September 11, 2001 was the second day of Middlebury College’s fall semester, with the same glorious Indian summer weather that graced the skies of New York and Washington, D.C. By 9 a.m., music drifted from open bedroom windows, most books still had their bindings unbroken and the first wave of autumn colors flashed on the far horizons of the mountain ridges. It was the season for new beginnings and unlimited possibilities.

Less than an hour later the bucolic Middlebury bubble burst. Within minutes of American Airlines Flight 11’s crash into the World Trade Center, the first news of the disaster rippled across campus. Awareness spread slowly at first — fanned by the voices of stunned disc jockeys breaking into top-ten hits, phone calls from anxious family members or friends, and impromptu groups gathering around dormitory television sets.
The College switchboard began to field record numbers of calls as the shock and grief gained momentum. Realization of the enormity of the tragedy flooded pathways, classrooms and dormitories. Students in bright summer clothes sobbed in corridors. Professors paused, mid-lecture, struggling to regain composure. President McCardell ended his campus-wide e-mail by writing, “let us hope, and let us pray, for an end to needless violence and for strength and courage in the days ahead.” Middlebury College had never felt so isolated and yet so vulnerable.

There were also, however, profound moments of hope and connection. First-years, who had met just days before, embraced each other in comfort. President McCardell walked from dormitory to dormitory to watch CNN with students. Scores of individuals waited for five hours in line to give blood, and all night a warm light shone out the open doors of Mead Chapel, offering a quiet sanctuary for reflection. Some commented on the juxtaposition of the falling steel towers versus the granite solidarity and strength of Mead Chapel’s spire, two images framed forever against an impossibly beautiful blue sky.

Middlebury College and New York City seem very dissimilar and very distant but on September 11, 2001 the connections between the two places became pronounced and the people whose roots stretch from Manhattan to Vermont were highlighted.
Lindsey Corbin ’05 was in one of the first classes at college when the planes slammed into the twin towers. As she sat in Chateau listening to her professor and gazing out over the Vermont landscape, she appreciated Middlebury’s pastoral beauty, especially since she had worked in the busy financial district of Manhattan all summer.

The minute Corbin stepped onto her dormitory hall after class, however, she was bombarded with the terrible news of the attacks. She raced to the television lounge and watched in horror as the two enormous buildings were reduced to boiling rubble. For as long as she lives, Corbin will always be able to “vividly picture the T.V. screen and the buildings just crumbling.”

Suddenly, Middlebury’s isolation seemed unbearable. “Even though Sept. 11 was supposed to bring the nation together,” she said, “I felt isolated. My family was suffering together in New York and I was up in Vermont. I hadn’t yet found a family here.”

Corbin called her father immediately but there was no news about the fate of her scores of friends and relatives who worked in the World Trade Center. It was a time of “suspense, waiting and praying.”

She returned to the television and began to imagine walking through the familiar streets of lower Manhattan. She could picture everything — everything, that is, in the way it had been yesterday. It was so hard to comprehend that the entire
landscape had been permanently and horrifically scarred.
“I felt fortunate to be at Middlebury because I felt safe,”
Corbin remembered, “but I also felt frustrated and
disconnected. I wanted to be in New York.”
On the morning of Sept. 11 Scott Pardee, Alan R. Holmes
Professor of Economics, was watching CNBC when live
coverage of the initial hit on the twin towers flashed onto the
screen. Within minutes he was on the phone with his wife,
explaining to her why she had been knocked out of bed in
their Battery Park penthouse apartment. He advised her to
leave the area immediately.
While his wife escaped the financial district and headed
uptown, Pardee began worrying about his son, who walked to
his job at Merril Lynch every morning around 9 a.m. The
phone lines became clogged and he was unable to reach either
his wife or his child. “I was ready to start my first class of the
year,” he remembered, “and suddenly I didn’t know where my
family was.”
Pardee had been the Chairman of a company based on the 96
floor of tower two from 1986 to 97. Had he been there last
September he would have been the last one to leave the office.
“Having gone through the 1993 episode,” he said, refering to
the previous bombing of the World Trade Center, “I think we
would have gotten the hell out of there but who knows
whether there would have been time.”
He knew that many of his friends who still worked in the
upper floors of the towers would not survive this attack, but he wanted to make sure his family was alright.

Pardee quickly made arrangements for his classes and then jumped in his car and drove down to New York City. He was only able to get as far as suburban Westchester, N.Y., however, because the city was blocked off by bumper-to-bumper traffic. He turned around and drove back to Middlebury, where his wife was finally able to reach him by phone that night. She was physically fine but the experience had been “shattering” for her.

The next day he returned to the classroom and divided his Monetary Theory and Financial Institutions class into teams. They were each given a title and asked to pretend that they were the highest ranking executive in a firm that had lost 700 employees the day before. Each team prepared a presentation with a detailed plan of action. Their presentations were covered by WNCAX-TV in a ten minute segment on the evening news.

Pardee was very impressed with what his students projects — two or three groups drafted the same plan that real CEOs in the same situation put into effect. “They all said to think of the families first,” Pardee said.

A year later, as his family struggles to come to grips with the disaster and move back into their apartment overlooking Ground Zero, Pardee is still thinking of his family first.

Kevin Dougherty ’03 was having breakfast in Hamlin when
coverage of the event first surfaced in the morning news shows. Kevin, an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) for the Middlebury Volunteer Ambulance Association, watched in shock as the building burned and New York rescue workers pulled up to the scene in droves.

“Everybody stopped eating and stood around the TV, confused over whether the event was a premeditated attack or a terrible accident,” Dougherty said. When the second plane hit, the reality of a terrorist attack sent shockwaves through the group.

Dougherty returned to Battell Hall, where he was a junior counselor, to comfort many first-year students. Soon he realized that his other volunteer position as an EMT, might lead him to Ground Zero. On Sept. 12, Vermont Emergency Services put a handful of town-based ambulance associations, including Middlebury, on standby to go to New York if needed. Dougherty immediately volunteered to go if Middlebury was called.

“I spent the afternoon of Sept. 12 gathering resources and packing my bags,” he said. He talked to his teachers, parents and friends about his willingness to travel to Lower Manhattan. He steeled himself to miss critical weeks of classes as a junior pre-med student. “I was very excited at the possibility of being able to help the nation at a time of crises,” Dougherty said. The Middlebury rescue team was never called, however.
Other students experienced feelings of frustration and helplessness, unable to make a direct contribution in the first hours of the attack. Many parents of students, however, expressed relief that their children were attending school in a fairly isolated place rather than in a major urban area.

A year ago many members of the Middlebury College community struggled between feeling comforted by their sleepy Vermont location and bothered by a sense of remote seclusion made acute by the attacks on New York and Washington and the crash in Pennsylvania. No American will ever forget where he or she was on Sept. 11, 2001. Those who were a part of the Middlebury College community will always remember the emotions tied to that location, the friends and colleagues who lent support and his or her own individual story as the community struggled through an infamous moment in history.