

Choices We Make

by: Kevin Brian Dowling, Pennsylvania

The world changed forever on that tragic September morning in 2001, when nearly 3,000 human beings died just going to work to support their families. I watched the carnage live on C.N.N. news as the planes struck the Twin Towers in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the field in Pennsylvania.

I had grown up in the shadow of New York City, had walked in and out of the Trade Center many times, including when I worked on Wall Street for a brief time in the late 1980's. This made it very personal for me. In addition, I had the surreal experience of watching this news from a death row cell, a place I have no reason to be in.

Some months later, I learned that someone I had worked with had died in the Towers. His father owned the company where I worked from 1990 to 1995 in Lancaster County. I was an Area Operations Manager for 13 stores. My boss asked me to take his son in the field and show him the business. He later chose a career in finance in New York. On "9/11", this fine young man was vaporized by a direct plane strike on the offices of Cantor Fitzgerald in one of the Twin Towers. I read of his father's death a few years later, no doubt of a broken heart.

I chose to leave my job in 1995 and accepted a General Manager position with a restaurant company. When the promised District Manager job did not open soon enough, I chose a new General Manager position with a retail chain that was expanding quickly, and I was in line for District Manager in less than a year. I had a wife and three children, over 20 years of management experience under my belt, and I was confident this was the path to best provide for my family.

My new employer put me in a fast-track program where I needed to learn the operation of their stores. I lived in Lancaster County where they were just planning many new stores. Their manager training stores were in Berks and York Counties. Both locations were 49 miles from my home, one west, the other east. I knew the heavy traffic patterns to Berks County, so on August 5, 1996 I took a test drive to Hanover, York County prior to heading to my restaurant near Harrisburg. I was given my choice where to train, I chose Hanover. I resigned my restaurant effective September 27, 1996 and started my new job on September 30, 1996. Remember those dates, I chose York County.

On December 4, 1996 while at work, police from a nearby town visited my store. They asked if I would go for questioning, suggested I was a possible witness. Once at Hanover Police station, they quickly accused me of having committed an armed robbery of a framing gallery, on the same highway I traversed every day since September 30, 1996. The same highway I traveled on August 5, 1996 as it turned out, the day of that robbery. I was arrested and taken to York County Prison.

I was able to get bailed out on February 22, 1997. While awaiting trial, the alleged robbery victim was murdered at a new business on October 20, 1997. Conclusions were jumped to and I was arrested again on October 29, 1997 and charged with Capital murder. I never left prison again, soon 21 years ago.

If I had chosen to reject the new job offer, or if I chose to train in Berks County instead, I am certain I would not be here. I would never have been falsely accused of the robbery, or the later murder. Evidence exists implicating real suspects in both crimes. The cruel irony, a major part of my job was protecting people from criminals.

Choices we make every day alter our fate. Choosing one job over another, or going west rather than east, can put you in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sadly, life can be that simple.