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Where Death Fell From Sky, Lives Intersect

Finding Collective Grief In Rockaway and Manhattan

By JIM DWYER

Long before Sept. 11, at least a house or two on any street in the Belle Harbor section of Rockaway was likely to be flying the United States flag. Even more visible, though was the unofficial flag of the Rockaways, with its motif of bright red lettering on white, a rigid sign on unbending poles: No Parking, Sat. Sun., Holidays, May 15-Sept. 30.

If Rockaway's no-parking signs are not exactly a message telling outsiders to get lost, no one would mistake them for "welcome to our beach," either.

Now, swaying in the salt breezes of this uncommonly gentle November, in a season of savage loss, yet another flag hangs in front of St. Francis de Sales, the parish school of Belle Harbor. This one is the standard of the Dominican Republic, and ever since it was hoisted last week, the flag has made for a strange but stirring sight in a parish that is mostly Irish and Italian-American.

The school and church are just a block from where five residents of Belle Harbor were killed last week when Flight 587 went down. Just a few days before, the church had held the 12th of 12 funerals for victims of the World Trade Center attack, many of them rescue workers.

For Nancy Corrigan, the wife of a firefighter and a mother who is raising her children in Belle Harbor, the Dominican flag spoke the first necessary words.

"You can end up thinking about only your own pain, until you realize those 260 lives were gone and those families are suffering," said Mrs. Corrigan, an instructor at Kingsborough Community College. "These events link us together."

In terrible hours, at unspeakable costs, new openings have been made in communities that once seemed to exist in a kind of cultural solitude. At the other end of the city from Belle Harbor, in northern Manhattan where Dominican flags are as ordinary as street signs, where political campaigns are as likely to be fought over candidates in Santo Domingo as in Washington Heights, and where Spanish is the tongue of commerce, the names Belle Harbor or Rockaway meant little before last week. Then it became the place where 260 people on board a flight for Santo Domingo died.

Manuel Rivera, 31, who lost three friends in the crash, said it has made him consider visiting this place, the Rockaways, that he had never heard of before. He does not know what to expect.

"I was thinking about seeing it, to be close to where my friends died," said Mr. Rivera, a janitor. "I hear it is not like Washington Heights, that it has a beach and big houses. Tell me, are there Latinos there?"

Not many. But what Mr. Rivera may find are people a couple of paces ahead on the escalator of American life, bearing a few striking resemblances to his own.

Both communities are dominated by island people, in love with the sun, the sand and the curl of ocean foam on the toe of the beach. They are able to hook up a cousin with a job, a nephew with a place to live, an in-law with a baby sitter. They are unafraid of doing a day's work. Especially

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at moments of grief, of birth and of marriage, their personal orbits bring them close to the Catholic Church.

Since the plane fell from the sky not far from her home, Arlene Jordan has been shuttling one of her daughters to shopping malls, to help the children in the Lawler family, who lost a mother and a brother. All the family's belongings were destroyed. Mrs. Jordan's daughter and friends collected $1,500 in a matter of hours and were using the money to replace socks, underwear, pajamas and other basic items for their schoolmates.

"I really don't know much about what Washington Heights is like," Mrs. Jordan said. "I guess we're similar in that we're a very Catholic community, we believe in family and kids and we're hard workers."

She paused. "They seem like great people."

That mirrored the impression held by Jacqueline Jacques, aunt and best friend of Lucia Rodriguez Almonte, who died in the crash. After 36 years in the United States, Ms. Rodriguez had been heading to the Dominican Republic to buy a home for her mother. Ms. Jacques, reflecting on the events in Rockaway, said: "It must be shocking for the people in Belle Harbor, after what they went through — all their people lost in the trade center. Then to have your house falling down around you."

Just as the events of Sept. 11 did, the act of counting losses from the plane crash brings revelations about lives and times that often go unnoticed. In the case of the Dominican-Americans, the world was suddenly introduced to a generation of immigrants who worked two or three jobs, supported people in the old country and brought family out to join them.

Ms. Jacques worked with her niece, Ms. Rodriguez, at Centro Medico Dominicano, a big medical practice in Washington Heights. Ms. Rodriguez had a photographic memory that seemed to take in all 70,000 files at the office, Ms. Jacques said, and possessed a keen sense of whom to phone, and how to get help, in situations that had nothing to do with the medical practice.

"People would call and say, 'I'm being evicted, my husband lost his job, I can't pay the rent,' and Luchy would know the right politician to call," Ms. Jacques said, using her niece's nickname. "Or she'd get a call from someone: 'Five people just showed up, I have nowhere to put them.' And Luchy would say, 'Send three of them to me.' "

Among those lost on the flight, Ms. Jacques noted, was a large Dominican-American family that had moved from New York to Pennsylvania, where many have settled near Allentown. Other Dominicans have moved on from New York to Chattanooga, Tenn., and North Carolina.

In New York, it is possible to buy cigarettes by the piece, phone calls by the minute and a chance on the Dominican numbers game in many a bodega. "People start to want something better for their kids than the city," Ms. Jacques said. "At Christmas, someone will come back and tell the others about a new place."

One night last week, after a memorial Mass at the Church of St. Elizabeth on Wadsworth Avenue in Washington Heights, Andrew Guzman tried to count up the number of jobs he has held from his arrival until he landed his current position, driving a shuttle bus for a hotel in White Plains. People around him started mentioning the places they had worked: factories, restaurants, cabs, cleaning jobs. Mr. Guzman, a U.S. citizen for more than 10 years, wore a lapel pin of the American flag. "I just like to keep America near me," Mr. Guzman said. "I love this country. I have two countries for home."

A few yards away, City Councilman Guillermo Linares was embracing friends. Some 41 Dominican-Americans who worked in the trade center were killed on Sept. 11. The plane crash last week had aspects of a rite of passage, he noted. "We have been exposed as a people, that we are part of the fabric of what America is, in the tradition of fulfilling the American dream," Mr. Linares said.

Prompted by Mr. Linares, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani has scheduled a joint memorial service for the two communities this afternoon at 2 p.m. in Rockaway. While the event has been broadly welcomed, not everyone sees the ties as being any more substantial than the accident of a planeload of people crashing into their neighborhood.

Tom, a building mechanic who would not give his last name, stopped near St. Francis de Sales on Wednesday. "They're from Santo Domingo," he said. "They don't mean a thing to me. I mean, my heart goes out to them because they lost all these people. But it's like, we've been interrupted here, and we've had our fair share of problems."

Nancy Corrigan, though, welcomed the idea of a joint service near the ocean. "We probably look very different, we're at opposite ends of the A train, but there are a lot of similarities — both communities are Catholics, very family-oriented, and work hard," she said. "It's a beautiful place here, very serene, so maybe they can have the beginning of peace, a start to healing."

Every morning Mass at St. Francis has included prayers for the dead on the airplane, said the pastor, Msgr. Martin Geraghty.

On Wednesday, he figured out a way the people at the diocesan offices could help. "I asked our Spanish apostolate to get me the Dominican flag, and it was here within a matter of hours," he said. Actually, two arrived. One went up near the parish office, and the other in front of the school. "It's to show our closeness to our brothers and sisters," Monsignor Geraghty said.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Joanne Shevlin, top, at her home in Belle Harbor, Queens. Washington Heights in Manhattan, above, where Spanish is the language of commerce.

Culturally distant communities will join in prayer.

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