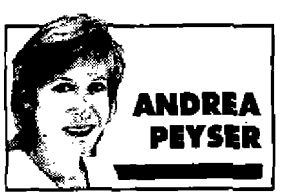
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Bravely confronting the final heartache



ANDREA PEYSER

FOR some, it was a relief. Others found the process agonizing beyond words.

From early morning, relatives of the thousands missing in the World Trade Center lined up at the family center at Pier 94, clutching leather briefcases, plastic shopping bags, manila envelopes.

Inside were birth certificates, marriage licenses, photographs, pay stubs, company stationery, personal letters.

Each bag, carried as tenderly as a child, represented proof to a bureaucratic certainty that a human being had lived, loved, worked and then died at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11.

Sobbing quietly and clutching a teddy bear to her chest was Jennica Vera, just 18 years old. Her father, David Vera, was an electronic technician working on the 84th floor of the south tower when the building came down.

Jennica went to live with her dad in Brooklyn after he and her mom divorced. Just last year, her brother died. Jennica is David Vera's only living relative.

At her age, she is the only person in the world eligible to come to the family center and attempt to prove that David Vera was dead. She had no choice. This was the only way she could obtain insurance and other benefits available to the kin of the man who supported her.

With her mother, Zeta Pacheco, at her side, Jennica answered difficult questions, posed as gently as possible by volunteer lawyers.

Questions such as:

"What makes you think this person was in the World Trade Center on this date?"

My heart has shattered so many times since Sept. 11, until the moment I met this young lady, I didn't believe there was anything left to break.

Joyce Cohen of Mount Vernon, Ky., carried a birth certificate to the family center, proof that she is the daughter of Florence Cohen.

Florence Cohen, 62, worked as a secretary for the state Department of Taxation and Finance on the 82nd floor of the south tower.

Joyce, 40, had just moved from New York last spring, and volunteered with an organization for the disabled. When she first heard news of the trade center attack, she thought her mom worked in another building.

But then she talked to her mother's manager, who said that while she'd escaped from the trade center, Florence Cohen could not.

Joyce flew to New York, stayed at a friend's house and waited for word. She worried about what she might find.

"I didn't want my mother to live life all burnt up," Joyce confessed. "I didn't know what to pray for, I had to ask God."

When more days passed without word, Joyce became resigned to the fact that her mother was gone. For her, coming to the family center provided some measure of relief, an end to the long vigil.

"I have faith in God," she said.

"He knows what He's doing."

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