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**Etowah County officers remember responding to 9/11**



*From left to right: Fred Lasseter, Stephen Hooks, Johnny Grant, Woody Johnson, Kevin Hassell and Jamie Grant recall responding to 9/11. Katie Bohannon/Messenger.*

**By Katie Bohannon, News Editor**

In the wake of the attacks that shocked a nation on September 11, 2001, an outpouring of emotion flooded the hearts of awestruck Americans. From the ashes of grief and disbelief arose a new unified mission – spanning from sea to sea – to help in healing, recovery and response, however possible.

No distance hindered the will to assist those in need following 9/11, with devoted individuals nationwide volunteering their time and efforts to tend to the World Trade Center, Pentagon and Shanksville, Pennsylvania crash sites. Twenty years ago, a collection of such individuals – rooted in Etowah County – traveled over 900 miles from home to serve their fellow citizens during a time of paramount crisis. Today, as they reflect on the date that forever changed history, and their role in the days that followed, one cohesive consensus abounds: they chose to help once before, and they would choose to help again.

Thirty-five-year-old Etowah County Drug Task Force Agent Woody Johnson sat in a barber's chair as he watched the first plane strike the North Tower. At the time, Johnson thought (like many throughout the United States) that the initial crash was a tragic accident. When the second plane hit, he realized that was far from the truth. Six days later on September 17<sup>th</sup>, Johnson turned 36 in New York City, joining the first group of Etowah County responders serving their fellow Americans after 9/11.

Johnson was one of many who stepped forward when needed, alongside law enforcement officers representing the Etowah County Sheriff's Office, Gadsden, Attalla, Altoona, Hokes Bluff police departments and the National Guard. Three groups deployed to New York City in the weeks following 9/11, after former Etowah County Sheriff Todd Entrekin contacted a friend from the FBI Academy who served as a commander with the NYPD and asked how Etowah County could help. While Entrekin led the first group, current Etowah County Commissioner Johnny Grant (then Chief of Investigation) escorted the second and third.

Among Grant, Entrekin and Johnson arriving in New York City were Kevin Hassell, Fred Lasseter, Chris Crisler, Brantley Bishop, Tommy Wigginton, Glenn Cline, Danny Tilley, Larry Howard, Scott Cardwell, Jason Rogers, Mike Jones, Stephen Hooks, Tim Dail, Donyale Richard, Jimmie Entrekin, Jeremy Walker, Connie Grant, Robin Grant, Kevin Grant and Jamie Grant.



From left to right: Kevin Hassell, Jason Rodgers, Scott Cardwell, Brantley Bishop, Jimmie Entrekin, Woody Johnson and Todd Entrekin are among the first group who traveled to New York City after the attacks. Photo courtesy of Kevin Hassell.

Etowah County's willingness to respond represents a legacy of service Johnny Grant witnessed firsthand over the course of almost 40 years in law enforcement. 9/11 proves one example of countless moments Etowah County citizens banded together to assist during times of crisis. From day-to-day emergencies in their professions to natural disasters such as severe flooding in Dallas, Texas and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the resilient spirit of Etowah County reigns stalwart and eager to answer any call of need.

"Etowah County has always been a patriotic county," said Grant. "We've always been fortunate to have a sheriff and administration, since I've been here, that if there's been a disaster, at least we've offered to help respond. About the time we decided we were going [to respond to 9/11], everyone had realized that this was not just an attack against New

York, but this was an attack against the United States...it was an attack against us. That was the reason I think we all felt led to go up there and be a part of it. It wasn't a problem to fill the slots to go. There were a lot of people who volunteered to go; we just couldn't take everyone."

"We were just a small part of it. There were agencies from all over the world [helping in New York.] When Todd [Entrekin] called up there and they said they needed help, it wasn't necessarily that they wanted us to come and dig at Ground Zero – they wanted us to let them continue to go through the rubble and try to find their coworkers and firemen, or to just be there and give honor and respect for the ones who died."

As New York first responders addressed Ground Zero, Etowah County responders alleviated their workload and shared their burden, allowing New York law enforcement the opportunity to take brief moments with their families. Receiving instructions at the Javits Center, the groups performed various responsibilities as needed, from working security at the United Nations to serving at a temporary morgue. Hooks and Lasseter worked as beat cops, while Grant served as security at The Consulate General of Israel. Several responders aided in security measures for celebrities, who were in Times Square filming "I Love New York" commercials to support the city and encourage visitors to return.

The weeks that transpired brought forth a newfound revelation for the Etowah County teams. No television footage or media coverage could compare to the gravity of the attacks they witnessed with their own eyes, and the immediate impact 9/11 wrought on those in the locations directly affected and the nation.

Fred Lasseter served as a fire medic before transitioning into law enforcement, sharing that when answering a call, first responders never know what might occur. Those who responded to 9/11, Lasseter said, did not know then that they would not return.

"You would've just had to be there to realize how it affected everybody in New York," he said. "Not just the ones with family members killed in the towers – it affected everybody."

"There are so many thoughts going through my head," said Kevin Hassell, looking back. "I'm still in awe."

An unfathomable plume of smoke billowed in daylight as Johnson crossed the Brooklyn Bridge for the first time, before he beheld all that remained of the towers in the rubble at Ground Zero. Grant watched as family members, coworkers and friends surrounded the perimeter, putting up memorials for those lost and flyers for those missing. Cradling the

possibility that perhaps someone they loved escaped, people held up photos of relatives and friends, asking if anyone saw them, hoping they might be reunited.

“We were at the boneyard where all the firetrucks were, and I climbed up and looked inside one and there was a baseball cap,” said Jamie Grant, who was 26 at the time. “You look back and you know that’s where the guy took his hat off to put on his helmet and didn’t come back and get it. Especially as a young guy, those things kind of set in. You don’t want to move it...you hope his son or daughter gets that. He put his helmet on knowing what he was going into, and he went in and didn’t make it.”



Etowah County officers gather in the streets of New York City while responding to 9/11. Photo courtesy of Kevin Hassell.

Despite the sorrow and sheer tragedy, the responders shared that the opportunity to serve remains a true honor. As the men from Etowah County devoted themselves to a greater cause, their own families represented the same support they extended to others. Etowah County native Susan Spiker's brothers Johnny, Robin and Connie Grant, alongside her nephews Jamie and Kevin Grant and Fred Lasseter were among those three local response groups. While Spiker's brothers and nephews volunteered their efforts in New York, her husband Todd traveled to Arlington, Virginia.

Spiker sat in their Atlanta, Georgia home on the morning of September 11, holding her eight-month-old son, Noah, as she watched a travesty unfold on *Good Morning America*. She immediately called Todd, an FBI Special Agent and member of the Atlanta Evidence Response Team (ERT). Todd shared with Spiker when he initially watched the attacks unfold, he wondered how the terrorists hijacked empty planes off the tarmac. The dreadful reality that the planes were not empty soon settled in. Just days later, Todd responded to the Pentagon, working grueling twelve hour shifts where he searched for evidence, personal effects and human remains and retrieved highly classified documents. Spiker noted that like her brothers and nephews, it was Todd's job to respond at the crash sites, and it was her job to support them and stay home, taking care of her three children. "A lot of us are fortunate," said Johnson, reflecting on how Spiker's circumstances mirrored that of his own family. "Todd and I were the same age, and [like Susan] my wife was home with three little kids, not knowing where we were or what we were doing. It was good to have a wife that supported you."

Though the shock and devastation proved immense, Spiker experienced an incredible wave of unity that flourished in the aftermath of 9/11. A historical togetherness circulated throughout America, with a nation grieving, praying, hoping and healing in one accord.

"I'd take the boys and we'd go downtown to candle light vigils," said Spiker. "There would be people there from all walks of life, all side by side. It's been said nobody wishes for another September 11, but we'd like a September 12."

That sense of unification was not scarce in New York City, with Etowah County's responders receiving endless tokens of appreciation wherever they walked. Johnny Grant recalled memories that stood out in his mind as expressions of gratitude he experienced while in New York, including one moment at The Plaza Hotel, where they stayed during their time in the city. As the group approached the hotel, filthy from working, they noticed impressive limousines aligning the street and chauffeurs standing outside the door, who were there for a fundraiser. Though Grant and the rest tried to slip up to their rooms, they

did not go unnoticed. An entire hallway full of people in tuxedos applauded them as they walked past.

Grant and Mike Jones protected a Greenwich Village police precinct while its bomb squad worked at Ground Zero. The pair spotted an older, grey-haired woman down the street shuffling toward them slowly. When she reached them, Grant and Jones spoke to her and she bent downward, opening a compartment under her walker. She lifted a cake from the storage space and handed it to them, thanking them for coming.

Floods of donations rushed in, with people offering food, water, clothing, shoes and masks for one another in the city. While guarding the entrance to the embassy, Lasseter saw officials from other nations thank officers, giving them their lapel pins. Hooks remembered the Times Square precinct covered in children's drawings, with scribbled handwritten messages saying, "We love you."

"They [New Yorkers] would stand on the street corner and talk to us for an hour," said Jamie Grant. "You'd ask, 'Do you not have somewhere to go?' and they'd say, 'Nah, I'll just stand here and talk to you.' They were so grateful – constantly. We didn't want for anything when we were there."

"It can happen [disasters like 9/11]," said Hooks. "But it can also happen that America can pull together and not be so divided."

Etowah County's partnership with housing Immigration and Customs Enforcement detainees at the time of 9/11 added another element to the county's efforts following the attacks. Johnny Grant discussed escorting various detainees, numerous unknown persons who entered and exited the area under the uttermost security. The 9/11 responders discussed how the attacks transformed nationwide security and changed the trajectory of individuals' lives. They commended their fellow first responders and military personnel who served and sacrificed their lives defending America and will continue to do so.

Despite the decades that pass and the societal perspectives that shift, that momentous September morning illustrates an instance that encapsulates a mission the Etowah County officers and first responders nationwide will forever share – to serve, protect and assist those in need. Regardless of the challenges that surface, ardent individuals like the Etowah County responders remain earnest to answer the call whenever and wherever it may resound. While September 11 proved an astounding tragedy, at daybreak a unified desire to comfort and mend that which was broken inspired three local groups to aid America – something that 20 years later, those from Etowah County will never forget.

“There’s no doubt in my mind if something else were to happen again, people from Etowah County would respond,” said Johnny Grant. “I’m glad we were in a position where we could go help and represent the people of Etowah County. Anybody in this county would have gone, if they had the opportunity.”

“The patriotism of this country is overwhelming,” said Kevin Hassell. “How can you forget it?”