NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

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New York's heart is now an American emblem

There was a remarkable picture in the paper last week. Maybe you saw it: Several firefighters carrying a couple of stretchers containing the flag-draped bodies of two of their own whose remains had been retrieved from the biggest homicide scene in American history. They were surrounded by the rubble of what must be viewed as a holy site, a national cemetery where the World Trade Center once stretched to the sky.

"They remind me of the Marines," Michael Mullane was saying. "They are not going to leave until everyone is accounted for."

Mullane is with the International Firefighters Union. For three weeks now, he has traveled back and forth between his office in Boston and a room on the fifth floor of the Sheraton Manhattan Hotel, and he still cannot quite grasp the enormity of the crime that has been committed.

"Three hundred and forty-three dead on the job," he said. "Plus 5,000 civilians. It still hasn't sunk in."

"The other day I was looking at the list," Larry Curren said. "It was eight pages long. I put it down, and then it really hit me — my God, all these guys are dead."

Curren is the union's PSOB expert. That stands for Public Safety Officers Benefit program. A firefighter with a law degree, he has the heavy duty of cutting through a mountain of red tape to get money to families of the dead as quickly as possible.

"Each beneficiary will get $151,635, lump sum, tax-free," he said. "It's a federal program administered by the Department of Justice. And they've been great. Congress passed a special law just for this disaster, so instead of taking six months or a year and filling out form after form, we just have one to fill out. Once that application process is complete, we hope to have a check issued in 30 days. But that doesn't come close to replacing a life, does it?"



'Anyone who thinks the country is soft isn't paying attention.'

MIKE BARNICLE

Both men are stunned at the spirit rising from the ashes. They have witnessed the true power of America and know it isn't measured by military might or economics.

"Anyone who thinks the country is soft hasn't been paying attention," Dr. John Greene said. "From the guys working on the pile to the people on the street, there is a commitment to keep on going. It makes you proud."

Greene is a 54-year-old psychologist who leads the critical incident stress debriefing unit for the firefighters' union. Since Sept. 11, he has found himself moving among the walking wounded, most of them with emotional injuries, in the fresh scab of Ground Zero.

"I've never seen anything like it," he said. "I've never experienced anything like it, and I've seen and experienced a lot."

What he and many others see is a city filled with people making an enormously impressive effort to stabilize a situation that would surely stagger a lot of other places in the world. Many are dead. Many more are dazed and saddened. Each day dawns with the reality that strangers arrived on these shores with a clear intent to kill us and succeeded somewhat in their murderous mission.

But if courage is the ability to acknowledge and deal with fear without becoming paralyzed, then New York is a noble picture of bravery in constant motion. All through the Financial District last week, men and women went to work, their faces still mute with shock, still somewhat apprehensive and forever remembering — yet they were there, at work, at the banks, in the brokerage houses, subdued but strong enough to report for duty.

Uptown, it sometimes seemed as if you were strolling through a separate city. The air was different. The restaurants were slowly filling up with customers eager to embrace the novelty of normal life, whatever that phrase might mean today. But the churches and St. Patrick's Cathedral appeared busier than ever before. St. Patrick's was a crush of humanity, all silent in prayer, businessmen on bended knees alongside police officers in uniform, everyone alone together, lighting a candle or contemplating what has been lost, who is missing and what might be next.

"This will never go away," John Greene said. "The wakes will end. The funerals will be finished. The flowers at all the firehouses will die. But this memory, what happened here, will be talked about forever."

Greene's job is listening to the fragile whispers of surviving firefighters as they try to talk their way through the horror of what they saw, what they did to bring out the dead and why they were allowed the miracle of life while a brother disappeared in dust.

But as Greene and the others walk through New York, they now hear and see the soul of a city that has become more of an emblem of national strength than any weapon aimed at an enemy incapable of understanding that municipal courage and character are contagious.

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