

Four weeks after 9/11, I took a group of students to Manhattan. One morning, I asked them to meet me in the lobby of the hotel if they wanted to go to the site of the World Trade Center. Every single kid went.

You could still see smoke rising from the destruction. Several thousand people were walking around the site, yet there was total silence.

Biggest Historical Event Of Their Lifetimes

The kids with me that day had an important opportunity. They got to come closer to understanding the significance of the biggest historical event of their lifetimes.

The next year, when I took a group to New York, only one kid out of 30 was willing to go to the site. The rest of them hung out and went shopping. Part of me wanted to get angry, but I knew something else. Especially for teenagers, the urgency of the present can drown out any desire to really understand the past.

Yet, I kept trying. On every 9/11 until I retired in 2013, I'd have students read C.K. Williams' "War," a difficult but rewarding poem. They would read profiles of people who died on 9/11. We would watch a film by the French brothers Gédéon and Jules Naudet, who just happened to be making a documentary about the training of a new fireman stationed in the Engine 7, Ladder 1 firehouse in New York City when the attacks occurred. The film really brought home the horror of that day.

I'm someone who studied English, and I always found poetry more interesting than history. So I am well aware of how lacking my knowledge and sense of the past has been. My class from that day is now in their early thirties, but I do feel that the one time period that I, and they, know pretty well is the day of September 11, 2001.

About the author: Patrick Welsh taught high school English for 43 years at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia until he retired in 2013.