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Law School Notes

Law students question lessons of 9/11

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As a former resident of New York, Wally Ghuneim said he used to be able to see the twin towers from his elementary school in Brooklyn.

Ghuneim, a 3L at DePaul University College of Law, said that memory was one of the first things that popped into his head when he learned a plane crashed into the towers on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

"I was in Jacksonville, Tenn. in chorus class and my principal came on the loud speaker and said, 'An act of war has been committed against our nation today,'" said Ghuneim, 25. "Being from Brooklyn, I just remember having a weird feeling."

He said that feeling didn't last too long before it was replaced with concerns over how the incident would impact people like him: a Palestinian American and a Muslim.

"We've gone through it before," he said, referring to the backlash he said Muslims received after the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. "I knew at that moment that something, some sort of backlash, was coming."

Surprisingly, he said, he didn't receive much. His uncle, however, was approached by federal agents shortly after 9/11 to ask him why the Ghuneims moved from New York to Tennessee about a year and a half before the terrorist attacks occurred.

And now, with the 10-year anniversary of 9/11 on Sunday, Ghuneim said he doesn't believe his generation — those who have spent the majority of their adult lives in a post-9/11 environment — learned the right lesson from the incident that devastated his home state.

"I think this generation misinterpreted what we should do," he said. "Sure, we came together for a while, but we should have come together to learn from our experiences, learn about the differences in the world and what American foreign policy means to other people."

Ghuneim isn't alone in his sentiments over his generation's reaction to 9/11.

Lauren Morris, also a 3L at DePaul, said she does not believe she and the other members of her generation have taken it upon themselves to get more involved and informed.

"We're all so disconnected," she said. "It's really easy to get the sound bites and not delve further into it."



Wally Ghuneim

Maybe it's reality television or just the stresses that come along with school and work, but Morris, 26, said her generation is overstimulated to such a point that "it's really easy to detach yourself from what's going on around you."

Erin Wessell, a 25-year-old 3L at The John Marshall Law School, agreed. After a decade of reading headlines and watching news reports about 9/11 and the pair of wars that followed, Wessell said her generation has "just gotten used to it."

"We are sort of desensitized to it all. It's just how it is," Wessell said, adding that she thinks it might be different had the wars that followed the terrorist attacks taken place on American soil.

Jinsun Koh, also a 3L at John Marshall, said as a non-U.S. citizen, she might have a different perspective on 9/11. Koh, 27, is from South Korea.

She said she was learning how to sing Happy Birthday in Chinese in a boarding school in Massachusetts when the planes hit the World Trade Center in 2001.

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“The first thing I thought was, ‘Am I going to die here by myself while my parents are back in Korea?’ ” Koh said, recalling that she quickly questioned whether it was a good idea to come to the states from school.

“I guess I never looked at it like Americans had to react,” she said. “I always thought they were victimized.”

Laura Herrera, a 1L at John Marshall, said after hearing about 9/11, as well as the deaths and increased security that came as a result of the attacks, “war has become part of our normal life.”

Herrera, 25, said like many other traditional law students, the U.S. has been at war for almost half of her life. She and Christos Photiou, a fellow 1L at John Marshall, said they think 9/11 taught their generation a tough lesson, but they are not sure if Americans fully grasped it.

“Everyone thought we were safe because we are the United States,” Herrera said. “You don’t think someone

would have the balls to do something like that do the U.S., but they did.”

Photiou, who said he served in the military prior to 9/11, said the terrorist attacks provided his generation a lesson in humility. He also said it added to his generation’s skepticism toward government. Photiou is not alone in his latter statement.

The majority of the students interviewed for this story mentioned some distrust or questions over the U.S.’s decision to go to war following the attacks and all of them said they believed the biggest impact of 9/11 has been on security matters.

Barry S. Kellman, a law professor at DePaul, teaches classes on various security matters.

He said when it comes to today’s law students, most of them “don’t have a frame of reference on what 9/10 was like” and consider the security changes following 9/11 to be a hassle.

Kellman said the day after the terrorist attacks, he traded his regularly scheduled teaching plan for a discussion on what just happened to the nation.

“Most people were still stunned,” he said. “The one or two older students and myself were horrified too, but less stunned than the others. We had seen terrorism in the early ’90s, but just not as bad.”

Joseph Ferrari, a social psychologist at DePaul University, said Americans’ reaction to 9/11 is more a result of culture than generation.

“Americans are very fickle. We get excited and then we get bored,” he said, referring to how many of the law students said they felt like 9/11 only briefly brought together their generation.

While some of the students used the word “desensitized” to describe their generation’s feelings on war, Ferrari said it’s actually a common psychological process of becoming saturated with something and “just simply becoming used to it.”