrupted the congress session: attacking law enforcement officers, congressmen and women, and the people who were working in the building. I remember that someone shot a gun and injured a police officer. The damage to the building was evident, and they had occupied the Capitol for several hours. For a moment I thought that maybe this event could be replicated in other buildings or cities of the country.

But also, I noticed how the U.S. institutions, people, and society were able to keep moving forward and arise from the terrible episode and I think that this is more important.

2021 - Anti-Asian Hate

We are Part of America's Success

By Chor Lee

The killing of Asian women at three spas/massage parlors in metro Atlanta, Georgia on March 16, 2021, sparked the “Anti-Asian Hate Crime” movements throughout the nation. This senseless shooting spree that killed people exposed the fact that every ethnicity is vulnerable.

Bias, discrimination, harassment, and hate based on race, national origin, gender, age, and disability have always existed. Anti-Asian hate crimes are unknown to the general public because Asians tend to keep such incidents hidden and unreported. The incident in Georgia was a wake-up call for Asians to become more vocal and to open up about violence against men, women, and elderly people of Asian descent.

2021 - Anti-Asian Hate

Also, the news media have been reporting unprovoked attacks on Asians in New York City, such as the setting of fire to an 89-year-old Chinese woman by two assailants, and the brutal beating (in front of a Manhattan building) of a 65-year-old Asian woman on her way to church by a man who said, “F-k you, you don’t belong here.” Security guards and staff looked on and did nothing to help.

As an Asian American who grew up in NYC, I found such news bringing back old memories of racial intimidation and of my fight to bring Asian awareness education into the universities.



2021 - Anti-Asian Hate

Since many Piscataway residents have loved ones around the United States, they hope that this hateful violence against the Asian people and community will be contained.

How can we promote love instead of hate? One key solution is education to help remove the notion that Asians are foreign invaders. As a nation composed of diverse nationalities, we need to communicate each ethnicity's contributions and accomplishments to the growth of the United States, promote "Anti-Asian Hate Crime" awareness, and emphasize that Asian Americans are part of American history's success story. We need to control language that incites violence toward Asians such as "China Virus," "Wuhan Flu," and "Kung Flu" or that "auto jobs were stolen by Japanese."

Some positive outcomes from sharing about bias, hostility, and discrimination are unifying Asians against hate crimes, starting "Stop Asian American & Pacific Islander Hate" movements nationally, advocating that Asians are Americans in a diverse nation, and promoting Asian awareness and the cultural contributions that make up the U.S.

2022 - Russia Invades Ukraine

Aren't We Beyond This?

By Alma San Juan

I feel very sad whenever I turn on the TV and see news of Russia doing all those horrible things to Ukraine and its people.

I can't believe that in this present time, there are people - Russia's governing people - who are hungry for power and would inflict pain and suffering on the people of Ukraine.

I turn on the TV every day to the news and can't help seeing all these things happening to helpless Ukrainian people, their country. Buildings demolished, people dying, young children crying, people walking with bewildered expressions on their faces.

I feel helpless and can only say a prayer for the country of Ukraine and its people.

2022 - Russia Invades Ukraine

World War III?

By Douglas Johnston

When Putin's Russia invaded the free democratic European republic of Ukraine, I was not surprised. It was abundantly clear since he first invaded and took over Crimea and other parts of that sovereign nation that he'd do more. Dictators are usually quite open about what they intend to do on the international stage because they are used to getting what they want from the sad subjugated people of their nation. So I knew it was coming and President Biden warned us and the world.

I fear wider war. Some call it a "conflict" but that connotation is not even close to accurate. It is a bloody war and it could very well lead to World War III. In the first World War some 50 million people were killed. In WWII, approximately 150 million. WWIII will hit billions. There may be no fool left to fight WWIV.

2022 - Russia Invades Ukraine

I'm proud that our nation under President Biden is standing up to Putin. At a Saturday small gathering of friends, one neighbor claimed that Putin wasn't wrong. The rest of us were dumbfounded but I did my best to understand. We didn't agree, but at least I understand.

We live in such a diverse, fascinating community. This reminded me of how important it is to listen to your neighbors whether they are next door or on the other side of the world.

Treasure every day.



2022 - Roe v. Wade Overturned

How Insatiable the Wrong

By Bonnie Brunish

Today the Supreme Court of the United States overturned the Roe v. Wade ruling which had granted women the constitutional right to abortion. The tide of expanding rights which had begun at the end of the Civil War has reached its peak and has begun to retreat. What lies ahead?

I don't think anyone wants abortions to happen. I strongly agree with the pro-lifers that to end a newly unfolding life is a terrible thing. Ideally, people would abstain from sex if they don't wish to become parents. Ideally, there would be no such thing as rape. But human beings are not ideal, and laws tailored for non-existent ideals don't always serve real people.

The burden has always fallen on women to take care to avoid unwanted pregnancy. With abortions becoming difficult, it would be great if pro-life states mounted efforts to insure that contraceptives were available to all who need them.

2022 - Roe v. Wade Overturned

But it seems that the forces opposing abortion also frown on planned parenthood.

When I commented about that seemingly contradictory stance to my daughter a few days ago, she told me that it was simply survival of the fittest. Groups that produce the most offspring will out-compete other groups.

I suppose she is right. There is neither logic nor kindness in legislation that produces unwanted children, but it is a strategy that works.

The Governor of Mississippi celebrated the Supreme Court's ruling with these words: "This decision will directly result in more hearts beating, more strollers pushed, more report cards given, more little league games played, and more lives well lived. It is a joyous day!"

2022 - Roe v. Wade Overturned

One of my friends, an ardent Trump supporter and staunch Republican, told me once that he didn't oppose Roe v. Wade because statistics indicated that crime rates dropped when abortions became legal. No doubt crime rates will creep up again once the Governor's celebrated children come of age, because children born to families that don't want them and can't provide for them will not have ideal lives. There will be more poverty, more child abuse, more tortured souls.

Justice Clarence Thomas, one of the six-to-three majority, wrote in his opinion: "In future cases, we should reconsider all of this Court's substantive due process precedents, including Griswold, Lawrence, and Obergefell." It seems he would also overturn the rights to contraception, same-sex sexual activity, and same-sex marriage.

The tide is sweeping us back into the past. Will the forces driving this Supreme Court also overturn Loving v. Virginia making anti-miscegenation the law once again, reviving the old argument that God meant to keep the races apart?

2022 - Roe v. Wade Overturned

No doubt they will roll America back as far as they can, as far as they are allowed before some opposing force rises to stop them.

I am reminded of things I have read about the state of the country just before the Civil War, when forces in the South attempted to extend their chattel slavery system across the North American continent, when they pushed their odious Fugitive Slave Law on the nation, insisting that God was on their side. I am reminded of this stanza from a poem Henry Cuyler Bunner wrote on the death of Grant:

“Up from the South came a great wave of sorrow
That drowned our hearthstones,
 splashed with blood our sills;
To-day, that spared, made terrible To-morrow
With thick presentiment of coming ills.
Only we knew the Right—but oh, how strong,
How pitiless, how insatiable the Wrong!”

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