



9/11: What seems like yesterday is history to today's students

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By **Pam Adams**

Journal Star education reporter



On any other Wednesday morning, Greg Walters' fire science class at Illinois Central College focuses on on tactics and strategies of fighting fires.

This past Wednesday, Walters devoted the two-hour class to what for members of his generation are the unforgettable moments of one September morning.

Walters, chief of Peoria Heights Fire Department, retired as assistant chief from Peoria's fire department in 2011. He has taught fire science classes eight or nine years. During Wednesday's class, he wore a cap inscribed with bold letters, FDNY. He had just shown a video, "9/11," made by two brothers who happened to be embedded with a crew of New York City firefighters, documenting the life of a rookie firefighter, when hijackers flew one airplane into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, a second into the South Tower.

"I see our country forgetting, whether we intend to or not," Walters told the class, most of them too young to remember, much less forget.

"I took a solemn oath on 9/11 to never forget. What I'm doing in this class is passing that responsibility from me to you." But, he added later, "My fear is it may not be being taught at the lower grade levels."

Sunday marks the 15th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. For the most part, this year's high school seniors were the last group born in the 20th century. This year's high school freshman were not born in 2001.

"Their whole lives have sort of been lived in the shadow of 9/11. That's why it's so important to teach it," said Dean Cantu, chairman of Bradley University's Department of Teacher Education. Cantu is also director of Illinois Council for the Social Studies, which represents K-12 teachers and teacher-preparation programs. Teachers aren't forgetting, he said, but what they're teaching students to remember is evolving.

Walters passion for the subject is as understandable as his fears about how it is taught. Almost 350 of his "brothers and sisters" died that day, the single deadliest incident for firefighters in U.S. history. More have died since, because of health-related issues caused by the toxic dust that spread over lower Manhattan after the Twin Towers collapsed. He began dedicating a class to 9/11 when he noticed the "deer-in-the-headlights look" among young, would-be firefighters when he mentioned the subject.

While several of Walters' students knew about the attacks, particularly Gunnar Merritt, whose father and uncles served in Afghanistan and Iraq, others said they learned little about 9/11 during high school. Schools conducted moments of silence or other commemorations to honor some 3,000 killed and 6,000 injured in four separate attacks.

One student said he didn't realize the Pentagon also had been attacked. "A lot of people just assumed you knew," said David Nolan, 21, a graduate of Richwoods High School. Kryssi Kauhn suspected teachers were uncomfortable teaching about the attacks. Marcus Simmons, a 2016 graduate of Peoria Christian School, said he wasn't taught about 9/11, he researched the events himself for a junior project.

Cantu cites a 2013 study that gives credence to what all three students said. Teachers may have avoided teaching 9/11 because of time constraints, the general difficulty of teaching the recent past, or hesitancy to wade into potential controversies. But as time passes, teachers are beginning to create lessons that look at 9/11 in a broad context and not just as an isolated event, he said.

Nolan Wilson uses the 9/11 attacks as a starting point for a section on global terrorism in his current events class at Illinois Valley Central High School in Chillicothe. Thomas Hayes spent much of the past week on 9/11 in the advanced psychology and history classes he teaches at Richwoods High School.

Both teachers said it's a tough, but rewarding, topic to teach.

"Every year, there's this awkwardness during this time period," Wilson said. "It's almost like teachers are afraid to take the risk. I felt it, too, when I first started to teach about it."

Hayes moved beyond the event to cause and effects in his classes. "Why were we attacked, that's a question that still gives a lot of adults pause."

The new state learning standards for social studies emphasize critical thinking and historical research, Cantu said. Between the standards and the availability of primary source materials, teachers are in a better position than ever before to teach 9/11 in a thorough manner, he added.

"But we can't overlook that what is the recent past for us is history for them."

Pam Adams is the *Journal Star* education reporter. She can be reached at 686-3245 and padams@pjstar.com. Follow her on Twitter @padamspam.