

Windows on the World chef Michael Lomonaco escaped 9/11 but dedicates cooking to friends he lost

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DAILY NEWS FEATURE REPORTER

Sunday, September 11th 2011



Kevin Hagen for News

Chef Michael Lomonaco in his restaurant Porter House in Manhattan.

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, chef [Michael Lomonaco](#) was heading up to his office at Windows on the World at 8:15.

Although he had an appointment at [LensCrafters](#) at noon, he stopped in the lobby of 1 World Trade to see if he could get his glasses fixed earlier.

Since 1997, Lomonaco had overseen the kitchens of Windows as well as Wild Blue and the Greatest Bar on Earth, which sat on the 106th and 107th floors of the building.

"It was a special experience for anyone I've ever spoken to," remembers Lomonaco of the restaurants. "It was memorable. It was life altering. It had something to do with the location. It was such a magical way to see [New York](#)."

That Tuesday would have been a beautiful day at Windows. Lomonaco remembers noticing the clear blue sky and the greenmarket that sat outside the [World Trade Center](#), where he often bought local produce for the restaurant.

About 30 minutes later, as he was leaving to head upstairs, Lomonaco heard what he describes as a rumble, and shortly thereafter he was evacuated from the lobby.

"It was a feeling like I've never felt before,"he remembers. "I couldn't really hear anything, but this rumble was unusual. Later I would realize it was the impact of the first plane.

"When I got out a few minutes later I could see that where Windows on the World was there was a fire. The extent of it was hard to tell, but I immediately began to take stock of who was up there working."

He was heading toward the fire exits to see if he could help when he saw the second plane hit.

"I saw it happen,"he says, incredulously. "It was really incredibly shocking, a moment I'll never forget. I wasn't watching TV, I was on the street. I was there."

"People were stunned. They were shocked, weeping. The streets were full of people who didn't know what to do, where to go or what had happened. There was such confusion, no one could believe their own eyes.

It was less than an hour later that Tower 2 collapsed, and that's when downtown began to clear out. The question everyone kept repeating was, 'What is happening?'

As Lomonaco headed north with the throngs of people running from the debris, he had another fateful moment when amid the thousands of people in the streets he bumped into his wife, who was heading downtown to find him.

"It was a miracle, really,"he remembers. The two then walked to the upper East Side, where they live.

Seventy nine of Lomonaco's colleagues were at Windows that morning.

It was the staff at Windows on the World, says Lomonaco, that made the restaurant what it was.

"As a group of people they made it a family,"the chef remembers. "There were more than 60 nations that were represented, more than three dozen different languages spoken, but everyone got along really well."

"We were open seven days a week. We never closed,"he continues. "So we got to know each other really well — 450 people is a lot, but I got to know them, some became very close friends. I respected all of them for the job they were doing, whether they were greeters or in the stewarding station washing dishes. They were an unbelievable group.

"And they were all up there just doing their jobs that day."

When Lomonaco got home on Sept. 11, his first move was to connect with as many employees as he could.

"We tried to assess who was working that day, who was lost in the building,"he says. "It took time for people to come together, to make contact with their co-workers — to try to figure out what would happen, and what was going to happen. We lost 79 co-workers that day. And the funerals and memorials began within five days."

Lomonaco and other Windows employees began to go in large groups to services, to pay tribute to their friends who perished.

On Oct. 1, they attended a memorial at the Cathedral of [Saint John](#) the Divine not just for the Windows workers, but for the additional food service workers who died in the attacks. All told, 102 people were represented, and more than 2,000 people attended the memorial.

A few days after Sept. 11, Lomonaco and some of his staff, with the help of the [Community Service Society](#), formed a nonprofit called Windows of Hope to provide aid to the families who had lost loved ones.

"There were 150 families, 250 family members who were immediately affected,"says Lomonaco. The fund provided health insurance and education funds to the food workers' families.

The organization's first and only fund-raiser, supported by 4,000 restaurants worldwide, raised \$22 million, of which two-thirds has gone to the family members.

The remaining will go toward education costs — which, Lomonaco says, is enough to cover the last of the children's college costs.

That child was born on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

"After we were able to understand what had happened, we focused on getting back to work,"says Lomonaco.

In 2002, he and about 40 people from Windows opened Noche, a multilevel midtown restaurant with Latin American influences.

"We banded together. Everyone needed their friends at that point. They needed the people who were their support system."

Noche shuttered in 2004, and Lomonaco went on to serve as a consultant for Guastavino's and continued to appear on TV on shows including "Epicurious"on the [Discovery Channel](#) and "Michael's Place"on the [Food Network](#).

But he didn't really feel at home again, he says, until he opened Porter House New York in September 2006.

"I re-created the warm convivial atmosphere that Windows had,"says Lomonaco. "A lot of my heart and soul is in here."

Looking out of Porter House's windows in the [Time Warner](#) complex above [Columbus Circle](#), it isn't lost on the chef that he has found a home in another iconic [New York City](#) location.

"This has become an unbelievable center of activity in [Manhattan](#). "Between the location, the restaurant collection [Per Se, A Voce, Bouchon], I am very lucky to have found another epicenter of New York."

And although Lomonaco is surely moving forward, it seems that Windows is never far from his thoughts.

"The thing I focus on now is how much I love what I do and how my colleagues and friends who died, died loving what they wanted to do,"he says.

"Working at Windows was something they were proud of. I've spent every day since acknowledging and dedicating the work I do to my friends who I lost on that day.

"We have an obligation to remember them and honor them and cherish their memory. Everyone who was lost that day was of equal value and equal worth. The fact that 10 years has gone by is sometimes unfathomable.

"I was born here, and like so many natives who lived through this, and the people who moved here and made it their city, it's something we won't ever forget. It will always feel fresh.

"The collective memory will keep the memory of those we lost alive."