

NINA MOINI: As the tragic events of 9/11 began to unfold on that Tuesday morning 25 years ago, millions of teachers and students were just starting their school days. Among them was Waseca High School social studies teacher John Hanson and his students.

JOHN HANSON: I'm in the middle of a conversation with my class in senior American government class and just get a knock on the door, and it's a colleague.

NINA MOINI: She told him something had happened and that he needed to turn on the TV.

JOHN HANSON: So it was turn it on, which as a teacher, you're taking a little risk there because I don't know what to expect and I don't know what's necessarily coming. But clearly all news of all different levels and places was covering the early events.

NINA MOINI: That was when Hanson and his students saw what was going on. And what began as just another Tuesday quickly became a day unlike any other.

JOHN HANSON: You begin to process as a teacher and I worry about my students. Is there somehow a connection that a student might have that you need to be concerned about? And so everything is just wrapping your head around all of it. And we were one of those schools that stayed in session all day.

I know a lot of schools dismissed. We did not. We kept our kids and we helped them process while processing ourselves at the same time throughout the day.

NINA MOINI: 25 years later, Hanson is again beginning a new school year. He's still teaching the same subject at the same school, but now he's teaching a generation of students born after 9/11 without any living memory of that day. This included Jack Conway, who was born two years after the tragedy and was a student of Hanson's.

Conway is studying to become a social studies teacher himself. And as we mark 25 years since 9/11, I sat down with both Hanson and Conway to ask them how they grapple with the legacy of this historical moment from two very different perspectives.

I think for folks who are younger who don't remember John, sometimes it's hard for people to even imagine a time where there wasn't social media, folks weren't able to get on their phone right away. People were really dependent on one another and on authority figures like yourself for information and perhaps for guidance. And I know they still are, obviously, but it was just different back then.

Can you describe for people who might be younger just what that was like, how information was being processed at that time, and how that made you feel in your role?

JOHN HANSON: Well, I mean, the importance is pretty significant. And in circumstances like that you can have a tendency to jump to conclusions. And so it becomes, let's hold on and let's only go with the information we have. Let's not be too quick to draw too many conclusions.

Let's take time to gather more information because it's our nature. Who did this? Why did this happen? We want information and we want it fast because we have emotion attached to it.

And I think that's one of the biggest elements of having lived through it is the idea of the emotion, not only your own emotion, but seeing the raw emotion from all kinds of different people associated with it. And the days following that element of emotion can register and linger and stick with you for a very long time, which makes the events far more memorable and more almost permanent in a way than as compared to Jack's circumstance where Jack learns about it as a historical event and the teachers do their best to try and capture that emotion.

But that's not something a student feels fresh today. It's a hard thing to do. But we do our best in the classroom today, whether it's teaching Pearl Harbor or teaching 9/11 or whatever it might be, to try and capture the significance of it, and the impact of it on people, as well as how it changes the nation.

NINA MOINI: Jack, you weren't born until after 9/11. So you don't have like, so many people in our population right now, any living memory of that day. And I think what John says is something we all universally feel, which is if you lived through something, you want people to not forget and to have a sense for what everybody really did go through, whether it is Pearl Harbor or whatever your generation or you might have lived through.

And I wonder what that was like for you learning about such a significant historical, tragic event. Do you remember your first memory of learning about it?

JACK CONWAY: Yeah. I would say my first memory of learning about it was in my seventh grade US history class. My teacher had a picture on the smart board of someone jumping from one of the Twin Towers. And he asked the class what the significance was of that picture. Why would someone do that?

And a student replied, well, they're going to die. They know they're not going to make it out of the building, so they have to make a choice. It's either you burn or you jump and die quickly.

And that was really the first moment where that stuck with me because I had never thought about that event in that way before. Because when we think about 9/11, at least my generation, the image in our head is the planes hitting the towers. And we tend to not think about the personal stories behind it and everything else attached to it, the things we normally don't think about.

NINA MOINI: And some of those details that can be harder to recall or think back on, but that are important so that people don't forget the enormity and the tragedy of something like that, and what happened. John, when you're in the classroom teaching this new generation of students who weren't alive maybe 25 years ago, how do you approach your teaching about 9/11?

JOHN HANSON: Well, I mean, you try and capture the significance of it, to try and put them in the moment as best possible by sharing some of my own memories of the day. But there are others that say, well, I have an association through family or whatever it might be. So everybody's background on it is different.

But also, as an American government teacher, I am tasked with how are we different? And one of the primary ways would say, have you flown lately? And if you've been through an airport, you know the significance of what an airport check is and security check.

And as a result of that, you say, well, when did that happen? Has it always been that way when you're in an airport? Well, one of the significant changes was made post 9/11. I mean, that's one example.

And so you do your best to try and help them. But it also was broad picture in terms of what's the feeling of a nation? How does a nation respond? And you see that sense of nationalism where it's like, I want to help. I want to do something to try and help those that were impacted by it and to show my support, whether it's patriotic support or whether it's practical support financially or other ways.

Or, in some certain circumstances people are motivated to join the military. So there's all different kinds of ways that you see evidence of a changed personality nationally. And helping them capture that, but then also seeing where's the evidence even today 25 years later, that we are different as a nation as a result of those events?

NINA MOINI: How does this still impact us today? That's another important part of teaching and remembering history. I think that's a really good point beyond just what happened on that day, how did it continue and does it continue to impact everybody?

Jack, I know you're actually studying to become a social studies teacher. John has been a mentor to you. But what all led you to choose this path?

JACK CONWAY: There were a variety of reasons why I chose this path. The first one being, I have always loved history since I was a little kid. I would have conversations with my parents about that. Just tell them facts and information, sometimes I'd annoy them, but they really got a kick out of it.

And also too I had really great teachers. I struggled with math for a long time, and almost every single math teacher I had was really patient with me and understanding, and they never made me feel like I was stupid in any way. And I'm also, I think, really good at connecting with people and connecting with others and empathizing with them.

And so I think when you combine all three of those categories, it just seem natural to me to want to go into this profession.

NINA MOINI: I wonder, John, how it makes you feel to hear that from Jack and the role that teachers play. Do you feel like as many students nowadays are interested in teaching or how have you seen that evolve?

JOHN HANSON: Well, I mean, it's very kind of Jack to say that. It's a reminder of the significant role that all educators play. And that's part of also our motivation for getting into the occupation.

NINA MOINI: No matter how much time passes or how much technology and things are available out there, educators still do have such a critical role in the development of students and where their interests might go and what interests about themselves they might explore because somebody encouraged them, or the conversation we're having about the terrible events of 9/11. Helping guide students through something like that, that becomes part of their memories for the rest of their lives as well. It's just such a critical and in a lot of ways, a very beautiful role.

Just lastly, John, what do you hope this next generation of students will come to understand or take away from the significance of 9/11?

JOHN HANSON: Each year, and granted because it's the 25th, so it's getting a little bit more attention, more than normal. But I think our generation, it's a way in which that my generation of whatever age group you put it in experienced something. So for me, my connection to better understand a significant event was when my mother told me about Pearl Harbor or other people share their memories of maybe the Kennedy assassination or the moon landing or something significant.

So that is history. But it's not just history. It's a part of our nation. It's a part of our personality. It's a part of who we are.

And when it's something that's significant, it's A, trying to grasp the impact on people's lives at the moment, but also how are we different from it? And how have we changed as a result of it? And trying to grasp that and help them better understand that a nation that experiences something together may not always feel the same way about it, but it's a shared experience and it's a powerful one, and it's going to have an impact one way or the other in a variety of different ways as you move forward.

And Jack speaks to that as he talks about how he learned about it and now the significance of it. And he'll take that with him into the classroom and do a great job. And so it's powerful. And that's why we try to give it that attention and try and bring that emotion so they can capture that for students today.

NINA MOINI: Well, John and Jack, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

JOHN HANSON: You're very welcome. Thanks for having us.

JACK CONWAY: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: That was Waseca High School teacher John Hanson and Waseca High alum, Jack Conway.