

October 27, 2001

To Whom It May Concern,

If you are reading this letter I am either long since passed or you are in a whole lot of trouble for opening up this time capsule. Let's hope it's the former!!

I have written thousands of letters since joining Eagle Hill in 1993, but never one as difficult as this one. Perhaps it is the enormity of the tragedy that makes it so difficult, or maybe even the absence of a specific audience and a clear objective that complicated the process. Nonetheless, I offer this letter with the intent of giving you a glimpse into the world as I/we understood it and experienced it at Eagle Hill before and after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on America.

On Monday, September 10, 2001, Eagle Hill School welcomed 123 students and their families to opening registration for the 2001-2002 academic year. It was a glorious sunny day filled with the usual mix of excitement and anxiety. The veteran students were playful in their return and pleased to reestablish the friendships that the long summer had estranged. The new students were bright-eyed and eager to find the success that had long been promised by EHS and their parents. It wouldn't be long before they too experienced both the labor and love of educational and social success. As a faculty, we were also pleased to have the students back on campus. It is eerily lonely without them.

After a long evening filled with social positioning and even a touch of homesickness, the students arose on Tuesday, September 11, 2001 for their first day of classes. As usual, the first morning produced an energy that was unlike any other day of the year. You could literally feel the pulse of the campus as the students gathered for breakfast (not a person is late on opening day!) to assess their social status. Then, as each student received and shared with peers his or her class schedule, cheers and groans could be heard alternately throughout the dining hall.

Shortly after 9 am, I received word that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Not thinking too much about it, I proceeded casually to the admission reception area to get a report from CNN. While there clearly had been a terrible accident involving the WTC, the initial reports and videos seemed fairly innocuous. Then, suddenly, out of nowhere a second plane appeared on the television screen and flew directly into the twin towers. This horrific image is forever emblazoned in my memory—and unless you watched it live, you will never be able to truly comprehend the enormity of the moment or gravity of the horror. As we stared at the television trying to make sense of these

incomprehensible acts of terror, a report of a third plane hitting the Pentagon was aired. Surely this was a mistaken reaction to a heightened sense of panic and fear? Unfortunately, these initial reports were confirmed and were followed up by further news that as many as seven other planes remained unaccounted for and potentially hijacked. Time would tell us that only one of those planes was actually hijacked, crashing into the ground in Shanksville, PA after a group of brave passengers overtook the terrorists to prevent them from striking their intended target—The White House.

As events unfolded, our first order of business on campus was to contact all of our families in the New York City and Washington D.C. areas, as well as those who were on flights to the west coast following our opening of school. Thankfully, we were able to confirm that none of our parents were directly involved. As we heard from each of our families who were geographically vulnerable, we met with each of their children individually to let them know that all was well at home. Following these individual meetings, I addressed the entire student body at noon and filled them in on the events as we had come to understand them to that point. At this same all-school meeting, the students had the opportunity to ask as many questions as they wished. The questions were insightful and fitting given the severity of the tragedy. From there, our students went back to class and were afforded the opportunity to process the issue further with their teachers if they wished. It was truly an extraordinary day for everyone involved.

September 11, 2001 was a day that changed all of our lives forever. The age of innocence and complacency was over for all Americans. For those that viewed the world quantitatively, we were handed a sound defeat from which many thought we might never recover. Over 5,000 people perished in the attack, and more than 10,000 children were left without a mother and/or a father. The nation experienced temporary paralysis as every domestic and international flight was grounded for days. The New York Stock Exchange, the symbol of American superiority in the global economy, came to a screeching halt—followed by a major crash upon opening the following week. It appeared that the terrorists' objective of crippling, if not toppling, the world's greatest superpower had been achieved.

Yet, in the wake of arguably one of the worst attacks on America and American values, America is standing taller than ever—and changing with each passing day. Things that seemed so vitally important just a few short weeks before seemed trite in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. For many Americans, this event marked a return to the values of past generations.

Our heroes, recently clad in “Nike Sunday Red” on the 18<sup>th</sup> green or in bejeweled evening gowns at the Oscars, have been transformed back to America's “ordinary” citizens who (as usual) are doing extraordinary things. Old Glory, previously reserved for July 4<sup>th</sup> cookouts and Olympic triumph, now flies proudly in every neighborhood across our nation as a symbol of our renewed—and unwavering—pride in America. This tragedy also marks a return to family values, with millions of families reconnecting with the people who are really most important in their lives. Thankfully, we have also been witness to a renewed sense of civic responsibility—with blood supplies at capacity,

donations to relief efforts at staggering totals, and a multiplicity of community events aimed at coming to terms with the tragedy and the future.

More than a month removed from the tragedy and America stands strong, refusing to succumb to the terror of September 11th. Similarly, as a school community, we stand united and firm in our commitment to each other and to our beliefs. The student body has been truly remarkable in their resiliency and resolve, casting aside their own needs and wants for the benefits of others. They have raised money for the victims' families, participated in the national pledge of allegiance, sent care packages to local residents, written papers and assembled collages, and purchased this new flag pole in memory and honor of September 11, 2001, among many others signs of their character. The faculty, themselves trying to make sense of the tragedy, has shouldered the added responsibility of helping the students make sense of the senseless. Their "teachable moments" were unfairly and unthinkably linked to utter despair and crisis. They, too, are our heroes. And finally our parents, many miles from their children (many for the first time), have been amazing in their support and trust. Never before has the EHS philosophy of parent partnerships been so put to the test—and never before has it been so successful. Incredibly, ninety percent of our parents were represented over the course of this Family Weekend, despite the great distances that many had to travel. This is truly a testament to a wonderful school community and a commitment to family and family values.

The world as we knew it on September 10<sup>th</sup> is a distant memory. As time marches on I can only hope that the positive changes that emerge from this tragedy move to the forefront of our minds, as the horror of the reality fades from our memories.

God Bless America and watch over the special members of the Eagle Hill School family.

Sincerely,

Peter J. McDonald, Ed.D.  
Headmaster