

Carol A. Porter, DPN, tells a story about Leading Self

Carol A. Porter came to MD Anderson in 2016 to serve as Chief Nursing Officer and Head of the Division of Nursing. In an interview conducted in 2018, she talks about her experiences as Director of Emergency Services and Emergency Preparedness at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City during the terrorist attack on 11 September 2011.



## *9/11 at Lenox Hill Hospital, New York City*

I was in the Emergency Center rounding on patients and staff, and we had TVs for the patients to watch, and it was captured on the cameras in New York City and there were so many screams and yells telling me to come and look. So, immediately you're thinking okay, victims, people are going to come, they could come quickly, it's just like two miles, two, three miles that's it, to the Twin Towers. So, immediately, we went into disaster mode and everybody started to do whatever they had to do in our disaster plan. They got ready, the floors got ready, everybody got ready. At the same time, I had staff come to me saying, "My husband works in that building." I realized that okay, a lot of people have family members in those buildings, so we had to worry about how do you console somebody who just saw the building go down? So I think I went to the Psychiatry Department, we reached out to our HR colleagues and everybody else, to please help them. I remember the phones—if I remember correctly, three of the major companies, two companies had towers in the tower and they went down, there was only one cell phone that was working. I had one of them, it was working, and so I told her to call, and of course she didn't get an answer. Then I asked somebody to take care of her and try to help her reach her family, whatever. Meanwhile, everything is going and the CEO and I are talking, and the CNO came over and everything else, and we were getting everything prepared, and in the back of my mind I'm thinking I have this really important job to do, but my son was working in a building right across the street. So I'm thinking oh my God, is he okay, and then trying to be very strong outward, because people are looking at you. If you're going to start to crumble, then we're crumbling with you, so you can't.

So, I was about to take a few seconds to try to get a hold of him on the phone and he called me and he said to me, "Mom, a plane came into the building across the street." He said, "They're telling us to stay on the floor and don't leave the building." He said, "I'm evacuating this entire floor." He was a brand new graduate, college graduate. So he said, "I love you," and that was it, click, no more cell service for him. I actually wanted to vomit, I had a visceral reaction to it, but I was so thankful that he was truly my son, he was evacuating their floor, because he knew that sometimes you have to do things like that, sometimes you have to use your common sense, and thank God he did, because even though he wasn't in the Tower, the heat, the smoke, the ashes, and people jumping out of windows, they were involved in all that.

You don't realize it, as a leader, how important your demeanor is in an emergency. Even if you feel like crumbling yourself you can't, and you have to find out who you can lean on. So there was a chair of the Radiology Department, who I had worked very closely in the Lenox Hospital, and the CNO. The three of us were constantly in communication with each other. It's not just the event, it's what did it do to the people around you. Even if you didn't have somebody in that tower or towers, being in the proximity of New York City during that, it had an effect for, I would probably say a couple of years. Every single time we do anything like that, anything, you learn from it, you know you learn from it and you never forget it.

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## About This Content

This interview clip was taken from an in-depth interview conducted for the Making Cancer History Voices Oral History Project. This ongoing project currently contains almost 500 interview hours with MD Anderson institution builders.

The transcript has been edited from the original.

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**Interview link:** <https://mdanderson.libguides.com/PorterC>

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