

Hero of 9/11 won't stop speaking out against Bush

Louise Vennells – Western Morning News Sat 2nd December 2006

One minute he was going about his business, the next he was looking at a vision from the depths of hell. Still reeling from a blast which rocked the World Trade Centre, William Rodriguez could hardly believe what he was seeing.

“A man came running into the office shouting, ‘explosion, explosion!’” Mr. Rodriguez soon saw a third of his body had been badly burnt by the blast. “When I realised, I started screaming. I looked at his face and it was missing parts.”

It was the start of a day that transformed Mr. Rodriguez from a maintenance man to the hero of 9/11. He ran back into the crumbling tower three times, and helped save hundreds of people.

In the months that followed, his role would change again, from the “face” of the rescue effort to an outspoken critic of the government.

For Mr. Rodriguez, a native of Puerto Rico, swears his ordeal began before the first plane hit the Twin Towers. He claims that the White House failed to act, and accuses the government of being involved in “sponsored terrorism” in a bid to find a motive to invade Iraq. He brought his argument to a West Country audience on Wednesday, when he spoke in Torquay as part of the Global Truth movement.

Before America's Trade epicenter was reduced to rubble, Mr. Rodriguez routinely ate breakfast at the Windows of the World restaurant, on the top floor of the North Tower, where his friends would feed him free of charge. On 9/11, he was running late, so he skipped the treat.

It was while in the basements of the North Tower that Mr. Rodriguez says he felt an explosion from below. “It was so hard that it shook the foundations of the building and the walls cracked,” he said. “The ceiling fell down on top of us.”

Mr. Rodriguez, 45, had worked in the building for 20 years, and survived the 1993 bomb blast. As the sprinkler system came on, he was mentally transported back. It was only then that he claims he heard the sound of the first plane hitting the tower at 8.46am. “It came from far away – all the way at the top of the building,” he said.

The handyman's thoughts immediately raced to the plight of his friends on the top floor, and he spent the rest of his ordeal battling his way through the building, trying to reach them.

Mr. Rodriguez, one of only five people to hold a master key which opened the doors to an escape route, repeatedly encountered people in need of help. He saved scores from the crumbling tower, including two who were stuck in a lift shaft that was filling with water from the sprinklers.

“I could hear them shouting, ‘we're going to drown’,” he said. “I was always an agnostic, but in that moment I prayed.”

He suddenly remembered where ladders were stored, and found the longest one unlocked, so he was able to drop it down the shaft and escort two workers out to waiting ambulances.

Mr. Rodriguez dived back into the building to try to reach his friends, but again he encountered a casualty in need, this time on the 34th floor. “There was a blond woman, lying on the floor, shaking. I told her she had to get out but she was new and she didn't know where to go.”

Mr. Rodriguez helped her down the stairs, and ran back into the building on his third trip. This time he played a role in helping a man in a wheelchair to the waiting ambulance crew.

“It was like a scene from The Towering Inferno,” he said. “Pieces of rock kept falling all over us and hitting us.”

I said to the man in the wheelchair, "When we get out we'll go for a drink." His face was just a dust mask.

Mr. Rodriguez was set to make a fourth trip up the stairs when he Police outside ordering him not to look back. "Of course, when they tell you not to look back, you always do," he said. "It was the worst memory I ever had."

The blond woman he had helped save lay dead, her body mangled by falling debris. "I looked around, and saw all the bodies of people who had jumped out of the windows, and they looked as if they had melted into the ground," he said.

Mesmerised by the apocalyptic vision, Mr. Rodriguez realised the ground was trembling. To cries of "Run", he dived under a nearby fire-engine as the huge building tumbled down. "I thought I was going to die from asphyxia," he said. "I thought, 'God, please don't let my mother see my body cut in half'."

But the media saw Mr. Rodriguez dive, and soon rescue workers were hauling him free.

Today, Mr. Rodriguez is grateful to be alive, but he said: "I never found my friends. I saved hundreds of people, but the reason I do what I can to get the word out is that I lost 200 friends who have no way of claiming justice."

In the aftermath, Mr. Rodriguez was hailed a hero, and he felt he was playing a big role in the 9/11 Commission, "I thought they were going to do the right thing," he said.

But Mr. Rodriguez soon felt that his evidence was being covered up, when he became the only person to be interviewed behind closed doors. And his account was omitted from the final report. He claims evidence he collected from scores of witnesses was overlooked.

The final straw came when he was asked to give a public address on why Iraq should be invaded, "I said no – 9/11 was nothing to do with Iraq. I helped organise the families, and we voted against the President using us for his political motive. That's when the thrust changed, and the invasion suddenly became about weapons of mass destruction."

These days, Mr. Rodriguez fears for his life – and says his plight is relevant in the wake of the death of Alexander Litvinenko, the ex-KGB spy many believe was poisoned by the Russians.

But Mr. Rodriguez continues to speak out. Once a prominent magician, he said: "The 9/11 attacks are just an illusion. It never happened the way they say. It's all manufactured to give the impression that it happened like that."