

News Journal

Estimated printed pages: 5

October 7, 2001

Section: News

Page: 5A

Brush with death makes life precious

LAURA UNGAR

Staff

Businessmen were on the way to World Trade Center Sept. 11

By LAURA UNGAR, Staff reporter

David Freschman and Richard Eckman stared out of the window on the Amtrak train, watching the World Trade Center burn, and realized: They were supposed to be there.

They were near Newark, N.J., headed toward a quarterly board meeting for MarketDataInsite.Com Inc., which had offices on the 79th floor of the first tower. For two years, board meetings had been held at 8:30 a.m. But on Sept. 11, the meeting had been changed to 10:30 because the company's chief executive officer thought it would be busy and crowded in New York in the weeks after Labor Day.

That random decision may have saved their lives.

Since then, their perspectives have changed. Freschman, 39, of Hockessin, president of Delaware Innovation Fund, a Wilmington venture capital firm, knows more than ever that money means nothing compared to human life. He and Eckman, 50, a partner with Pepper Hamilton law offices in Wilmington, realize that forces greater than themselves are in control. They know to ignore life's annoyances and treasure every moment.

These lessons - which many Americans learned vicariously as they watched the events unfold - were hard-won for the two men. That Tuesday, they feared their friends and colleagues had died. Through the day, they began to come to terms with some of life's most elemental questions, such as: What's important?

Such realizations are typical for those who come close to death, said Kathryn Poppiti, program coordinator for Christiana Care's Pathways Outpatient Psychiatric Services. Suddenly, material possessions become less important and relationships, health and the beauty of life become priorities.

"I think that life takes on a whole new meaning for someone like these two men," Poppiti said.

Suddenly, it feels as if you have been given a second chance, a chance to re-evaluate your life. Since the tragedy, she said, "all of us are doing that on some level."

Changing hopes

The seeds of those lessons were planted on Sept. 11.

That morning, Freschman and Eckman boarded the Acela train to New York. While Freschman read the newspaper, Eckman handed him stock certificates from MarketDataInsite, and they talked about the hopes they had for the technology company.

As the train sped closer to Newark, Freschman's fund administrator called with news of the fire.

Freschman looked to his right and saw Tower One, where his meeting had been scheduled, in flames.

"The World Trade Center is on fire!" he shouted at Eckman.

Eckman, of Chadds Ford, Pa., forgot about the meeting and thought of his four daughters. He did not know how far-reaching the danger would become. He just knew he wanted to see them.

In the next moment, Freschman looked at Eckman, and both men said they had the same thought: Their colleagues might be in the tower.

They frantically punched the numbers on their cell phones.

Taking stock

John Vaughan, 49, CEO of MarketDataInsite, heard what sounded like a freight train rushing over his head as he looked for a place to park about two blocks away from the towers.

Startled, he pulled over, got out of his car, and saw pieces of the building fall to the ground as a fireball engulfed the tower.

Vaughan's cell phone rang. It was Eckman.

"Are you OK?"

"I'm OK," Vaughan said. "But it's like Beirut. I'm getting out of here. ..."

Then his phone went dead.

A minute later, Eckman and Freschman watched the second explosion from their train. Both got calls from their wives.

Then, Freschman saw the first tower crumble.

My God, he thought, thousands of people just died. My friends may have just died.

He looked at the stock certificates in his hand, and considered ripping them to pieces. Somehow, they did not matter anymore.

Most colleagues survive

Freschman and Eckman kept trying, with no success, to get in touch with their colleagues.

About 9:30 a.m., the train pulled into the Newark station. As soon as Freschman and Eckman stepped off, they heard a message over the loudspeaker to evacuate the building because of a bomb scare.

No one panicked. They just walked, quickly, into the sunlight, one passenger helping another. Freschman and Eckman were struck by the calm and the kindness.

Vaughan had the same impression of kindness. From his hotel, he watched the New Yorkers that he had pigeonholed as self-centered and achievement-oriented comfort each other. Strangers stood together in the streets, talking and hugging.

From Newark, Eckman and Freschman finally reached Vaughan on the phone. All 12 board members were all right, including one woman who had arrived on a local train under the building just as the first plane hit.

But a receptionist on the floor was among the missing. The next day, Vaughan saw her children on "Good Morning America," clutching her picture.

"What cowards," Vaughan said. "These terrorists just killed working moms and dads."

'Glad to be home'

Freschman, too, thought of the families.

As he and Eckman wandered around Newark, trying in vain to catch a cab or a bus, he thought of the children orphaned by the terrorists and longed to get home to his two children.

It took several hours, but the two men managed to find trains to get them back to Philadelphia late that afternoon.

A friend picked them up and, realizing they probably had not eaten all day, he brought them to a TGIFridays two blocks from the train station, where Freschman had a beer and a hamburger. Normally, he would have gone for something healthier. But that day he realized that exercise and healthy eating cannot save you if it is your time.

At home, Eckman savored the embrace of his wife and daughters. Freschman just put down his bags, walked outside, and said, simply, "I'm glad to be home."

Survivors cherish life

Since that day, all three men have seen subtle changes in themselves. Others have noticed, too.

"He's a whole different person now," Robin Freschman said of her husband. "He just lives for the moment now."

Little things, like small problems at work, do not get to him anymore. He will cut off conversations that waste time.

Eckman, too, has been concentrating on what is important: family, friends, hard work and kindness. He knows that he cannot put things off anymore. "I realized life is short," Eckman said. "You should maximize life. ? Every day is a special day."

Freschman, Eckman and Vaughan said they always have cherished their families, but this experience has reinforced those feelings. Knowing so many relationships have been torn apart showed them just how important families are.

And despite the evil Vaughan witnessed, the behavior of average New Yorkers convinced him of the inherent goodness of people. He recalls a man in his New Jersey hometown, a man he barely knew, walking up to him, hugging him and crying.

"There are evil people," Vaughan said. "But there's a vast amount of goodness."

Finally, all three men know more than ever that they are at the mercy of fate, of God, of other people. A snap decision, a simple happenstance, can mean the difference between life and death.

Freschman's father, Morris, learned this lesson early in life, surviving Nazi concentration camps at age 10.

"I don't know what postponed that meeting," the 72-year-old said. "I'm telling him it was God's mission to save him."

"You feel as if you're in control of your life, and you're not. It's a humbling experience," the younger Freschman said. "I feel like the luckiest man in the world."

?Reach Laura Ungar at 324-2547 or lungar@delawareonline.com.

Photo Caption:

The News Journal/WILLIAM BRETZGER

Richard Eckman (left) and David Freschman were on their way to a meeting at the World Trade Center when planes hit the towers Sept. 11. Both say they have re-evaluated their priorities since the attack.

Copyright (c) The News Journal. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.