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FDNY families gather to gain hope, answers

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Rookie Firefighter Fred Ill 3rd escaped the World Trade Center disaster physically unscathed but emotionally devastated — his father, a fire captain, is missing.

In the long hours after the attacks, Ill and his mother were comforted by co-workers, family and friends.

But it wasn't until this week, when the FDNY held a meeting for the loved ones of the more than 300 missing firefighters that he realized his family's life would be forever intertwined with other Fire Department families.

"Being there really did help. It made me realize I'm lucky to be part of the Fire Department," Ill, 22, said yesterday. "When I saw all those people there, it made it real that my father was not the only one inside the building.

"There were so many of us, we were all there for each other," he said. "There are so many people who are going through the same thing."

The Tuesday night meeting, held at a Manhattan hotel, was attended by more than 1,100 relatives of missing firefighters.

The family members were comforted by clergy and counselors and hugged by FDNY Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, Gov. Pataki and Mayor Giuliani.

"Some of the women who came up to me I thought were daughters of firefighters, and they would explain that they were newly married," Von Essen said.

"As you get older, when you see a 22-year-old young girl all you can think of is a child, and you almost feel like you lost, you know, put people in that thing that were maybe too young to make that sacrifice," he said. "And to ask a young woman to make that sacrifice . . .

"It was a tough night for us."

So many questions

The FDNY tried to make the meeting as comforting as possible, draping a mammoth American flag behind a ballroom podium and placing boxes of tissues on all 100 tables.

"Most of the families wanted answers," said Lynn Tierney, FDNY deputy commissioner for intergovernmental affairs, who helped organize the meeting.

"Many people wanted reassurance that it was still a rescue operation, not a recovery operation," Tourney said.

"Many wanted to pinpoint a location of [their] husband's units as the buildings came down. Many were concerned about the status of their benefits. It's a very difficult thing to look out into the room and see so many families affected by this."

The meeting came to an emotional pitch when dozens of NYPD detectives entered the room to collect DNA samples to help identify the dead.

But many were reluctant to believe their husbands, sons, brothers were really gone.

"If anyone is going to make it out of there," Ill said yesterday, "it will be my dad."

That sentiment was shared by many of the family members, who declined to cooperate with DNA collection.

"No one wanted to do it," said one detective. "It was sad. A few cops were crying."

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