NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2001

Unforgotten Soldiers

By Christy Ferer

My husband, Neil Levin, the executive director of the Port Authority, was one of the thousands who died at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. I am like others who have lost someone they love. What I have left of my husband are his love, my memories and the place where his life ended.

Ground zero is sacred territory for the families that wake up each day still unbelieving, still trying to figure out what happened and why and how it could be that they have no body to bury.

Ground zero is for mourning, not gawking.

Many people have come to ground zero to pay respects and to deal with the psychic blow of what happened here. But lately there are others for whom ground zero has become — and I don't mean this unkindly — a kind of in-spot for celebrities, for the rich and famous, for those who want to be able to say that they've got the connections to get a tour to see it up close. I'm told you can buy the latest in flag memorabilia at the site, and that you can even buy a container of debris.

When I made my own way down to ground zero, 48 hours after terrorists had torn our city apart, I was still hopeful. I actually believed that I was on a rescue mission. Armed with a mask, a bottle of water and 200 copies of my husband's photo, I was convinced that I could find him — or at least find someone who'd seen him, someone who knew he'd been taken to the hospital where he was in the E.R., maybe trying to reach me. I just knew my phone would ring.

I made it as far as the blue phalanx of New York City cops who formed a human chain encircling the site. The chain broke only for iron workers in sweat-stained bandanas, National Guardsmen, Red Cross workers bearing food. It didn't even break for medics — because they weren't needed. There was no one to treat.

Yet as I stood on the other side of the line, holding up my husband's picture, I remained hopeful — especially when rescue workers asked me for copies.

Only in time did I begin to understand what 5,000 other families were coming to understand. Our loved ones were not coming home. This is where they were buried.

The scores of dedicated policemen and firemen who have been at ground zero since the first day know this. When a body is found, they salute and they make way for another fallen soldier in this new war. The fallen here don't deserve gawkers, tourists and the curious.

I was moved when I heard that Gov. George Pataki had decided not to clean the shoes he wore to ground zero — they were caked with the gray glue-like substance that sticks to everyone who wades through the debris. This, to me, is like ashes of the dead.

I know that these 16 acres of prime real estate at the tip of Manhattan cannot be suspended in time or entirely covered by a memorial. But I ask as one who is grieving that this place not be turned into a public spectacle, even by those who mean well.

Ground zero is not a theme park. It is a burial ground. It is a cemetery, where the men and women we loved are buried. Where they rest is now hallowed ground. □

Christy Ferer is a contributing correspondent for CBS News.

CITY_21MC100_011831608

NYC-WTC_000230733