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NINA BERMAN—AURORA FOR USN&WR

The Rockaway area of New York City has suffered the twin tragedies of September 11 and November 12.

# Rockaway's web of grief

## One ravaged New York neighborhood, home to 'Mondo' and 'Bells,' endures

BY DAVID WHITMAN

BELLE HARBOR, N.Y.—As Mayor Rudolph Giuliani neared the inferno at the crash site of American Airlines Flight 587, the first thought darting through his mind was, "Oh, my God. I just passed the church in which I've been to . . . 10 funerals." Yet even the ubiquitous and steadfast mayor has been unable to attend all of the post-September 11 services held at St. Francis de Sales. When the World Trade Center towers collapsed, the Roman Catholic church lost 12 parishioners, six of them firefighters. Last week, death from the sky again visited Belle Harbor, a sleepy seaside sliver of Queens, killing five residents just two short blocks from St. Francis de Sales. And once more, Msgr. Martin Geraghty readied himself to toll the church bells to call mourners to memorial services. The chapel at St. Francis de Sales seats 500 people, but since September 11, 1,000 people at a time have crowded in for memorial services. Geraghty installed loudspeakers outside to carry the memorial masses to hundreds more who stood silently nearby in roped-off streets.

Unlike many communities, the Rockaways know how to deal with fiery catastrophes. "If you want to have a first-responder emergency," says U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner, Belle Harbor "is a good place to have it." Almost every block seems to boast a retired or off-duty firefighter, police officer, or ambulance worker. When Flight 587 went down, dozens of residents, many of whom had already lost family and friends in the World Trade Center, nevertheless ran toward the fire to help battle it.

Off-duty battalion fire chief Thomas Murphy, who had wriggled out from under debris at the World Trade Center collapse, sprinted over in shorts and a T-shirt to help fellow firefighters stretch out hoses. Retired firefighter Bernie Heeran first helped put out a fire with garden hoses and a fire extinguisher after a plane engine fell on a gas station across the street from his home. Then, Heeran—still mourning his son Charlie, a Cantor Fitzgerald trader who died on September 11—raced down to the restaurant he owned several blocks away, the Harbor Light Pub. It was just a few yards from the fire and soon became the disaster's triage center. When the blaze began to subside, firefighters Peter and Wally Blum dug through the rubble to retrieve the body of their nephew, 24-year-old Christopher Lawler, who had been asleep in the basement of his parents' house. All told, about 50 off-duty firefighters and police officers rushed to the scene, some sporting garden hoses, others toting ladders to evacuate residents. Officials at the crash site say that without the rapid response, the property damage and loss of life on the ground could have been much worse.

**A village in the city.** For all that it is part of New York City, Belle Harbor is the antithesis of a sprawling, anonymous metropolis. Set in the midst of the narrow 11-mile-long spit of the Rockaway Peninsula bounded by Jamaica Bay and the ocean, Belle Harbor almost has the feel of a New England fishing village. It is just five blocks wide at the crash site, so every house in the area is within easy walking distance of a beach. Restrictive zoning has kept out shopping malls, high-rise apartments, and all but a handful of chain outlets. For generations, Irish, Italian, and Jewish families have lived side by side in modest, boxlike, two-story homes that succeeded the beach bungalows that once dominated the area. Trim lawns, many overlooked by front porches, fill this isolated enclave, which is about 45 minutes by car from Manhattan. And on summer

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