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Hearts warmed by tragedy

Firehouses hit badly

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Firefighter Albert Nocella will never forget the truck driver who came by the firehouse, calculated his checking account balance, then gave all he had left to the wives of the seven missing men of Brooklyn's Ladder 101.

About a mile away, another fireman, Eneth Moore, marveled over the "little old ladies with shopping carts" who keep coming up to Engine 279 and Ladder 131 and hand over a can of corn or beans or crumpled dollar bills.

Throughout the city, firefighters and cops who lost comrades have been overwhelmed by donations from well-wishers.

But the generosity in one of the city's most impoverished neighborhoods has awed firefighters. Two Red Hook firehouses, surrounded by public housing and industrial buildings, have been inundated with flowers, food, cards and money from *newly appreciative neighbors* who can ill afford it.

Twelve Red Hook firefighters died trying to rescue victims at the World Trade Center. Before Sept. 11, community relations between the firehouses and their neighborhoods were courteous, but distant.

Not since.

Last week, Nocella described the anonymous truck driver, still in work clothes, setting himself down at Engine 202 at Richards St. to figure out what he would have left after paying his bills. He wrote a check for $105.

"*That was one of the most* touching things I've personally encountered," Nocella said. "He didn't give it a thought. It was so sincere. When people aren't in good financial positions, their donations just seem so generous."

These fire companies located near the mouth of the Battery Tunnel were among the first to reach the twin towers after the hijacked jets struck. Now, among the missing are Ladder 101's Joseph Gullickson, Sal Calabro, Brian Cannizaro, Terrance McShanie, Joseph Maffeo, Thomas Kennedy and Patrick Byrne.

Lost from the Engine 279 firehouse, which is located under the Gowanus Expressway, are Lt. Anthony Jovic, Anthony Rodriguez, Mike Ragusa, Christian Regenhard and Ronnie Henderson.

Firefighters at their stations can't get over the mounds of burning candles, flowers, food, clothing and water and hundreds of pictures and letters donated in the memory of those who lost their lives.

And beyond material things, the firefighters also have been struck by the silence.

Gone are the mischievous false alarms pulled by school children en route home at 3:10 p.m. every day or by teens hanging out at 2 a.m. on a Saturday night.

"Before this, we got all kinds of weird calls about someone having a heart attack or a stomachache," said Engine 279 Firefighter Radames Torres. "We'd *race there and there'd be no*body at the boxes. Senior citizens sometimes just wanted a taxi service to the hospital so they didn't have to pay. They'd call us for any little thing.

"Now everybody's being extra *careful not to call us unless they* really have to."

Joe Ortega, 12, said he always liked to hang out at Engine 202, but none of his neighbors did. After the tragedy, his mother brought candles, he said. Hundreds of well-wishers have attended prayer vigils.

"My neighbors never used to notice there was a firehouse until now," Joe said. "It's sad it takes something like this to come."

Never in Moore's two decades as a firefighter had he seen such generosity.

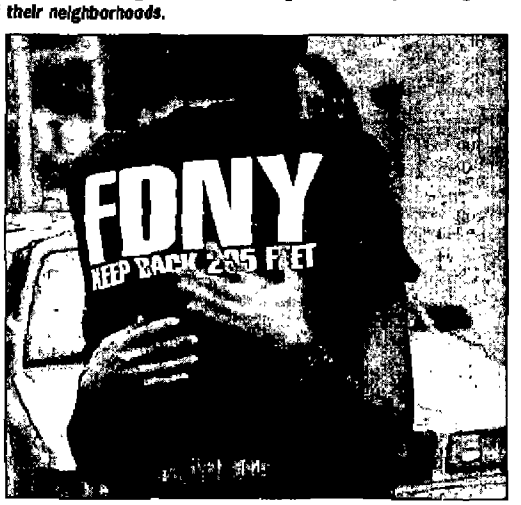
"These are people on fixed incomes, there are mostly projects here," said Moore. "You got people who don't speak English who stop here. In broken English, they say a few words and *pull out a dollar.*

"It makes you humble. It makes you proud."



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

SUPPORT Neighborhood woman Dale Bernucca keeps candles burning outside Engine 205 on Middagh St., Brooklyn. Firefighters throughout the city have been overwhelmed by the support of their neighborhoods.



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

BE BRAVE A firefighter is comforted at Engine 205 on Middagh St., Brooklyn.

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