

'Treat Every Day Like A Gift'

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Westport resident Mike Jaffe, who used to work on the 96th floor of the north tower at the World Trade Center, made a fateful decision on Sept. 11, 2001. He made up his mind, after thinking about it a day earlier, that he was going to have breakfast with his family and go into work late. He was tired of missing his family while commuting to and from downtown Manhattan.

"Each morning my wife would drive me to the station with our [one-and-a-half-year-old] daughter sleeping in back, tucked sweetly into her car seat," said Jaffe. "I would come home each night and my little girl would be exactly as I left her, asleep in the backseat as my wife waited in the parking lot for my train to arrive. Days would go by where I wouldn't see her awake at all. Children look peaceful while sleeping, but seeing her mostly in that state started to remind me that this was not the kind of parent I wanted to be, absent from her waking world."

Jaffe's decision to spend some time with his family on the morning of Sept. 11 ended up being perhaps the most important decision he's ever made. If Jaffe had skipped breakfast, he would have been in his office when the first plane struck the north tower, between the 94th and 98th floors, at 8:46 a.m.

"My company [Marsh Inc., a risk management and insurance brokerage] lost 300 people," said Jaffe. "My direct team lost 17, including my boss."

When Jaffe arrived at the World Trade Center, both towers had been hit but had not yet collapsed. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He was staring in disbelief.

"It was unimaginable, knowing what it was like inside and what it must have been like for those people," said Jaffe. "Once the towers collapsed that's when I pretty much knew I had lost a lot of friends."

Jaffe, feeling helpless, began heading uptown before the towers fell. He was unable to use his cell phone to let his wife, Sabrina, know that he was OK, and pay phones weren't working, except for three-minute local calls, according to Jaffe.

Meanwhile, his wife, who was on her way to the Westport Weston Family Y when the towers were hit, cried at the YMCA when she learned the towers had collapsed and she hadn't heard from her husband. The Jaffes had only moved to Westport that summer and only knew a couple of people in

town. Fortunately, Sabrina was "comforted and embraced" by YMCA staffers and members before she would get that all-important call from her husband.

It wasn't until Jaffe reached a friend's office in midtown that he was able to call his wife and parents.

Even before Jaffe's brush with death, he'd realized that he needed to make a change, as his job in Manhattan was, in essence, controlling his life and keeping him from seeing his family. Two weeks after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Jaffe began working for his company's midtown office.

"I was there up until a year-and-a-half ago," said Jaffe. Before leaving, he had started a coaching business on the side. That side business, Jaffe Life Design Inspired Coaching for Life and Business, is now his full-time job. Jaffe provides coaching and workshops both over the phone and in person.

"I help give people a shift in perspective so that they can create a vision for their life and business and then put a plan together to go after it on their terms," said Jaffe, who has given free workshops for the Interfaith Housing Association and has a few "pro bono" clients.

Unlike his former job, the hours are not guaranteed. It's a riskier venture but Jaffe is passionate about what he is doing. He didn't find the work he was doing previously all that meaningful.

Jaffe Life Design (www.jaffelifedesign.com) is a different story however. "It's the most satisfying thing in the world knowing that I can make a positive difference in someone else's life," said Jaffe. "It's awesome."

He added, "I have a lot of clients in New York so I'm still going to New York but I'm doing it on my terms. That's the difference."

While Jaffe still commutes to New York on occasion, he also works from home, which gives him more hours in the day to see his wife and watch Olivia, 6-1/2 years old, and Sam, 3-1/2 years old, grow up.

Jaffe said he and Sabrina "treat every day like a gift."

The man who spent more than 15 years of his professional life working in Manhattan told the Westport News that "it's so easy to look at what we don't have and complain, or to want more and more, but when you really think about it, we're all so fortunate in how much we really have."

Jaffe has no regrets about casting aside a life working for a Fortune 500 company in the Big Apple.

"It wasn't a matter of how much I was getting paid," said Jaffe. "It's about living the life I wanted to live and I knew there had to be another way even if I didn't know what it looked like yet."



Jaffe said many people are hesitant to set foot on a new career path because they are used to their routine, are afraid of change or "they don't even think it's possible."

Jaffe is proof positive that small decisions can make a big difference. Deciding to have breakfast with his family gave him a lot more than extra time with his wife and daughter. It gave him a new life and a new vision that he is now sharing with others.