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NEW YORK POST

9/11 STUDY SHOCK

By CARL CAMPANILE

March 12, 2007 -- A crumpled white Oxford shirt left in a messenger bag for more than five years holds a bit of good news for Sept. 11 survivors caught in the massive dust cloud: The air was not as poisonous as previously believed.

At least for those who immediately evacuated, an environmental analysis conducted for Esquire magazine has found.

Preserved samples from the tested shirt show that two-thirds of the debris from the collapse of the South Tower was relatively harmless gypsum from drywall.

The other third was pulverized concrete and gravel - caustic materials that caused choking, coughing and sinus problems.

Importantly, the material tested showed little or no traces of lead and other toxic metals that were found in and around the pile from burning fires and from debris on the floors of surrounding buildings, said University of California at Davis scientist Thomas Cahill, who conducted the study for Esquire.

The shirt and messenger bag belong to Eric Gillin, now an editor of the magazine's Web site who worked at 14 Wall Street on Sept. 11, 2001. He was one of an estimated 5,000 people in the vicinity who fled after the first plane crashed into the South Tower.

"The shirt was a godsend. There was untouched fine dust on the shirt. It was an uncontaminated sample of the dust people were breathing after the South Tower collapsed," said Cahill. "I'm so glad to give New York good news for once. The tests showed the plume was less harmful than we thought. Most of the plume was harmless drywall. There were no hazardous materials," he said.

Cahill did say the ground-down concrete and gravel swallowed and inhaled was a health problem, but mostly a short-term irritant rather than a long-term issue.

"It's not a free ride, but it's three times better than we thought," Cahill said.

For certain, other experts and health advocates will question Cahill's findings. The study doesn't taken into account other pollutants - such as the jet fuel from the planes.

A Post analysis last year found that a preserved shirt worn by a Ground Zero volunteer, who worked at the site immediately after the attack, was loaded with asbestos.

Cahill's study of the burning pile where responders worked found a toxic stew of metal, ground glass and incinerated computers. The results were far worse than what the Environmental Protection Agency reported.

He said there are reasons for the differing results from the initial plume and the pile.

The materials he tested from the Oxford shirt were very fine particles, whereas the more toxic materials found at the site or in buildings were heavier and settled on the ground.