

'When Our Teachers Told Us:' Alfred University students remember Sept. 11, 2001

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Most traditional college-age students today were in elementary or middle school on Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists aimed planes at New York's twin towers, bringing down the World Trade Center. For them, the first news, and sometimes the most poignant memory, is of being in a classroom and learning, from their teacher, what was happening. "The majority of today's college students didn't comprehend their teachers' despair until recalling the moment later in their lives," said Dan Napolitano, director of student activities at Alfred University. Napolitano teaches a two-credit course, "Drawn to Diversity," that employs community art projects to draw attention to how diverse viewpoints, lifestyles, religions, and cultures understand and react to social issues. Students are given a weekly challenge, often relating to a news story or historic event, and asked to develop a project responding to it for the next week. So it was logical that this week, students chose the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center. Today's project, "When Our Teacher Told Us," "focuses on the role of the school teacher in educating students" about events, such as the attack, Napolitano said. "In focus groups, a majority of today's college students associate their 9/11 memories with a teacher's announcement, the excitement of leaving school early, or the 'odd mood' of parents once they were home," Napolitano said. "The reaction of the teachers then, and to today's issues, such as the proposed Quran burning, leaves an indelible mark in the memories of students." Napolitano's students placed five school desks, each marked with a sign denoting a grade-level, from fourth-eighth, representing the grade-levels most of AU's students were in on Sept. 11, 2001, in the center of campus, near the King Alfred statue. Each desk also has a composition book on it, and students were invited to write what they remember their teacher told them as the events of Sept. 11, 2001, unfolded. While Wednesday's class discussed plans by Pastor Terry Jones of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, FL, to burn the Quran on Saturday, the anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks, students decided to proceed with their project as planned, addressing the "value of education to overcome ignorance," rather than a more specific response to Jones' threats. In response to faculty and staff concerns about AU's Muslim students, particularly in light of Jones' planned actions, counselors are being made available to students who may be affected.