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DAILY NEWS, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2001

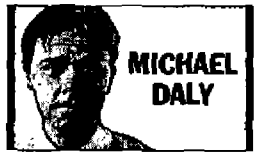
A precious right survived attack

Ninety minutes into the voting at the edge of Ground Zero, the machine for the 3rd Electoral District broke. "The last time, it blew up," said voter Mary Grassi. "I had just voted when the plane hit."

On Sept. 11, Grassi had been one of 41 people who voted in the lobby of the World Financial Center before the first jetliner struck the twin towers directly across West St.

"I don't want to say my vote blew up, but it did," Grassi said.

Yesterday, the World Financial Center was still unsuitable for a polling place, so the voting was conducted two blocks away, in the community room of a Battery Park City apartment building.



MICHAEL DALY

The room has plate glass windows looking out at the Statue of Liberty, and democracy was in its full, resilient glory when the machine's lever stuck.

Grassi arrived shortly afterward to the news she would have to file a paper emergency ballot. She shrugged off this minor complication with the perspective of the lucky ones who escaped harm that terrible Tuesday.

"It's okay, I'm still here," she said.

Terror flashback

Election inspector Barbara Watkins was at the broken machine, recording the count at the time of the malfunction. She also had been in the World Financial Center when the planes hit, and she had dashed across the street to help evacuate people she knew from the south tower.

"The 23rd floor," she said.

Watkins had then headed back to the street.

"When I was taking the stairs down, the Fire Department was coming up," she said.

Watkins had then encountered a woman with twins.

"The mother just stood there in shock," Watkins said. "I told her, 'Just leave the stroller and take the kids.' She took one, I took the other."

Watkins had been fleeing with the child through the falling debris when a cop carried both of them to safety.

"He was no bigger than me," she recalled. "I don't know how he picked me and the baby up."

Now, eight Tuesdays later, Watkins squinted at the counter next to each lever on the broken machine.

"I can't sleep since," she said. "Some of the people I knew still didn't come out."

Watkins recorded the count for Michael Bloomberg and Mark Green, numbers that meant nothing at this point. All that could be said for certain about the election was that neither candidate deserved to be mentioned in the same breath as the firefighters, cops and paramedics who risked all just across West St.

Both candidates had been so hungry to win that they resorted to smears and distortions and other shameful tactics that are an insult to all those who died in that horrific attack on our democracy.

But the choice was still Bloomberg or Green, be it on the machine or a paper ballot, at the edge of Ground Zero or any other place in the city. Watkins and her colleagues knew that a vote was still a vote and therefore precious.

"We've got to be careful," fellow election inspector Dorothy Drayton said. "Every one counts."

Resorting to paper

Grassi sealed her paper ballot in an envelope, which Watkins then dropped through a slot into the top of a cardboard box marked "Emergency Ballots for Machine Breakdown Only."

"Maybe it'll be the deciding vote," Grassi said.

After three hours of paper ballots, a truck carrying replacement machines arrived. The driver explained the delay.

"This is Ground Zero," he said. "I had to wait for a police escort."

The broken one was pushed over by a glass door.

"No!" election inspector Ethel Lewis said. "That's an emergency exit."

The moving crew pushed the machine from the doorway.

"You never know," Lewis said.

Lewis also had been in the World Financial Center when the first plane hit, and she remembered panicked people crowding the door as a guard fumbled for the right key. She had finally reached the street, only to witness a horror.

"When I close my eyes I see how the second plane was coming," she said.

She had watched the people trapped above leap rather than be consumed by flames.

"Two people, see them hold each other and jump," Lewis said. "I say, 'Lord have mercy.' I was bawling. I couldn't stop bawling."

The second machine also was broken, but the third that was brought in worked fine. Lewis and Drayton and Watkins continued to serve democracy in the room by Ground Zero overlooking the Statue of Liberty, no less noble for the choices on the ballot.

The victor was Bloomberg, who was so hungry to win.



DECISIONS Voters wait to cast ballots at Julia Richman High School on 66th

Marshall and Molinaro

By BILL FARRELL and BILL HUTCHINSON
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

Queens voters elected their first black borough president last night, while outgoing Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari's hand-picked successor won a close race.

Democrat Helen Marshall, 72, easily defeated Republican Alfonso Stabile, 54, for the Queens borough president post being vacated by the term-limited Claire Shulman.

Marshall, a city councilwoman facing term limits, received nearly 70% of the vote.

In Staten Island, Republican Jim Molinaro, 70, beat veteran Democratic Councilman Jerome O'Donovan, 57.

"It's a great night for us, a night a lot of people said would not happen," said Molinaro, the deputy borough president and a longtime friend of GOP powerbroker Molinari. "They said I was not electable and not articulate enough.

"But I want to thank the people of Staten Island for having the confidence in me and giving me this opportunity to serve."

O'Donovan conceded the race at 11:50 p.m., after Molinaro had given his victory speech.

"So many said, 'Don't concede,' but he's got me by about 4,000 votes with 75% of the votes in," O'Donovan told supporters. "I'll be taking a vacation to Puerto Rico tomorrow so when those paper ballots come in and say I won, call me."

Manhattan Borough President Virginia Fields, 56, a Democrat who was the only incumbent seeking a second term, won easily.

So did Adolfo Carrion, 40, a city coun

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