New Oregon Office of Emergency Management (OEM) Director Andrew Phelps was working as an actor in New York City when he received a call from his girlfriend on Sept. 11, 2001 describing the ominous fireball she had just seen. While observing the scene from the roof of his East Village Apartment, Phelps realized one of New York City’s iconic twin towers was on fire.

When Phelps saw a second plane flying toward the fire he said he thought maybe it was coming to help. However, as the plane got closer and the wings began to tilt, Phelps said he remembers trying to will the plane to miss the building during a very surreal experience.

Phelps and his girlfriend spent most of the morning atop their apartment with a view of the terrible scene, he explained. When they saw objects flying from the tower, Phelps said he grabbed a neighbor’s binoculars to take a closer look, only to realize the objects were people. That fateful moment had a profound effect, changing his path in life, Phelps said.

“I wanted to donate blood or do something like move pallets for the Salvation Army,” Phelps explained. “I just wanted to do something, anything to help.”

Phelps remembers catching a ride to the scene with a group of construction workers two days after the attacks with gloves, goggles and a hard hat, but feeling helpless about his efforts on the rubble pile moving buckets of debris by hand. That is when Phelps said he decided that next time something happened like 9/11 he would be in a position to do something to help. He said it was that tragic experience that inspired a career in emergency management.

Shortly after, Phelps helped start the first FEMA sponsored Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) in New York City.

“When we started, we thought it was a good idea; and now I am proud to say there are more than 50 CERT Teams in that city,” said Phelps.

Phelps volunteered as a fire fighter, and in many other roles, to absorb and learn as much as he could about emergency management and response. He continued the development of a budding career in emergency management by graduating with honors from John Jay College in New York City with a degree in Public
Administration/Emergency Management and Planning before receiving a Master of Arts in Security Studies from the Naval Postgraduate School’s Center for Homeland Defense and Security—where he was also class president.

“With volunteering and school I was trying to find anything to get my foot in the door,” he added.

Phelps got his foot in the door as the Local Preparedness Program Manager with the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management before becoming Director of Emergency Management for the City of Santa Fe, N.M., where he was also a volunteer firefighter with the Santa Fe County Fire Department.

“Andrew Phelps has been a great asset for the City of Santa Fe and the State of New Mexico,” said Santa Fe City Manager Brian Snyder. “He has a great understanding of perspectives: of emergency responders, of elected officials, and of the public in general.”

Santa Fe Fire Chief Erik Litzenberg added that Phelps has a rich skill set perfect for emergency management. “I’m sure we will miss what he brought to our team in the City of Santa Fe, and am confident that he will thrive as an asset for the State of Oregon,” stated Litzenberg.

Previous OEM Director Dave Stuckey, who is now Deputy Director of the Oregon Military Department, said he is very pleased Andrew has joined the team.

“He has a very strong background in multiple levels of emergency management and public safety,” Stuckey explained. “His track record of working with partners and stakeholders will prove vital as he leads OEM in the future.”

As Phelps leads Oregon’s Office of Emergency Management, it will not only be his background and track record that drive him toward success, but also a passion and motivation to help people through the profession of emergency management that stems from the experience on 9/11 that changed him forever.

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