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As Thousands Grieve

Families of civilian victims battle for recognition, benefits

By Roni Rabin
STAFF WRITER

It is the question everyone invariably asks, Laura Miuccio says, when they hear that her father was killed in the World Trade Center. Was he a firefighter?

He wasn't. Richard Miuccio was a 55-year-old sales tax auditor who had been married to his high school sweetheart for 35 years. He was a good man who raised three children, a man of faith who wore a cross on a chain around his neck, a man with a generous heart.

"It hurts when they ask that," said his 25-year-old daughter Laura, who lives on Staten Island. "When I say no, they look at me as though the loss . . . is somehow not so grave after all.

"I don't see the relevance of the question," she said. "It's not appropriate. He was just the most wonderful, best guy. My dad."

Miuccio is not alone in feeling that, somewhere in the maelstrom of pain and anguish, the vast majority of regular working people who perished in the Twin Towers Sept. 11 have been forgotten, eclipsed into obscurity by a public spotlight that has focused intensely on the uniformed rescue workers.

The slights family members describe are like paper cuts, hard to see with the naked eye but deep and stinging: celebrity concerts that hailed the rescue workers as heroes and hardly mentioned the workers in the building; free cruises and trips to Hawaii offered only to firefighters' families; invitations for children of firefighters to fly to Arizona with the mayor for a World Series game and to cut the ribbon for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. Many trips, vacations, sports events and concert tickets have been offered to families and people in uniform who may not even have lost a loved one.

Beyond the symbolism is a harsh financial reality. Even though families of uniformed rescue workers are perhaps, across the board, assured of more financial stability than most other families who lost a breadwinner — a spouse will draw the deceased person's salary tax-free for life, and families are also eligible for city and federal death benefits worth $275,000 plus a year's salary — enormous amounts of money have poured in from the public to funds exclusively reserved for them.

The funds devoted to rescue workers, who represent just over 10 percent of the total number killed Sept. 11, already have raised more than $300 million. The Twin Towers Fund established by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, which raised $113 million, has distributed $47.4 million of it to 397 families who lost firefighters, police, Port Authority police and court officers; the Port Authority Police PBA Fund last month issued checks of $25,000 to families of deceased and injured officers; and the New York Police and Fire Widows' and Children's Fund, which has raised $80 million, is mailing $40,000 checks this week to surviving spouses of rescue workers with minor children.

"It's not like we need dollar for dollar as the rescue workers," said Cheri Sparacio, a mother of 2-year-old twins who lost her husband, Thomas, and is expecting a third child in March. "But the money that people donate does speak to who their sympathies go out to, which is why we're feeling frustrated, and so bitter and hurt."

Relatives of firefighters who were lost acknowledge the issue is a difficult one. Michael Stackpole, a firefighter from Massapequa Park who lost his brother, Fire Capt. Timothy Stackpole, and who is one of the founders of the 9-11 Widows' and Victims' Families Association, said the organization's view is that monies should be distributed evenly between victims' families. While firefighters' funds are not permitted to redirect donations, Stackpole said, media attention and political pressure may result in increased public awareness and donations to civilian families.

"Do I believe firemen deserve a little bit more? Maybe," Stackpole said. "The firemen knew it was bad when they rushed in. They knew there was a

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