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Recovery still elusive for Trade Center's neighbors

Three months later, the pall of Sept. 11 lingers

By Martha T. Moore
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Rachid Ayari is wondering where his customers are.

Before the collapse of the World Trade Center two blocks north of the Subway sandwich shop he manages, Ayari served 400 customers a day. Now, on a good day, he serves 100.

"I used to see the same faces every day, and I would know what they wanted," he says.

This is what he knows now: Business is down 75%; he lost 5 weeks' pay while the store was closed after the attack, his 7-minute commute now takes nearly an hour, and his six-person staff has been cut to one.

Three months after the attack, many New Yorkers are back living and working in the neighborhood around Ground Zero. Or trying to. Businesses that have been able to reopen find their customers have disappeared. Residents find their daily routines upended by round-the-clock debris removal and repairs to damage caused by the attack. Commuting, shopping, working — nearly every aspect of life has been disrupted.

It makes for a grim Christmas season. At Moran's, an Irish restaurant just south of Ground Zero, owner Abby Lydon has seen 10 Christmas parties — half her bookings — canceled. The remaining parties will be considerably smaller: 40 people, on average, instead of 150, she says.

Last year, kids sat on Santa's lap in the shopping mall at the World Financial Center. This year, the mall is damaged, the stores there are closed and the customers are gone; 100,000 workers have been relocated from lower Manhattan.

They were the lifeblood for businesses in the area, from delis that sup-

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Cover story

Hear business owners talk about moving back, at usatoday.com

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plied lunch to professional firms serving the financial industry to Chinese restaurants that fed citizens on jury duty at nearby court buildings. Forced to close for weeks, those businesses now struggle to survive.

"There are thousands of businesses that are in grave jeopardy," says Julie Menin, founder of Wall Street Rising, a 2-month-old association trying to help small businesses in the neighborhood.

Menin owns Vine, a restaurant across the street from the New York Stock Exchange. Business has dropped 30% since Sept. 11, and she had to fire 32 people from her staff of 70. "Every month gets a little bit better, but it's tough," she says. "It's very, very tough."

While most of lower Manhattan has physically returned to its former self, the three-by-four-block neighborhood tucked between Broadway and Battery Park City, just south of the Trade Center site, is still enduring conditions that are chaotic even by New York standards.

Cover story

A few yards from the front door of Ayari's Subway shop, trucks leaving Ground Zero are hosed down by workers in full-body protective suits. The streets are a construction zone as damaged utilities are repaired. Temporary electrical cables run down tiny Exchange Alley.

Phone service has been spotty. "One day you'd have one line, (and) the next day you'd have no lines," Lydon says. To e-mail her clients, Lydon has been going to an Internet cafe near her daughter Meghan's school.

The smoky, bitter smell from the continuing underground fire at the Trade Center site persists. So do worries about whether it will cause health problems for those exposed to it daily. Even on days when the smell fades, the air still causes throats to burn.

Ruben Napoleoni is used to zipping in and out of neighborhoods in his job as a bicycle messenger. The attack put the brakes on. Increased security at office buildings means he can't get past the lobby and must wait for someone to take his package. "It is a disaster down there," he says, pausing on his bicycle near Trinity Church. "To do one pickup and one delivery takes about an hour. This really slows me down."

Daily routines upended

For everyone in the neighborhood — about 270,000 people still work in lower Manhattan, and tens of thousands live there — almost every daily routine has been upset.

Getting to work is harder. Passenger cars, other than those driven by neighborhood residents, were banned for 6 weeks and are still prohibited during morning rush hour. More important, five subway stations are closed — three beneath the Trade Center and two south of it. So is the PATH station, the train line under the Hudson River from the World Trade Center to New Jersey.

Getting lunch is harder. Navigating the sidewalks is tough. Pedestrians weave through barricades and tramp across wooden bridges. They dodge trucks loaded with debris headed from the Trade Center site to a Staten Island landfill.

Tightened security in office buildings has upset a daily ritual for office workers: getting lunch delivered. The New York Stock Exchange recently banned lunch deliveries. That has hurt delis and restaurants heavily dependent on lunch trade. Moran's has lost $350 a day in delivery orders, says Brian Lydon, Abby's husband.

Lawyer Randy Wills' favorite lunch spot, Sophie's on Greenwich Street, has closed. During one recent lunchtime, Wills made his way down Rector Street with takeout from a different deli. "It's an obstacle course and not a particularly pleasant one," he says of his work neighborhood. "I'm grateful to be back. But it is hard."



By Todd Pitt, USA TODAY

Life goes on: A hand-painted sign lets passersby know that Moran's, an Irish bar and grill just south of Ground Zero, is still in business.

"People are a little more serious, a little bit more anxious," Wills says. "Being this close to Ground Zero has a fairly significant effect."

Much as homeowners spray-paint the names of their insurance companies on their wrecked houses after a hurricane, businesses near the Trade Center have put up temporary signs alerting potential customers that they are open.

A small flier on a wooden barricade alerts clients of Pete and Vito, formerly of Plaza Chateau men's hairstylists, that they can now be found at Executive Hair in the lobby at 26 Broadway.

Brian Lydon made dozens of signs with spray paint and sheets and hung them on construction barriers. He painted a few arrows on the sidewalks for good measure. Now he's replacing the signs because tourists are taking them as souvenirs.

While workers and residents try to get on with their daily lives, a steady stream of tourists come to gaze at the Trade Center site. From Rector Street, the view north is of wreckage, including a section of the south tower's facade that is still standing.

A few onlookers at a time approach blue police sawhorses to shoot pictures. Some leave flowers at the barricades. And some stop at Ayari's Subway store for a sandwich. But the steady trade from the massive office buildings that used to bustle up the street — whether the daily lunch business or office parties that ordered huge subs — is gone. "I haven't made any party subs ever since," Ayari says.

The tourists have been a blessing for businesses struggling for survival. When there were still hundreds of them gathering at the barricades outside Moran's, Brian Lydon used to go outside and urge them to come in and eat.

They are buying film at Manoj Rajani's newsstand on the corner of Rector and Greenwich. Sales of the *New*

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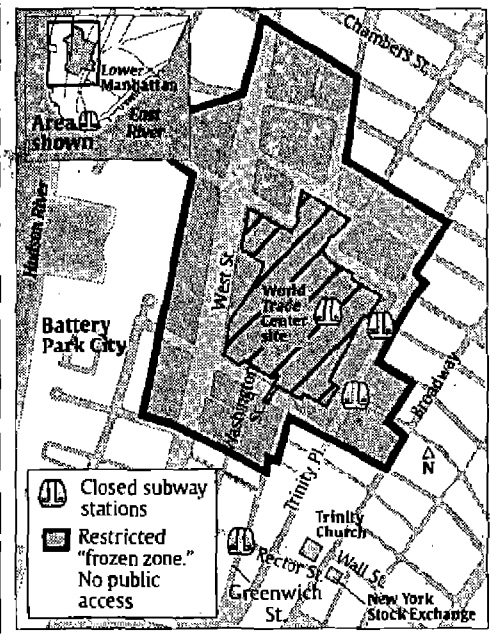
Restricted area

With no public access allowed around the site of the World Trade Center, small businesses and residents in the neighborhood are struggling with the changed environment that followed the Sept. 11 attacks.



By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

York Post were down to 40 copies a day, from 200, when Rajan reopened 3 weeks after the attack. When a subway station on his corner reopened in October, sales went up to 150 copies. But he no longer can get the newspapers delivered to his kiosk. Instead, he has to haul them from Broadway, a block away.

"There are the gawkers. That is helpful, and people should be grateful," says Kathy Wylde of the New York City Partnership, a downtown chamber of commerce. But they add to the congestion on nonexistent sidewalks and make life more difficult for office workers, she adds. Eventually, they will go away.

As hard as the holiday season appears, those in the neighborhood fear it will only get worse after the new year. "January is going to be a killer," says Menin of Wall Street Rising. "Because now there's media attention that's being paid, or people will make a point of going out to a downtown restaurant or shopping downtown for a day. But we need it every day."

From aerobics to search and rescue

Local organizations are scrambling to keep businesses going, especially during the Christmas season. There are shuttle buses to take Battery Park City residents shopping at the South Street Seaport, on the other side of lower Manhattan. And to lure other New Yorkers downtown, the Alliance for Downtown New York, a business group, is running TV ads.

One TV spot shows a bald man getting a haircut. "You may not need it, but downtown does," the tag line says.

Wall Street Rising plans to issue cards good for discounts at downtown stores and restaurants. The economic damage from losing weeks of revenue is so severe, however, that groups are lobbying the federal government for small-business grants rather than loans that owners say they won't be able to repay.

The last time Harry Bosworth was in New York, "you could run into people, and they'd give you a look and call you an (unkind name)," he says. "Now you're both saying 'Excuse me,' at the same time."

Bosworth has spent a month in the neighborhood. His company, American Restoration, is cleaning a 60-unit apartment building at 110 Greenwich Street and the health club next door, Dolphin Fitness, which was used as a command center by search-and-rescue teams.

The apartments at 110 Greenwich have terraces that once offered views of the World Trade Center. Now the building bears scars from flying debris, and apartments were coated with dust.

Dale Martin, the building manager, moved back into his apartment over Thanksgiving. Just 17 tenants have joined him. His happiness about being back turned to dismay when he discovered his son, Rocklind, can no longer catch the school bus in front of the building. Police have blocked the traffic.

Instead, Martin's wife must walk the first-grader two blocks to catch the bus to his relocated school. "It's really just turned our lives upside-down," he says.

'You relive it every day'

Before Sept. 11, the neighborhood had everything Martin could wish for. His wife shopped in the World Trade Center mall three times a week. There was a movie theater in Battery Park City. "We were in our own little world down here," Martin says. "All of it's gone. All of it."

Many of the people threading their way around the barricades are carrying memories of Sept. 11: trying to breathe through the choking dust, hiding in a basement, rushing to find children at day care or school.

Doreen Tyrrell was inside the American Stock Exchange, where she and her brother Tom are clerks. When the towers crashed down two blocks away, workers at the exchange hit the floor. Tom covered his sister's body with his own as their building filled with smoke and dust. "You relive it every day you come down here," Doreen says. "When the subway rumbles underneath (the street), you jump."

The Lydons bought their Christmas tree early this year, for Meghan's sake. They found a Christmas tree stand in Battery Park City, just like last year. But sometimes Abby Lydon wonders whether the disruptions are ever going to end.

The collapse of the Trade Center damaged their apartment building in Battery Park City, so the family is now living above the restaurant that they are struggling to keep afloat. Then there was a fire in the temporary electrical cables on Rector Street, a few yards from Moran's front door.

When American Airlines Flight 587 crashed Nov. 12 in Queens, the lower Manhattan neighborhood was immediately locked down by police as a precaution. There was a bomb scare at the police station across the street from the restaurant. And on Thursday, a blast of compressed air escaping from a pipe in the trench on Rector Street blew out windows in nearby buildings. Abby Lydon thought it was a bomb.

It's all starting to get to her. "I was saying, 'Do I need a brick to fall on my head to tell me it's time to leave?' " she says.

Ophir Barone and Ryan Farrell have made their decision. After nearly 3 months of shuttling among hotels, the New York University students came back to 110 Greenwich recently to pack their belongings. "I don't know how people are living down here," Farrell says as he pushes a chair and stereo speakers through the lobby. "I'd rather not deal with this."

"I don't want to breathe in something that in 35 or 40 years is going to catch up with me," Barone says. "For a security deposit? It's not worth it."

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