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Chinatown, Its Streets Empty, Quietly Begins to Take Action

By DEAN E. MURPHY

Though it was spared physically on Sept. 11, the Chinatown that President George W. Bush visited yesterday showed signs of trauma most everywhere, from jobless workers to streets with barricades to shops teetering on bankruptcy.

Chinatown has been transformed into a near ghost town since the attacks on the World Trade Center. Most of the tourists are gone and many of the regular Asian shoppers from New Jersey, Brooklyn and elsewhere have taken their business to Flushing, Queens, where they can drive their cars more easily.

At times, it has been so hard for some trucks to get in and out of Chinatown that many of the 250 or so garment manufacturers there have cut production in half. People without photo ID's, including some street vendors, have been scared away or turned away at police checkpoints, leaving long stretches of the sidewalks bare.

Telephone service remains so spotty that some pharmacies cannot fill prescriptions because of downed computer links, some shops cannot process credit card orders and some residents cannot call for help in emergencies.

In one case, Shiun Fuhai, 67, died of a heart attack in his apartment while his wife frantically searched for a pay phone, according to the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, which has been documenting some of the hardships.

"It's deceiving, because you still see people walking around, but these are local people and a lot of them are unemployed," said Don Lee, a businessman and community board member who was volunteering yesterday at the Chinese Community Center on Mott Street. "People want to think positive, but there is concern about whether we are going to make it."

Despite Chinatown's proximity to the World Trade Center — about 12 blocks — its business owners and residents have kept relatively quiet about their problems, moved instead by the consuming events farther to the south and roused by a newfound sense of patriotism and self-sacrifice.

A Cantonese radio station, WNSW 1430 AM, raised nearly $1.4 million in an on-air fund-raiser for the city's relief effort. The station's general manager, Tony Wong, said the company had also given away 200,000 paper American flags.

"In my 30 years in New York City, this is the first time people are united and working together," Mr. Wong said. "Chinese-Americans are feeling part of this society. You talk about assimilation; this is it."

With patronage off as much as 70 percent, some restaurant owners have turned to delivering hot meals to firefighters, construction crews and volunteers at the World Trade Center site.

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"My waiters just stand around, stationary like burning candles," said Jijie Hong, who owns Shanghai Cuisine Restaurant at the corner of Mulberry and Bayard Streets. "There are no customers to serve."

But in recent days, the atmosphere of stoicism has begun to give way to one dominated by practical concerns. More people are speaking up and looking to the authorities for help.

As the city promotes Broadway shows in television advertisements and makes special efforts to encourage financial companies not to leave for New Jersey, there is a growing sense that Chinatown needs to be recognized as a casualty, too. In that regard, Mr. Bush's visit was seen as a welcome spotlight.

Mr. Lee said several days of pestering finally paid off on Tuesday when the authorities agreed to move some of the wooden barricades along Canal Street several blocks to the south. Even though pedestrians were able to pass, the barriers had created a psychological no-go zone for shoppers.

Now, some business owners have set their sights on getting rid of the highway signs from New Jersey to Long Island that advise motorists to avoid Lower Manhattan.

"They are killing our business by stopping the traffic," said Eva Sam, the owner of Popular Jewelry on Canal Street.

Garment workers are also putting together a plan to encourage retailers to keep manufacturing work in Manhattan. Bruce S. Raynor, president of the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial and Textile Employees, said about 11,000 of the city's 60,000 garment workers were based in Chinatown. Almost all of them, he said, are now working part time.

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Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Flags are abundant around Chinatown, as residents and business owners show their patriotism after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. But businesses in the area, many of which rely on the tourist trade, have been hard hit.

"It seems as if the focus of many people has been on the financial industry and Wall Street," Mr. Raynor said. "Our workers have been just as adversely affected, if not more so, because they live closer to the line of survival."

At the community center on Mott Street, about 2,000 people from Chinatown and elsewhere in Lower Manhattan had taken advantage of a variety of services, including free legal advice, inexpensive cellular phones and small-business loans. But Mr. Lee said a survey of about 350 area businesses found that problems remained widespread.

Among those seeking help yesterday were five drivers from Allen Car Service on Orchard Street. They were applying for loans to get through the month. They used to get customers from Morgan Stanley and Merrill Lynch, making as much as $300 a day. Now they are fortunate to take home $30, they said.

Some of the drivers have cut back on basics like food. One of them had just done his grocery shopping for the next few days: his plastic bag contained several loaves of bread and a can of tomato sauce.

Another driver, Paul Ling, said he had cut out one meal a day so that he would have enough money to feed his daughter, who is 1.

"I've eaten ramen noodles every day for a while now," he said. "It tastes terrible after a while, but you've got to eat. What can you do?"

Others in Chinatown said they were coping the best they could, confident that things would turn for the better.

The intricate Chinese paper cuttings of one artist, Bun Lau, were displayed on some scaffolding along the sidewalk on Mulberry Street. So were his hand-painted shirts with colorful scenes of lotus flowers and fish and dragons.

But yesterday, as President Bush visited an elementary school a few blocks away, Mr. Lau was putting his fine brushes to work on a design unlike the others. Spread out on a folding table was a T-shirt with an outline of the Lower Manhattan skyline. Featured prominently in the center were the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

"It'll be better tomorrow," Mr. Lau scrawled in both English and Chinese, lifting a verse from a popular Chinese song.

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