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Ripon couple describes ordeal of close call in Trade Center

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FRIDAY, SEPT. 7: 7 P.M. PDT, MODESTO -- Debbie and Paul

Gasser are celebrating their ninth wedding anniversary with a romantic dinner at Black Angus in Modesto.

Until a few months ago, the couple lived in Durango, Colo., where Paul Gasser was a police officer and Debbie Gasser was a dispatcher. He had a hip replacement last year and needed to switch careers. They moved to Ripon to be near her family.

At dinner, she gives him a leather case for his laptop computer and a matching bag for his new job as a stockbroker. He gives her a necklace with a diamond heart. They talk about their two children, the last few years, and plans for the future.

Their celebration is early -- they were married Sept. 12. But Paul Gasser, 30, is leaving in two days to complete his broker training in New York.

TUESDAY, SEPT. 11: 8:30 A.M. EDT, NEW YORK CITY -- Paul Gasser gets a break on the 61st floor of the World Trade Center's south tower. He's been in New York three days, and it's his first time in the city. He walks to the other side of the building and looks at the impressive north tower reaching for the sky.

8:45 A.M. -- Gasser is scoping out the other tower's size when a red-orange fireball shoots out of it. The fire streaks toward his building, carrying with it flaming chairs, building material and other debris. He backs into the hall. The explosion rocks him. Windows shatter in the room where he was just standing.

"I turned around and I took off. I told everyone to get out as I ran to the staircase. I yelled as loud as I could to whoever was nearby," Gasser said. "I knew I had to get out of that building."

He does not want to die there. He knows where to find the stairs from an orientation tour the day before. He is first into the stairwell. He dashes down at least 12 flights, two steps at a time, before he sees anyone else.

"When I caught up to people, I couldn't believe how calm they were. They

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were drinking their Cokes and Pepsis and walking down like it was no big deal."

He hears several say they don't know what is going on.

"There was an explosion in the other building and we need to get out of here," he told them.

The staircase now is filled with people. Gasser grows anxious. They're going too slow.

He passes the 34th floor and realizes how much farther he has to go. He reaches the bottom, but security guards will not let him and the others out the nearest doors because there is too much debris outside.

A security guard directs everyone to the exits through a mall area half underground. Someone shouts at the guard, "You need to get out of here, too."

"I won't leave until everyone makes it out," the woman said calmly.

9:03 A.M. -- Gasser steps outside. Cars and buildings are on fire. Debris is everywhere. So are New Yorkers and visitors, watching from the other side of the street.

Suddenly the howl of jet engines blocks out all other sound. Gasser looks into the sky. A plane clears the top of another high-rise and hurtles into the south tower. He stands in disbelief for a few seconds.

"Then I realized stuff was falling down on me and I had to get out, run away. It was one of those run-as-fast-as-you-can-because-you're-scared-you're-going-to-die feelings," said Gasser, who faced similar fear a few times as a policeman.

He runs from the building. People trip over debris as they flee. Panicking men knock over women. Gasser -- 6-foot-6 and 260 pounds -- gets five women on their feet as he runs.

"All the pictures and documentaries I saw on this doesn't come close to the horror that was there. The feelings were so emotional, so intense, that no one could explain it," he said.

Gasser gets stuck at the Hudson River and realizes he went in the wrong direction. He works his way back around and gets within three blocks of the World Trade Center.

He looks at the south tower, the one he had been in. He sees two women and two men jump from floors above and below where the plane crashed.

"You could see them step up on the ledge, look for a little bit, and jump. Then another person stepped up, looked around and jumped. It was just black behind them. You knew there was fire all around them. "It made me sick. I almost threw up."

He can see firefighters high up in the building, waging a fierce battle against the inferno. They are using water to carve a path through the fire.

6:55 A.M. PDT, RIPON -- Debbie Gasser, 32, hears the phone ring as she gets out of the shower in their tidy, cocoa-colored, ranch-style house in Ripon.

It's her mother, asking if she's watched television yet. Marilyn De Leon asks if her daughter knows where her husband's class is. Gasser says it's somewhere in downtown New York.

The children, 2-year-old Brandon and 6-year-old Josh, watch cartoons in their parents' bedroom. She turns on the TV in the family room and sees the first tower of the World Trade Center on fire.

Her husband has a new job with Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in Modesto. She knows the brokerage firm occupies a large section of the center.

She does not know if her husband's training is there.

Debbie sits on a futon and watches a plane hit the second World Trade Center tower. Her mother calls again. "Did you see that?" De Leon asked. Both are shaken. De Leon rushes over. At 7:20 a.m., Debbie starts calling her husband's cell phone. The lines are busy.

The children come into the kitchen for cereal. Josh, who is obsessed with fishing, wriggles a rubber worm at his mom. She stands behind them trying to watch the news.

"Mommy's really worried about Daddy because she hasn't heard from Daddy today," Gasser tells them.

"Mommy, Daddy's going to be fine," Josh said.

She takes Josh to Ripon Christian Elementary School and Brandon to preschool, and then returns to the TV, her only window on the world of her husband 3,000 miles away. The cellular lines are still busy. Gasser grows more worried. She tells herself, I'm not going to lose it.

Her sister calls, and then her mother-in-law. Gasser calls Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in Modesto. They don't have any news about him.

9:50 A.M. EDT, NEW YORK -- One block north of the towers, Paul Gasser stops and turns to look back. He figures he's safe because he's upwind of the fires.

Then he sees the south building start to collapse. He hears each floor hit the next floor as the building falls. The noise is so loud, he can't hear anyone screaming or shouting or telling people where to go. "I saw the dust coming at me. It was moving faster than anything I ever saw," he said.

Gasser runs. The dust overtakes him after three or four blocks. Hot powder scorches his lungs and temporarily blinds him. He escapes the dust in half a block and stops 10 minutes later. His legs and hip are in pain.

He's five or six blocks from the towers when he sees a firefighter rolling a stretcher past. He recognizes the uniform on the woman who lies there, her arm hanging limply off the stretcher. And then he sees her face -- it's the security guard who refused to leave her post guiding people out of the south

tower. He later hears that she has died.

Gasser continues heading back to his hotel. Lines at pay phones are 15 to 20 people long. He tries to call his wife, but all circuits are busy. He'd left his cell phone at his hotel, so more than a dozen strangers let him use their phones, but the cell lines are busy, too. He makes 35 to 40 calls walking about 100 blocks to his hotel. He has plenty of time to get angry at whomever did this.

10:30 A.M. PDT, RIPON -- Debbie Gasser is sitting on the futon and waiting to talk to her husband's boss in Modesto when a call waiting signal beeps into the line.

She hears her husband: "Hey, it's me."

"Oh, thank God," Debbie said, the tension draining. Her mother grabs her arm.

"Are you OK?" Debbie asked.

"Yeah," he said.

She floods him with questions.

He tells her that he lost his wedding ring sometime after helping a woman off the ground.

"Honey, all that matters is you're okay. We can buy another ring," Debbie said.

FRIDAY, SEPT. 14: 1:50 P.M. PDT, RIPON -- Paul Gasser is calling his wife from an airport in Philadelphia. He drove there in a rental car after spending two days trying to fly out of New York. He's standing in line, trying to get a flight home to her and the children.

Tears sting Debbie's eyes. "I haven't seen him yet."

Lilies, orchids and roses tower over their kitchen table. The flowers arrived on their anniversary. Her husband ordered them before he left. On the card, he wrote, "I love you. Let's have many more."

SATURDAY, SEPT. 15: 1:12 A.M. PDT, OAKLAND -- Paul Gasser steps off an America West flight into Oakland International Airport. A sense of safety washes through him, mixed with concern for his wife and intense joy at nearly being able to hold her again.

He sees Debbie Gasser amid a crowd in the terminal. Their eyes lock. She thinks he looks exhausted yet relieved, his face shining at the sight of her. He knows everything will be OK. They embrace for several minutes.

2:40 A.M., RIPON -- The couple walks inside the house. Paul Gasser heads into the boys' room. Brandon won't wake up when Gasser rubs his back, so his dad just leans over and kisses him.

Josh springs up at the first touch. He jumps into his father's arms and says, "Daddy, you're home!" He hugs his dad. "I love you, Daddy."

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