

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2002

SPORTS

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EPA cleanup leaves woman in the dust

From the windows of Ilona Kloupte's condominium apartment in Battery Park City, you can see the spot a few blocks away where the twin towers once stood.

Some books and computer disks, all covered with a thin film of gray dust, lay on a desk yesterday in a spare bedroom. "The Joys of Yiddish" is the title of one book. "The Art of Meditation" is another.

Before Sept. 11, Kloupte used the room as an office.

Now it looks like a musty storage room. Most of her belongings are packed away in boxes, and an old sofa in packing cardboard was standing on its side in a corner.

The same film of dust could be found on the kitchen counter, on the window sills, on the dressers in the main bedroom, on every surface in the apartment.

A few days after the towers collapsed, Kloupte returned to her home and tried to clean up the dust and debris. It was more than 2 inches deep back then, she says.

She followed the advice of government health officials. She used a mop and a pail that the Red Cross supplied.

A few days later, she came down with respiratory problems, nosebleeds and rashes all over her skin. Her doctor ordered her out of the apartment.

Since the government said the air and dust were safe, she decided to have independent testing done, even if only a thin film of dust was left.

Those tests were done in February and April, according to Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan), who called a press conference yesterday with Kloupte.

Those tests showed dangerous levels of asbestos — above the 1% threshold that normally triggers professional decontamination. The tests also found elevated levels of hazardous heavy metals such as cadmium, chromium manganese and zinc.

Fourteen months later, Kloupte still has not returned to her home. She has bounced from one temporary shelter to another with Red Cross help.

In May, she learned that the Environmental Protection

Agency had finally decided to launch a new program to clean up residential apartments below Canal St. She applied immediately for the program. In September, EPA's private contractors came around to do a visual inspection of her apartment.

"They looked at me and told me there was no serious dust here," Kloupte says. They told her she would get only a "Scope A" cleanup, the less stringent type of dust removal.

EPA spokeswoman Mary Mears disputed that yesterday.

"I don't know what the contractors told her," Mears said. "But EPA makes the final decision, and our onsite coordinator saw this apartment. It has visible dust and qualifies for a Scope B cleanup."

The more stringent Scope B method means workers must use protective equipment and seal the apartment during the cleanup.

To Nadler and Kloupte, whether the cleanup is A or B doesn't matter. The key fact is that Kloupte's own testing has found high levels of several contaminants.

"Our cleanup methods will be effective in cleaning up not just asbestos, but also heavy metals and other contaminants," Mears said yesterday.

If Kloupte had followed EPA's instructions, she would have moved back to her home in October or November

2001. She would have ended up breathing the contaminated dust for more than a year. Nadler fears that thousands of downtown residents and office workers have done just that.

And there's another problem.

Even if the EPA cleans Kloupte's apartment thoroughly, what will happen if the apartment below her or the one above her remains contaminated? Won't the building's central air conditioning and heating units spread her neighbors' dust to her apartment?

That's why Nadler and environmental activists are furious at the EPA. One year after the collapse of the twin towers, the agency responsible for cleaning up WTC contamination is still dragging its feet.

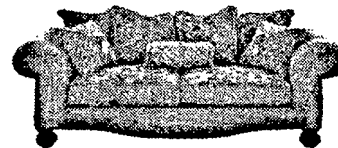
"I've lost my job, I lost my home and I lost my health," Kloupte said yesterday. "They should do the job right."

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