The Couric Effect: Katie Couric
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[Start of recorded material]

00:00:00  Katie Couric:  I remember the most emotionally searing time was, for me, were those days following 9/11, with all the signs and the Xeroxed pictures that were affixed on the chain-link fences. Where there was so much desperation to find people.

[Music plays]

00:00:22  Jenny Pachucki:  From the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, this is Our City. Our Story. a series where New Yorkers talk about their city, what it means to be a New Yorker, and how September 11th changed that. I'm Jenny Pachucki.

Katie Couric is an award-winning journalist, a former talk show host, mom, and cancer activist. Now Yahoo's global news anchor, she was the first woman to serve as a sole anchor of a network evening news program at CBS.
For 15 years, she greeted millions of Americans on NBC’s Today Show, which broadcasts from Rockefeller Center in Midtown Manhattan.

On September 11th, Katie and her Today Show host Matt Lauer were on air live, working to inform the nation about what was happening as they grappled with the same disbelief as their viewers.

Years before that historic moment, the Virginia native had moved to New York to work on the show, and it would take her some time before she would begin to think of the city as home.

Do you remember that moment, when you felt, "Okay, I’ve got my New York chops"?

Katie Couric: Not really. I think it was a slow assimilation to the city. I remember when I first moved up here, I had a brand-new baby daughter, and I remember walking on Broadway.

We lived on the Upper West Side. And I thought, “God, how can I be walking a baby in a stroller on this filthy street?” [Laughs] Because it just felt -- it just didn’t feel right.

But slowly but surely, I got used to the filthy streets, and used to raising children in New York City. And I’ve
loved raising my kids here. I can’t think of any place else where I would raise my kids.

But there was not one particular moment where I felt like, “Okay, my New York bona fides have been established.”

I think walking into Rockefeller Center is the quintessential New York experience. Seeing the murals, just seeing the majesty of that building, understanding the history, having the ice skating rink, and seeing Prometheus and all the things that are part and parcel of that experience in Midtown Manhattan.

I think I really felt sort of like a modern version of Mary Tyler Moore, but I wasn’t in Minneapolis; I was in New York City.

It was very, very exciting, because in a way I felt as if I was an ambassador for New York. And there were so many people from out of town who would congregate on the plaza, who would come watch the Today Show after we started the outside portion.

Because when I did it with Bryant Gumbel initially, we didn’t have that outside studio, if you will. And so it was really fun. I felt like this was a tourist destination for people. I think many people included it in what they were going to do that day in New York. And I felt
a responsibility to be welcoming and sort of be the hospitality center of the city.

Jenny Pachucki: How did you grow into that role? How did you become comfortable doing that?

Katie Couric: I mean I’m pretty comfortable -- I was pretty comfortable from the get-go. I think I’m just -- I’m ridiculously friendly and outgoing. This is sort of my M.O.; ergo, the description of “perky,” which sort of bugged me through my early years in television. But I think that I’ve just always been super outgoing.

I used to go to football games when I was little, and I’d memorize people's pictures in my sister’s yearbook and go up and say, "Hi. You’re Barbie McLaughlin, aren’t you? I recognize you from my sister’s yearbook." So I never had to grow into that role; I always felt very comfortable being kind of warm and welcoming.

Jenny Pachucki: Which aren’t necessarily -- I mean New Yorkers are great, but those aren’t necessarily qualities that are associated with your stereotypical New Yorker.

Katie Couric: No, they can be tough, and avoid eye contact. But I have had such a different experience. And I think partially because doing the Today Show and having people recognize you -- this is sort of the
positive side of being a public figure. You feel like you live in a small town. You know, I used to feel like I am actually living in Mayberry instead of New York, because people would be like, “Hey, Katie!” or, “How you doing?” or, “Hi.”

00:05:03 So I felt like the city was just ridiculously friendly. And I think I got a very different perspective being on the Today Show and having people recognize me.

Jenny Pachucki: On the morning of the terror attacks, Katie was on the set of the Today Show. Matt Lauer cut his interview short to let viewers know that there was a story breaking at the World Trade Center.

00:05:26 When the show returned after a commercial break, Katie and Matt tried to sort out the facts as a live shot revealed a large, gaping hole and smoke pouring from the North Tower. Snippets of this on-air moment are part of the 9/11 Memorial Museum’s historical exhibition.

Katie Couric: Well, it started like almost every other day did, when I was anchoring the Today Show. I went to work early. I remember exactly what I was wearing. I was wearing a black shirtdress with white stitching.

00:05:56 It was one of those very transitional, early fall days where you could feel fall in the air. The sky was so
blue; it was almost Crayola crayon blue. Cerulean, I would say specifically.

And I think I had been in Boston doing an interview with Julia Child, and she taught me something about making a pound cake.

She was very sweet, but she was a little cranky, and she taught me how to cut a pound cake and put Cool Whip in it, which I didn’t think was that instructive, to be honest with you. I was hoping she was going to teach me coq au vin or something more exotic.

But I was in her kitchen, and I was excited to do that. And I came home, and got up, and did the Today Show.

And it was a pretty typical day, until around 8:45 -- wasn't it eight --?

Jenny Pachucki: Eight forty-six, exactly.

Katie Couric: Eight forty-six exactly. I was pretty much done for the day, and Matt was interviewing somebody about a book he had written about Howard Hughes, a biography of Howard Hughes. And I was kind of half paying attention.
I was in the back, because when you weren’t on, doing an interview, they had kind of a work area where the writers were, and producers, and you could talk and relax and kind of do other things. And I would always commandeer [Ann Curry’s] computer and write funny messages to people as if it was from her, which she really didn’t appreciate. But anyway, I was hanging out, doing my thing, and suddenly I remember looking up at the monitor, at the TV screen, and seeing the World Trade Center was on fire.

All those flames coming out. It’s funny how magical thinking takes over. I think I thought, “Wow. A small plane must have crashed into the World Trade Center. Maybe a pilot had a heart attack. Thank goodness it’s before 9:00; hopefully not many people are at work yet.” And almost instantly I started to rationalize what was going on.

And then Matt cut his interview short, and I went in, and we spent the rest of the day -- and of course several days and weeks afterwards -- covering this unbelievable, catastrophic, heartbreaking event.

Jenny Pachucki: Do you remember the moment of realization that this wasn’t an accidental plane crash, a heart attack?

Katie Couric: Matt brought it up.
You know, it’s funny, because my mind went back to the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, when that had been bombed. And I was so cognizant of the fact that almost immediately people were talking about terrorism, Islamic extremism, in that case -- which of course we learned later it was homegrown terrorism.

So I was very reticent to make that declaration. And I remember Matt did, and part of me was worried. Part of me was worried for a nanosecond that -- I just wanted to really make sure, because the media was so criticized for jumping to that conclusion. You were probably like two.

Jenny Pachucki: That’s sweet.

[Laughter]

Katie Couric: But, you know, it was something I just wanted to be cautious about.

But Matt said clearly, "This is an act of terror."

Jenny Pachucki: You know what’s so interesting and evocative about watching that footage is it was a moment where we look to the media. We respect them to tell us what’s happening in these events, and it was this moment where you didn’t know. Nobody knew. We were all sort of figuring it out together.
In those moments, in that moment, what did you feel as it pertains to the sense of responsibility to your audience?

Katie Couric: Oh my gosh. I have never felt such a tremendous responsibility, I think, at any moment of my career. It was so confusing. No one understood what was going on. No one knew when it was going to stop.

And then we’d get a piece of wire copy handed to us about a plane in Pennsylvania, and the Pentagon, and all these things. And I felt like I was in the midst of War of the Worlds. You just didn't know when it was going to stop. You didn’t know the extent of what was happening.

So first and foremost, it was my fervent desire to maintain calm, and to not be as panic-stricken as I felt. I was pretty much unglued by the whole thing. My daughters were in school, so I felt that they were safe. This guy that I had been dating at the time was on a flight from Boston to Los Angeles.

My parents don’t live far from the Pentagon, so I was really worried about them. And of course, not to mention all the people in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and on that plane that crashed in Shanksville. So it was really overwhelming, the amount
of upset and concern and worry and uncertainty, and it was just a very, very scary -- it was terrifying.

00:11:45 Jenny Pachucki: Did you have a moment when you got home to decompress and process everything?

Katie Couric: I don’t think I ever processed it. I remember getting home, and having my girls home, and what I remember most is the smell of burnt plastic and wires, like the smell that comes from an electrical fire.

00:12:09 I lived -- and still live -- way up on the Upper East Side, and the fact that it was just the stench of these buildings so far away just pervaded the atmosphere around my apartment. I remember people walking around with candles, and I think I was walking around with candles.

00:12:32 And I was just trying to figure it out, and trying to process what had just happened. It was very, very difficult to process.

Jenny Pachucki: A lot of New Yorkers talk about that time as a moment when New York City came together, a moment when New York City felt like a small town. Do you have memories where you relate to that feeling?

Katie Couric: I think neighborhoods -- everybody was out on the street, in front of their apartments.
I think, quite frankly, everyone was pretty dazed and confused. I was really frightened for the children in my daughters’ school, wondering if any of their parents had been killed.

Jenny Pachucki: Do you remember what you said to your girls?

Katie Couric: I don’t. I wish I had written that down. I had this wonderful nanny who had to walk home, because she was taking classes -- or she might have been downtown.

But she was walking back, and she went and got Ellie and Carrie. A lot of parents went and got their kids out of school early, and I thought, “Gosh, the safest place my kids could be is school, with all these loving adults.” So I felt really comfortable about that. I think I probably talked to them, and said, “Gosh, this is a really sad time. Someone has attacked the World Trade Center.”

But I’m sure I didn’t want to scare them too much, either. You know, I’m trying to think of how old my kids were. Ellie was probably like nine, and Carrie was just five. So I had to be careful. And, you know, they had already lived through the trauma of losing their father to cancer.
But I think I just probably made sure that they were okay, and that we were going to be okay. But it did kind of make you lose your innocence, and make you think, "Gosh, what if? What if something else happens? What is our escape plan?" I thought about that a lot. How do we get out? How do we find each other?

I think for the first time, in that process of losing your innocence, it made New Yorkers think, "What if this were to happen again? How am I going to keep my family safe?"

Jenny Pachucki: Katie's tenacity in covering the news is perhaps rivaled only by her commitment to cancer awareness. The disease claimed the life of her husband, Jay Monahan, in 1998, and a few years later her sister, Virginia State Senator Emily Couric, a little over a month after 9/11.

After her husband's death, Katie underwent a live, on-air colonoscopy on the Today Show in March of 2000 as a part of a series promoting colon cancer awareness and encouraging screenings. According to research by the University of Michigan, this would lead to an increase in colonoscopies performed across the country. The researchers called it the Couric Effect.

You know, a few years earlier you had lost your husband to cancer, and all of a sudden had assumed the identity of a widow and having two girls to think
about. What was it like for you to suddenly be pulled into a world, now -- and especially a city that’s really struggling with the idea of grief and loss -- and do you think that you approached the way you thought about the event, or the way that you told stories or talked to people after the fact, with a sense of empathy or specific personal viewpoint on it?

00:16:15 Katie Couric: I think I’ve always been quite an empathetic person. It just sort of is part of my DNA. But I think it was probably more profoundly affecting to see other people going through loss. I think it was a little different because it was this sudden, wrenching loss that happened so quickly, without any kind of warning.

00:16:48 I mean loss is loss, but I think there are different experiences that accompany different kinds of loss. So I think I could relate to people who suddenly found themselves without a partner, or parents who couldn’t find children.

00:17:10 I remember the most emotionally searing time was, for me, were those days following 9/11, with all the signs and the Xeroxed pictures that were affixed on the chain-link fences. Where there was so much desperation to find people.
That feeling, and that hope mixed with despair, and I think that was one of the most heartbreaking things for me to cover, because you just knew -- and those hospitals that were all empty, that were ready to take in people, to help them. I remember talking to doctors who said, “Nobody showed up.”

I mean some people did, but very few. They were ready to accept all these individuals. So I think that just ripped my heart out.

Jenny Pachucki: I’ve read a few beautiful pieces that you have written throughout the years on the anniversaries, and I know that you covered the 10-year anniversary and the opening of the memorial. What are some of your thoughts about how New York City has rebounded, collectively as New Yorkers and also the changes in the physical landscape and the site?

Katie Couric: I mean I think the memorial is beautiful. I really think it’s such a tribute. But it’s also still a scar. I guess you think about a terrible beauty, an oxymoron, you know, from Yeats. And I think it’s a beautiful memorial, but it just breaks my heart every time I see it.

It just reminds me of all those souls, and all that unmet potential. And I think the 9/11 museum is beautiful, too. I went there with my daughter for the first time not
too long ago. And it's emotionally draining. And huge. And --

Jenny Pachucki: Well, you’re a significant part in it.

Katie Couric: Well, yeah. That one room where -- yeah.

00:19:25 It’s kind of interesting to hear my own voice sort of narrate what was going on in that one part of the exhibit.

Jenny Pachucki: To become a part of history, and see yourself in a history museum.

Katie Couric: Yeah, I mean -- you know, listen. I hope I did a good job communicating to people what was going on.

00:19:48 It's an honor to be in that museum, but it’s also a reminder of a terrible, terrible event that changed the world forever. So I always feel quite mixed when I go there, because I think of all the relatives and the family members, and I can’t imagine it gives them a lot of solace. Maybe it does. But I can’t imagine.

00:20:17 It just reopens all those scars and all that grief that never really leaves. You know, I've done enough stories about this that there is never quote-unquote closure. And so it’s just a constantly, I think, fluctuating
feeling of forgetting and remembering, and feeling better and feeling worse, and longing and living.

00:20:47 Jenny Pachucki: With the approach of the 15-year anniversary of 9/11, and given her experience in reporting on the attacks and news related to them since, I was curious to know how she viewed our city, our world, and her place in history all these years later.

Katie Couric: Well, I think I, too, and the rest of the world, experienced a loss of innocence that has only increased.

00:21:09 The kind of anxiety and trepidation has probably increased over time, even though I think we forget about it and compartmentalize and put it away and go on with our lives. And the resilience of the city and of New Yorkers in general is inspiring, but I still think the world feels a little scarier, and a little more unsafe, and unpredictable.

00:21:39 I think that the result of that is that you just become more appreciative of life. It’s kind of like when you feel good, and you never say, “I feel good; this is so nice.” But then, when you feel bad, it’s like, “Why didn’t I appreciate when I felt well?”

00:21:58 So I think that I try to appreciate when it’s a beautiful day, and everyone seems to be doing okay, and the
city is operating, and there is no catastrophic event, and I appreciate normalcy.

00:22:22 And I think I can take a moment and say, "This is a good day because nothing bad has happened."

[Music plays]

Jenny Pachucki: From the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, this is Our City. Our Story. I'm Jenny Pachucki, series host, writer, and producer. This episode, written by Michael Frazier, concludes the first season of Our City. Our Story, but we will be back with another season, bringing you more stories of New Yorkers from every walk of life.

00:22:51 If you miss any of this season’s episodes, you can find the series on iTunes and at 911memorial.org, and listen to me talk with New Yorkers such as Robert DeNiro and David Dunlap. Writers for Our City. Our Story. include Elizabeth Bistrow, Carl Cricco, Michael Frazier, and myself. We also handle the research, fact checking, and editing. Thanks to everybody who worked on the show this season.

00:23:16 Web development and social media support come from Hannah Coffman, Angela Sheridan, and Maria Maiurro. Shanell Bryan is behind the art and creative for the show. Our City. Our Story. is brought to you by the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, the
nonprofit institution that operates the memorial and museum at the World Trade Center.

00:23:35 Before I sign off, I want to mention that Katie Couric has recently launched her own podcast called "Katie Couric" on the Earwolf Network. It features unscripted conversations with some of the biggest names in news, pop culture, and politics. Stream or download it now for free on iTunes, Stitcher, and SoundCloud.

[End of recorded material]