NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

'Hard to Feel Anything'

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Three of the most sought after men in the city, by the names of Mario, Joe and Angelo, sat at a table yesterday afternoon in their dark blue, one-piece uniforms, their pizzas long finished. Their conversation moved slowly from one quick joke to the next, with the long silences in between used to stare indifferently over each others' shoulders.

They are elevator repairers, frozen by the security procedures that rule most of lower Manhattan. Mario Bargiacchi, one hand in a pocket, the other holding a mobile phone, explained the best he could to exasperated customers.

"We can't get access to your building," he said. "We need passes, but the city isn't giving them out. We just spent two hours trying to get them." Two other men from their company tried separately to use the same pass. One got caught by police, who rushed him, frisked him and threatened to arrest him.

It had been that kind of day. "It's hard to feel anything today," said Angelo Giamboi from Brooklyn. "It's just a day at work, except we're very busy and the traffic is crazy."

The adrenaline that drove New York in the first few days after the attacks on the World Trade Center seems to have ebbed from the veins of those who work in lower Manhattan. On the second day back to work, in the most devastated part of Manhattan, few talked about taking a stand against terrorism, or refusing to give in to fear, or even of rebuilding the city. They spoke of major and minor inconveniences, about battling frustration with patience, and they reminded themselves that they are, after all, still alive.

They also spoke of arriving on the Staten Island ferry, unable to bring themselves to look at the smoldering cavity past Battery Park.

They spoke of listening to music instead of news on the radio, and feeling guilty for it. They spoke of colleagues planning to relocate to another part of the country. They spoke of the soldiers — a comforting sight because they give protection, and a distressful sight because they are reminders that the financial district is still a target. And they guessed at which building might be next.

"This is not over," said Maggie Rosado, who works next to the New York Stock Exchange.

"What's messing with my head is the smell. It's everywhere. And it's just so depressing."

That smell is the constant of all the days since Sept. 11. It seeps into clothes, hair and paper. It is the one thing the soldiers and police cannot keep from entering doorways.

Although much of the work force still has not returned, a few people did arrive yesterday to download information from their old computers, or fetch files. They returned to streets without gleam, without bustle, without the swaggering strides of all the men and women who a few years ago were making billions of dollars a second in these canyons.

The civic fervor which carried them to their desks and phones and keyboards on the first day of the week seemed to be supplanted yesterday by the realization that for the foreseeable future, this will be their lives — five days a week, trudging over ash with two pieces of identification in hand, flinching at every loud or unfamiliar sound, and shedding foul-smelling clothes at the end of the day.

"I'm resigned to it," said John Timmerman, who works at the end of Whitehall Street. "It's a fact of life and we're all going to have to accept it. We'll have to get used to soldiers and roadblocks and checkpoints.

"At work we try not to talk about it all the time. Anything we have to say has already been said."

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