NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

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BURNING TOWERS

Worker sacrificed life to stay with quadriplegic pal

By KATE SHEEHY and DAN KADISON

Abe Zelmanowitz and Ed Beyea overcame the odds to become best friends in life — they weren't about to be separated by cowards in death.

Abe, an Orthodox Jew, refused to leave the side of Ed, a Christian and a quadriplegic, when their office on the 27th floor of 1 WTC came under terrorist siege Tuesday.

In the panic, Ed told Abe that he couldn't leave the office — paralyzed from the neck down, the 42-year-old was struggling to breathe, and besides, he obviously couldn't walk down the stairs.

Abe, 55, assured Ed's nurse that she should leave, and he would stay to help Ed. A fireman was already by their side, offering to lend a hand.

The nurse made it out. The fireman, and Abe and Ed — both computer programmers for Blue Cross/Blue Shield — did not.

Ed's sister, Pam Southard-Park, said she is sure her brother — who overcame obstacles after a diving accident paralyzed him 20 years ago — urged his friend to leave him and save himself.

"I'm pretty sure Abe was Ed's best friend, and I know Abe was my brother's," she said. "He'd have to be, to do what he did."

In a sad twist, both men called their families in the throes of the terror — and told them they were fine. That was before the building collapsed.

Abe called his brother on his cell phone, "and we assumed he was on his way home," Jack's wife, Evelyn, said.

But during a second call minutes later, "He said he was still at work," she said. "He told me Ed was having breathing problems. I could hear a fireman in the background, and I was trying to convey, just go."

"But he wouldn't leave him," Jack said.

Southard said Ed also called their mom after the crash to assure her he was fine. Abe dialed and held the phone to Ed's ear.

"'Mom, I'm all right,'" he said, according to Southard, a teacher. "She said, 'Thank God.' ... I was going up and down my school's halls giving thumbs up."

When Southard's phone rang again, it was her son, who told her the devastating news.

The tower had just collapsed, taking her brother and his best friend with it.





FRIENDS TO THE END: Quadriplegic Ed Beyea (left) was struggling to breathe on the smoke-filled 27th floor of the north tower, and his best friend, Abe Zelmanowitz (right), refused to abandon him. Both died.

Heroes

John Toepfer drove all night from Milwaukee to help.

The 36-year-old carpenter — wearing a yellow hard hat on which he had written "USA" and "Sept. 11, 2001, WTC, NY" — had hoped to help build shelters and shore up damaged buildings. When told his skills were not immediately needed, Toepfer stayed to pass out food at a Salvation Army center.

While his employers were "a little freaked out" by his trip, "I just told them it's something I have to do."

SWAT team probes underneath rubble

By JESSIE GRAHAM

When NYPD Emergency Service Unit Officer Steven Miller stepped out into the rubble of the World Trade Center on Tuesday, chaos overwhelmed him.

"There was no order," he said. "We watched the buildings burn. We watched them fall. We couldn't tell what had really happened until the smoke had lifted."

ESU — a specially trained SWAT team that usually responds to building collapses, suicide jumpers and hostage situations — had lost 14 of their own.

They work 12-hour shifts, assembling at a staging area in Stuyvesant High School, waiting on Chambers Street with infrared cameras, listening devices and heat-sensitive tools.

Buses shuttle them to ground zero, where they enter the pile from various angles, never knowing what they'll find.

They use a tracking system to account for one another.

"You tug on the rope for your partner, and if he tugs back, he's fine," Miller said. "If he don't tug back, you go look for him."

They "work the voids" in the center of the pile, searching in sinkholes and air pockets.

In a garage west of the south tower, Miller and his team found a striking differential of devastation and preservation.

"It's very morbid, like a tomb," said one of Miller's partners, Jim Barnes. "There are cars covered with dust, and when you open them up, the inside looks brand new."

Just a few feet away from a barely scratched car, they find others that were flattened and melted beyond recognition.

They've journeyed five stories down to find entire floors flooded with water.

When they're down deep they feel the bulldozers roaring above them.

They burrow through air pockets in the rubble, crawling through tiny tunnels, following the stench of death.

"It's like a giant time capsule, like a nuclear explosion hit it and this is what's left of it — a ghost town," Miller said.

They've stumbled onto entire offices oddly intact despite falling 80 floors.

"It's a weird feeling to know that someone was sitting or standing there and this was their office," he said. "You wonder about their lives, what happened to them."

They try to hold on to some hope. They remember always the two Port Authority cops — rescued early Wednesday — who were spared after riding the building down 82 floors.

"By the grace of God, they were both alive," Barnes said. "That was a good feeling. You think of those two guys and you say there's hope."

So they trudge on, dropping heat sensors and microphones, squeezing through narrow passages and listening, always listening.

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