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Ground Zero air clearer

Recovery crews, neighbors say it's better

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For three months, acrid smoke and dust was as much a part of Ground Zero as the grief of victims' relatives and the determination of rescue workers.

But in recent days, workers and people who live and work in the area say the air has begun to clear up.

The choking smoke and smell that once spread for blocks and even miles is now largely confined to the underground pit where workers are excavating wreckage.

"It has gotten better," said sanitation worker Pete Lazare, 44, who has worked at Ground Zero since Sept. 11. "It's a different smell."

Crane operator Joseph Bradley said he used to have a persistent hacking cough.

"I still [have] a cough, but it's not like it was," said Bradley, 56.

Still, workers say they're not ready to doff their protective masks. "You've got to have it on, because you can hardly breathe," Lazare said.

Underground fires fade

No one is exactly sure why the air has begun to clear.

Officials say underground fires are starting to subside and should be completely out within weeks.

With half the wreckage gone, there also is much less debris and dust.

People who work and live in the neighborhood agree there's been a marked improvement in recent days.

"It's not that all consuming stench that it was before," said Edward Jones, 24, who walks dogs for a living in Tribeca.

Kelly Adams of Tribeca used to take her daughters — Zoe, 5, and Tess, 3 — to Central Park to play rather than to her local parks.

"Sometimes there was even a haze," Adams said. "You'd know it was going to be a bad day."

Now, she's spending more time in the neighborhood.

More than anything else, the cleaner air has helped her avoid reliving the horror of Sept. 11.

"It's much easier to avoid thinking about it without the smell," Adams said.

Staying away

Despite the improvement, not everyone is convinced the air is safe to breathe.

Lauren Liounis is still staying away from her Battery Park City apartment because she starts feeling ill after a few hours in the neighborhood.

"I'm still really glad not to be living there," said Liounis, 31.

Where to mourn our fallen heroes

The Fire and Police departments are asking the public to attend funerals and memorial services for firefighters and cops who died in the World Trade Center attack.

Some upcoming services:

- A memorial service will be held today for Capt. Vincent Brunton of Ladder Co. 105. It begins at 11 a.m. at Holy Name Catholic Church, 1245 Prospect Park West, Brooklyn.
- A memorial service will be held tomorrow for Firefighter James Pappageorge of Engine Co. 23. It begins at 11 a.m. at Transfiguration of Christ Church, 38-05 98th St., Corona, Queens.

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