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Trade Center warning baffles police

An 'urban myth' turns out to be true — but what does it mean?

By Jonathan Alter
SPECIAL TO MSNBC

NEW YORK, Oct. 12 — I went to Brooklyn this week in search of an “urban myth” about the World Trade Center attacks. What I came back with was no longer a myth — it was cold, chilling fact. But it didn't clear anything up for me; that the “myth” was true only made matters murkier. Was word of the attacks on the street beforehand? I wanted to find out.



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YOU KNOW the “myths” I mean. Maybe you heard the one about the “friend of a “friend” who was stood up by her Afghan boyfriend, who then e-mailed her on September 10 not to get on a commercial airliner the next day or go out to the malls on Halloween. The FBI said yesterday it was not a “credible threat.”

The story I was looking for had circulated less widely and in more general form. It recounted the story of a kid who bragged around school before the attacks that the World Trade Center was going to be destroyed. On October 11, an aggressive young reporter for The JournalNews of Westchester, N.Y. — Jeffrey Scott Shapiro — published a article that tracked the story down to New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn. Shapiro identified a teacher who witnessed a freshman in her

class saying: “Do you see those two buildings? They won’t be standing there next week.”

“This is the only case we know of where someone said the World Trade Center was coming down prior to it happening,” a police source told me. I had to take a closer look.

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SCHOOL OF RICH DIVERSITY

New Utrecht High School in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, is a wonderful melting pot. The day I visited, two girls — one Chinese, one Russian — sat poring over SAT prep material near polling booths set up for the the New York City mayoral runoff. I heard at least three languages spoken I couldn’t even begin to identify. The school offers courses in Urdu because 116 students come from Pakistan.

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Outside the school, Bensonhurst has changed immeasurably since the days of black versus white racial confrontation in the 1980s. Immigrants, many of whom speak little English, far outnumber native speakers on the streets. The restaurants and shops offer food from dozens of countries.

Since September 11, hundreds of leads have poured into the local police precinct, but incidents have been few. Someone tried to throw a Molotov cocktail into a mosque, but it hit a canopy pole instead of the building and did little damage. Reports that Arab immigrants had been cheering at a local supermarket after the towers collapsed (a frequent rumor around the country) were investigated and turned out to be false. So were the dozens of rumors of Arabs mysteriously disappearing from their homes just before the attack.

The police say they have been working closely with two of the three mosques in the area. One is run by an

Irishman who converted to Islam and became an imam; the other by a baggage handler for American Airlines. This latter fact, not surprisingly, aroused a great interest at first. His friends in the community thought he might lose his job. But the imam is backed by the airline and remains close to the police in the area. “I feel sorry for the dark-skinned people in the neighborhood,” says a police officer. “They’ve done nothing wrong and most have been cooperative.”

STRANGER THAN FICTION

It’s that context that makes the story of the Pakistani freshman so strange. I can’t tell you who filled in the details for me; the heat is on and the FBI is particularly jumpy. Both teacher and student have, with the help of the school, successfully ducked all efforts to contact them. But here’s what I’ve pieced together:

On September 6 — five days before the attack — Antoinette DiLorenzo, who teaches English as a second language to a class of Pakistani immigrants, led a class discussion about world events. She asked a freshman (his name has been withheld): “What are you looking at?” The youth was peering out the third floor window toward lower Manhattan. After he made the remark about the World Trade center not being there next week, the teacher didn’t immediately think much of it, though it stuck in her mind.

On September 11, school was canceled after the attack and again the following day. On Thursday September 13, a clearly agitated DiLorenzo, saying she had been afraid to come forward, reported the incident to the principal’s office. “It scared the hell out of everyone,” according to a source at the school.



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The police and FBI were alerted and twelve NYPD officers entered the school and secured DiLorenzo’s classroom for three hours, locking the doors with the students inside. While the students were brought lunch and a movie and told to be calm, the youth in question and his older brother, a sophomore, were taken to be interrogated by the FBI, stationed at the police precinct nearby.

DiLorenzo, the key to the believability of this story, was also questioned. She was described by school officials as having a superb and unblemished record in the New York school system. A police source described her as “100 percent credible.”

Moreover, according to police, the youth confirmed having made the September 6 statement about the towers. At the moment he did so, his older brother elbowed him, said he had been “kidding,” and the youth in question agreed. The younger brother seemed upset and said he was “having a bad day.” When asked why, he said that his father was supposed to come back from Pakistan that day. Further details of the interrogation are unclear, in part because the FBI is not discussing it.

Because of the suspension of air travel, it took the father a few days to return. About a week after September 11, the father visited the school and angrily asked why his sons had been interrogated by the authorities. He said that his family’s constitutional rights had been violated.

Having done nothing wrong beyond spreading a rumor that turned out to be true, the student was returned to his classroom. He remains in the school.

The FBI placed the boy’s family under surveillance but, according to sources, does not see a connection to the plot to blow up the towers. The case remains under investigation, but with thousands of leads, it doesn’t appear to be going anywhere.

TRUTH NO ANSWER

So what to make of all of this? There is no doubt in my mind that the story is true. But what does it mean?

There are only three possibilities: 1.) the youth was clairvoyant; 2.) the youth, knowing about the 1993 bombing, was just venting anger in a particularly timely way; 3.) word of the attack on the World Trade Center was rumored in his family or neighborhood and he heard about it.

Investigators don’t know what to believe. On the one hand, one argues, “This is too much of a coincidence that the kid said this” before September 11. On the other hand, scores of tips in the area have not checked out when pursued by police. One police officer says he would need a couple of other similarly confirmed cases to conclude definitively that word was on the street.

In the meantime, police and school authorities in Brooklyn are looking ahead. “It’s creepy,” one told me before I got on the subway to go back to the office. “But what the hell are we going to do about it now?”

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