

Speech Delivered September 11, 2021
Easton, CT Remembers 20 Years

Good morning.

My name is Vanessa Hoffman Elias. I moved to Easton in 8th grade and graduated from Joel Barlow High School, class of 1989.

Thank you for this opportunity to reflect on Pete's life and 9/11.

Some of you have heard my story before, and some will be hearing it for the first time. Every time I speak, I see life lessons and insights in the lives that Pete and Sue lived – and lost – with new eyes.

Lives that understood that there was more that connected than divided us. More than just about being tolerant, but actually embracing the differences of the “other” as that is what makes our world richer. That there is more meaning in life by forging connections with the humans around us, working to weave – and not rip – the fabric of our communities.

Sharing is always painful, but it is my responsibility – and it gives us the chance to reflect on our history, our humanity, and ask ourselves whether we are conducting our lives in a way that honors all who we have lost.

I strive to live a more meaningful life, a life that Pete would approve of, and maybe you will be inspired to do the same.

I've had more exposure to terror than most. Twenty years ago today, my husband survived 9/11, my friend and his family were murdered on 9/11, and five years ago, my brother survived the terrorist attack at the Brussels airport.

I met Pete – Peter Burton Hanson – in the halls of Barlow back in 1985. I was a freshman, and he was a junior.

I would have described him then as a bouncy Deadhead, with a mop of curly red hair and smelling of a mix of patchouli and smoke from hanging out in the smoking lounge (we really had one of those).

He was so friendly, a straight talker, with a great laugh. He had a big heart, a strong sense of fairness, and no problem speaking his mind, especially when standing up for someone. He was like a big brother to me. And he hated my music.

Pete grew up outside the U.S. His life experience gave him a unique understanding and appreciation for the different ways of being and living in the world and helped make him the special person he was.

He questioned everything, stuck by his convictions, was true to himself, went after his passions, and always tried to lift people up. You could always count on him.

He was not only open to different ideas and perspectives, but he embraced them as he understood the richness it added to life. He would love a debate, and understood that underneath it all, we were all humans doing the best we could.

Pete and I kept in touch after graduation. He was at Northeastern, and I was at BU. He took me to cool music shows like Thelonius Monk, sketchy and amazing jazz bars, and gave me cassette tapes of “happy” music (mine were alternative and depressing in his mind).

My now-husband, Eugene, and I continued to hang out with Pete and Sue at their place in Jamaica Plain, and we last saw Pete in San Francisco just five months before that September.

For me, 9/11 elicits very conflicting emotions, both heartbreak and gratitude.

My husband worked on the 64th floor of Tower Two.

After a number of frantic unsuccessful phone calls, I finally got a hold of him and he explained that it was the other building that had been hit, that he could see papers flying and debris burning, and that they had been told to stay in the building.

This was before the time of texting, so I had to hang up with him to call my father-in-law back and let him know that his son was OK.

While I was talking to his dad, I had the TV on and I watched as another plane hit the other tower, just about halfway up and which looked to be around the 64th floor, and my terror started again.

I had no idea who was on that plane. I waited and waited to hear from my husband, and after the longest hour of my life, I finally got his call. He had gotten out and was safe.

As he stood at the base of the buildings, he gave me a quick description of the horror, chaos, blood, and the people twirling to their death from the burning buildings as he looked on from where he stood. By then, I had a long list of family and friends to call back and update, so we hung up again.

A few seconds or maybe minutes later, I watched as his ginormous, indestructible building collapsed. I was once again tortured with no word, thinking he was at the bottom of that pile of rubble and smoke. But, finally, after another hour, I was lucky enough to get the call from him that he was OK. He was stuck in New York City as all ways in and out of the city were closed, but he was alive.

A couple of hours later, the very same day on September 11th, I got a package from our friends Pete and Sue. It was a baby gift for our six-week-old baby girl.

I wouldn't open it because I wanted my husband there with me, so I waited until Eugene got home the next day. We opened up the package and the sweet card, having no idea. We didn't have cable, and most of the TV stations were out because of the towers' collapse. We had only had reception for just one channel from New York or New Jersey but eventually turned it off. It was simply too much to bear to see all the photos, signs, candles, and desperate attempts of people trying to find their loved ones.

It wasn't until a few days later, after we had escaped to Vermont, when I got a phone call from my mom. "Vanessa, honey, I have to tell you something. You knew someone on that plane. It was Pete, his wife, and little Christine."

My own scream still haunts me. The plane that had hit my husband's building was carrying Pete, Sue, and little Christine.

For those of us who lived through 9/11, it's not just a news clip, a page in a history book, or a special on TV. It was a pivotal day in our lives, in the world, a marker in time of pre- and post-9/11 life. There is no way for many of you to know as you weren't even born yet. But I hope that by hearing about Pete and his little family and my story, that you can learn and remember.

Today marks twenty years. Twenty years ago, our realities were dramatically and traumatically changed. We felt like our world was ending.

The last 18 months, many of us, many of you, have felt that, too.

There is an old saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Although I'm not a huge fan of that saying, it does have a point.

When we go through dark times and come out the other side, we learn that we can do hard things and be OK.

We learn that we can tolerate pain, disappointment, loss, even tragedy, and we can cope. This is called "crisis competence," and we have all been building ours for the last 18 months. Hard as it is, and has been, it does make us stronger.

Even more important than making us stronger is having HOPE. The most important ingredient of resilience is hope.

As children and teens, it is hard, even impossible for you to have this perspective, but look to the adults in your lives to know it to be true.

And to all the adults here, this is our charge. To acknowledge and validate the pain, and give perspective for hope.

Knowing that we WILL get past the moments of immense pain and struggle, it won't always feel like this. Eventually, it will be a memory. There IS a future after this moment of pain. This is resilience. We are nothing and nowhere without hope. And hope is a choice that we can make.

As today is the last day of National Suicide Prevention Week, I reflect that the terrorists that took my friends, their two-year-old, and 3,000 innocent souls aren't the only terrorists that take those we love way too soon. So many in our world are struggling with tremendous pain. Our mental health is suffering; eating disorders, addiction, overdose deaths, and suicide are all on the rise.

They are **internal** terrorists that we must help our loved ones, and our community, fight daily. Never give up on the people suffering. They need you, and they need your hope.

Pete's mom, Eunice Marguerite as I like to call her, always says that after the attacks, she found strength and hope in our nation's unity, solidarity, and togetherness. People and communities

came together, volunteered, and many paid the ultimate sacrifice as they combed through the rubble for days and weeks on end.

The days, weeks, and months just after 9/11 sometimes feel like they are almost being romanticized. But it was real. My lesson from 20 years ago? That the only way through it is **together**.

Pete was only wrong about one thing. In his emails to me in the weeks prior to 9/11, we were trying to set up a time when we could get together. I could meet little Christine, and he could meet my Chloe. And he said, "Settle in, you're a new mom, don't worry, we'll have time."

We never got the time.

My story of Pete will never change. We will never have a chance to have more stories or make more memories.

Age is a privilege not all of us get. Don't take your time for granted. Don't wait to live.

Know that you can do hard things. Find connection. And know that there is ALWAYS hope.

Thank you.