NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Tough Trade in Financial District

By S. Mitra Kalita
STAFF WRITER

On Khaled Abou-el Khair's first day back at work, he showed police his vendor license. He showed them his driver's license. He gave them his Social Security and phone numbers. Only then was he allowed to his place of business since 1988: the street.

For the vendors who sell bagels, coffee, hot dogs and peanuts around the World Trade Center, getting back to work after the Sept. 11 disaster has been a complicated process, and some are still trying. Namely, the city doesn't seem to know if their carts on wheels qualify as vehicular traffic. Nearby shopkeepers complain that the dozen or so vendors cut into their already slow business. Many merchants who hail from Egypt, Yemen and Bangladesh wonder if they are being excluded because of their Islamic faith.

Earlier this week, Abou-el Khair was among the lucky: He got in. Seated next to him on blue crates turned upside down, Said Shehata of Staten Island could not say the same. He and his cart filled with meats for kebabs and frozen potatoes for fries and bottles of water and cans of Coke had been turned away. So Shehata joined Abou-el Khair to keep him company.

Many street vendors not allowed back in

"How can I live my life?" said Shehata, 32. "I haven't worked since this happened."

Calls to the New York Police Department were referred to the Office of Emergency Management. Calls to OEM were referred to the mayor's office. The mayor's office referred calls to the police.

Vendors say they've been given a similar runaround. Most say they understand; and their livelihood has been only temporarily affected. What's a few thousand dollars compared to the loss of thousands of lives?

"I thought I was going to die," said Abou-el Khair of his memories of Sept. 11. "It just hurts, the pain is too much."

As he spoke, a regular customer came up and enveloped him in a hug. "I bet you're glad to see me," said the customer. Abou-el Khair nodded.

Yet many businesses surrounding the carts say they are anything but glad to see the vendors' return. Their concerns reflect ongoing battles between street and storefront merchants.

"There are too many vendors, definitely," said Dipak Banik, manager of the Liberty Gourmet, a deli and restaurant on Broadway. "It was very good when they weren't here. People had to come over to us."

Others were angered when they saw vehicles with carts attached allowed below Canal Street.

"I used to drive in every day," said Vincent Signorile, co-owner of Champs Gourmet Deli who lives in New Jersey. "Now I drive to Staten Island and take the ferry. Their cars are dragging a hot-dog vendor. Why is it they can stay all day?"

He also wondered if the vendors posed a security threat. "I thought we were on terrorist alert," Signorile said. "They have propane tanks near the New York Stock Exchange."

For his part, Abou-el Khair said his coffee, bagels and muffins cart was searched and escorted by a police van to his spot on Wall Street. He expected the security but wondered if other businesses had faced as intense scrutiny. Abou-el Khair, now a citizen, emigrated from Egypt 15 years ago and is Muslim.

"I pledged to protect this country against all enemies foreign and domestic," he said. "Besides, what's between me and my customers is more than a business, it's a social life."

NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2001

CITY_21MC100_01183028 2

NYC-WTC_000412864