

What Could Go Wrong? It's His Job to Know

By RANDY KENNEDY

JERRY HAUER, to put it bluntly, likes guts. Meaning viscera, innards, the stuff things are made of.

There is one story he tells in which this fascination is quite literal (more on that later.) But another illustration, a bit more metaphorical, is hard to miss when you walk into his office on the 23d floor of 7 World Trade Center, otherwise known as "the bunker," the \$13 million bulletproof, hurricane-proof, blackout-proof emergency crisis center opened by the city last month.

Mr. Hauer's office looks nothing like a bunker. It has comfortable chairs and picture windows that frame the Woolworth Building. But in one corner there is also a big stack of mismatched bricks that attests to the unusual function of this office and the unusual fascinations of its holder.

As the city's chief emergency manager, Mr. Hauer oversees the response to building collapses, of which there have been no shortage over the last three years. And as he has sifted through piles of rubble, he has made it a point to squirrel away a chunk of each disaster. He has a brick from 540 Madison (office tower; partial facade collapse, Dec. 7, 1997), one from the entrance to the Selwyn Theater (collapsed Dec. 30, 1997) and from an apartment building at 172 Stanton Street (partial collapse; demolished Jan. 24, 1998). There's also a piece of steel about the size of a slice of bread, a cross section of the beam that fell from the upper deck of Yankee Stadium on April 13, 1998, forcing it to close.

When he found out someone was about to put the beam in a Dumpster, he almost lost his temper. "I said, 'Don't throw it away! That was two weeks of my life.'" Those weeks were, he adds dryly, "loads of fun."

For much of his professional life, it has been the task of Jerome M. Hauer, 47, to know a lot about how things work so that when they stop working — when they fall down, when they get blown down or blown up, when they freeze or burst or burn out — he knows what to do. Like all self-described emergency junkies, he sits around all day thinking up horrifying ways for things to be destroyed and people to die and then hoping that all his plans stay on the shelf.

He has done it for I.B.M., when he ran their worldwide emergency response program. In fact, he did it so well that his bosses wanted to promote him to a higher-paying corporate marketing job, and he had to say to them, "Listen, guys, if I have to sell computers, if I have to develop programs, then I'm going to die —



Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

Jerome M. Hauer, with pieces of rubble from collapsed buildings.

I'm going to starve — because I have no interest in this."

They insisted and so he left, eventually becoming the head of statewide emergency services in Indiana, where his wife, Glenda, grew up.

BUT nothing — not even trying to figure out whether the Bhopal chemical disaster in India could ever happen at an I.B.M. plant — prepared him for this job.

If he were to update his résumé, the "types of emergencies handled" category would read something like this: helicopter crash, subway fire, water main break, ice storm, heat wave, blackout, building collapse, building collapse, building collapse.

"No two days around here are ever the same," he said.

In many ways, you could say he was born for the job. The son of a real estate executive and a nurse, he was raised in Peter Cooper Village, on the East Side, and practically grew up around emergency rooms. He will go into more detail than most people could stomach about how he spent the summer when he was 15.

His mother, Rose, a vice president for nursing at Beth Israel Hospital, helped him get a job in the hospital's morgue as what pathologists call a "diener" — German for servant. "As the junior guy," he explained, "I was the one responsible for all the dirty work: cutting open the gut and cleaning it and pinning it and making it ready for the pathologist to review."

And did he enjoy this? "Well, it was fascinating. The first week was a shock. But I got used to it after a while, like anything else."

These days, the messes are a little more complicated. Around his belt, he wears two cell phones and three pagers. And no matter where he tries to go, something on the belt is beckoning him back. Saturday, for example, was spent in Queens, after a building collapse in Far Rockaway that killed a mother and her teen-age daughter. During the heat wave that began over the July 4 weekend, he was headed to Montauk, to begin a vacation with his wife and their 12-year-old son, Michael. But a beeper went off and he hitched a ride back into the city with the state police.

In a city where many emergency services fiercely guard their own turf, the introduction of an umbrella office to coordinate these services has created a few crises in itself. In particular, Police Commissioner Howard Safir has been involved in a long-running turf war with Mr. Hauer over who gets to call the shots at many city emergencies.

"I've got to work around it," Mr. Hauer said. "It's not an easy issue." (Marilyn Mode, a spokeswoman for Mr. Safir, did not return a call yesterday seeking comment.)

Ultimately, Mr. Hauer says, he still loves his job. But he wonders how much longer he can last.

He looks out the window. Where most people would see the glorious sun glinting off the gargoyles of the Woolworth Building, Mr. Hauer sees a problem. "One of the most beautiful buildings in the city, right?" he asks. "We have an earthquake, and you know what. All that beautiful artwork up there is going to fall like missiles."