# One day in Taj Hotel

# Mumbai terror attack survivor: I’m thankful each and every day

**Michael Pollack survived the 2008 terror attack on the Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai, India.**

Back in his early 30s, Michael Pollack was your typical finance guy.

“I made a bunch of money,” the now-42-year-old tells The Post. The Upper West Sider enjoyed a cushy, senior-level job at a hedge fund called Glenhill Capital, and remembers himself as a cash-obsessed workaholic: “I was narrowly focused on wealth accumulation.”

But all of that changed after Nov. 26, 2008, when Pollack found himself running for his life during a devastating terror siege in Mumbai, India, at the hands of Pakistani terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Pollack’s wife, Anjali, grew up in Mumbai, and the couple was in town visiting her family. That Wednesday night, they decided to leave their two young kids with Anjali’s parents, and set off for a date night at the opulent Taj Mahal Palace hotel, where the couple had wed four years earlier. They were sipping pre-dinner drinks at the hotel’s Harbour Bar at when gunshots rang out. Four men with AK-47s had just stormed into the hotel.

Terrified, the Pollacks tried, unsuccessfully, to smash the bar’s windows to escape onto the streets. They were rescued by hotel staffers, who quickly ushered them into the kitchen and barricaded the door — as the shooters tried to break it down.

“They were literally less than a foot from me with the rifle butts trying to break through the door,” says Pollack.

To move them farther away from the danger, a chef, Vijay Banja, whisked the couple into a members-only area called the Chambers. “Had Vijay not moved us, we’d be killed,” says Pollack. When he thanked the chef for saving him, he says Banja replied, “ ‘If I have to die, I’ll die before you.’ And then he was dead three hours later.”

More lives were lost during the next several hours of the attack, which Pollack describes as a “mad scramble.” At one point, he and his wife split up, because they were terrified that they would die together, leaving their kids orphaned. Pollack remembers holding a hotel staffer who was shot in the stomach, and carrying him down a stairwell as he died.

At 10 a.m., Mumbai commandos known as Black Cats, and equivalent to a SWAT team, found the Pollacks and brought them to safety.

In the days that followed, the couple learned that 31 people were killed inside the hotel during the attack — including 12 hotel staffers.

Pollack remembers being wracked with grief — and guilt.

“Having Vijay and the rest of the staff die . . . [I thought, I had to] try to give something back,” he says.

A few days later, he and his family flew home — and Pollack promptly quit his hedge fund job, because, as he puts it, “I had a debt to repay.”

He reached out to Banja’s widow, Fareda, to share how grateful he was for her husband’s heroism, and immediately started taking a stronger role in family activities. “I prioritized day care — I did all the stuff that nannies or moms would traditionally do with my kids, taking them to gym and music classes, all that enrichment stuff,” he says. “Time became precious. I didn’t want to miss those little moments.”

As he spent more time with his kids, and battled flashes of PTSD from the attack, Pollack was struggling with existential quandaries as well. Instead of obsessing over dollar signs, he found himself newly consumed with what it meant to do good. “I wanted to better understand the world,” he says.

He decided to focus on a more fulfilling career: shaping young minds. His business experience qualified him to teach at NYU Stern, where he’s since taught courses in ethics and entrepreneurship for the past nine years.

“I really press my students in my entrepreneurship class to get over their fears and really do something,” says Pollack. “In ethical philosophy, I tell them to contemplate owning their time and not living their parents’ dreams, but living their own.”

Outside the classroom, he also decided to donate his resources — which, after years in finance, were considerable — to helping others.

“I was blessed with a lot of latent power in the world, wealth,” he says. “So it felt incumbent upon me to do something pro-social with that wealth — [something that] people who died could be proud of.” He and his family set up a foundation in their name, which promotes education in the US and India. He also became a chairman of the US board for Educate Girls, an NGO that helps educate children across India.

“I do it, and my other work, all with the knowledge that without the sacrifice of the staff at the Taj I wouldn’t be here,” says Pollack.

He says there’s “no way” he’d be living the life he does without those attacks, and that he’s grateful to have had the chance to better himself as a person.

“Acute trauma never heals — you can only channel it,” says Pollack. “It’s like having a field of vision that gets broadened.

“I was a 30-year-old kid trying to make money playing a highly intense and highly competitive game . . . and today, I feel that I need to be thankful for each and every day that I have.”