

Witnesses recall horror

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NEW YORK — John Oberle caught his usual ferry from Hoboken, N.J. to the World Trade Center, and by 8 a.m. yesterday morning, he was at his desk on the 79th floor.

He was still checking his morning e-mail when he felt the building shake. He looked out the window to see paper and debris flying. His first thought was that a helicopter had hit the neighboring tower.

"Remain calm and stay where you are," droned the public address system. Luckily, said Oberle, 42, a vice president at Fuji Bank, "Nobody paid any attention."

Remembering the bombing that killed six people and forced the evacuation of the twin towers in 1993, everyone headed for the stairwells — a move that may have saved thousands of people when two hijacked planes hit both buildings yesterday.

Oberle had reached the 60th floor when a second plane hit a few minutes after 9 a.m. Just then, Julie Davis, 27, was rushing to a friend's office on the 83d floor to drop off a forgotten cellular phone.

She glanced at her watch, and worried, "Geez, I'm late to work." Then she heard a huge boom.

"The coffee I had in my hand spilled all over my skirt," she said. People shrieked, "Oh, my God!" and ran for the elevator. Davis panicked and froze, wondering whether to look for her friend. Then she hit the stairs. A man rushed by, saying his friend had seen colleagues sucked out the window. A minute later, he fainted on the stairs.

"I was thinking we were doomed," she said. "Dozens and dozens of firefighters were running past us, telling us to stay calm and keep moving. I remember

looking into their eyes, thinking how brave they were.

"Now I bet they're all gone."

When Bradley Sweeney, executive vice president of an investment firm, emerged from the building, his black suit was entirely white with ash.

"I saw people jumping out of the building, just jumping to their deaths. Then I watched the building crumble right before my eyes. This is not real. This can't be real," he said. "The world changed today."

Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge on foot, Rachel Zimmerman, 36, assumed the smoke rising from the first tower meant an accident. "Only in New York," said one passerby.

Then came the second explosion. Everyone froze. Someone shouted, "Oh, my God, the bridge is next." And people began to run.

In Williamsburg, Brooklyn, artists gathered on studio rooftops just in time to see the towers collapse in a plume of gray smoke.

Amanda Allen, who works in the Federal Reserve building, watched as burning paper fell. She picked up a bloody business card. It belonged to Daniel Rodriguez, an American Express employee.

The night before, Dan Calista, 27, a technology consultant from Hingham, opened the blinds of his company studio in midtown Manhattan, the way he'd done every night for weeks since starting a consulting project there.

The view made him feel calm amidst the bustle of New York City.

"It gave me some perspective, and some calm about things," he said. "It makes me feel, 'Hey, work's not so bad.'"

The next morning, as Calista, walked downtown to the Port Authority building at 10th Avenue and 16th Street, a plane streaked low across the sky. Flames billowed from the World Trade Center — where he knew many col-

leagues were working on projects. What was most striking, he said, was "the glistening of the glass coming down," like Christmas tinsel.

He wondered whether to call police, then realized that was a silly impulse. The second explosion sent him fleeing to an office a few blocks further from the trade center.

Calista was walking home up Fifth Avenue, away from the towers, passing groups of people hugging and crying, and pay phones with lines three and four people deep. "Oh, no!" someone shouted, and he turned to see the last remaining tower, framed above Washington Square park, collapse into dust. Back in his apartment, the view was incomprehensible: "A gap in the sky."

Meanwhile, Davis, a lawyer, had struggled down the stairs, "I thought we would have severe burns, but I never thought the entire building would collapse." She couldn't tell what floor they were on or how much farther she had to go.

"Random strangers kept patting me on the back and putting their arms around me," she said. Finally, she made it out.

"Nothing makes sense to me today," she said.

Oberle, too, made his way out of the building and back onto a ferry. He found a pay phone and called his wife, Maria. "She was just in tears," he said.

Calista was looking for a place to give blood.

"Everything seems very superficial at this point," he said. "I can only imagine how many people passed away. Is it best to move on and go about some daily tasks tomorrow? What do we do next, and what do we do to remember those who were lost?"

Anne Barnard and Raja Mishra of the Globe Staff contributed to this report.

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