NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Grief—and the Governor—Come Uptown

The convergence was awful and random. But when American Airlines flight 587 went down, the lives of more than 200 Dominican immigrants ended in the middle of a Queens neighborhood of second-generation Irish and Italian cops and firefighters represented by a Jewish congressman—the new New York



colliding tragically with the old.

Immediately, the official talk was of the unity of the victims, no matter their borough or ethnicity. On the streets of Washington Heights, though, there is considerable doubt about how public sympathy and practical support will be apportioned. There's also deep skepticism about the rush to declare the crash an accident.

In the 181st Street subway station, the front door of Alexandra's Fashions is covered with family snapshots of a smiling young woman. Below them spreads an improvised shrine of candles and roses. The store's manager, Nieves Mason, 36 and the mother of one son, had been on flight 587.

Upstairs, at the corner of 181st and St. Nicholas Avenue, Governor George Pataki suddenly appears and takes a few questions. He'd largely ceded the spotlight to Mayor Giuliani in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack, but with a gubernatorial election less than a year away, he's been much more aggressively high-profile since last Monday's crash. Pataki's eagerness to appear in charge draws some heat: His press-conference statement, hours after the disaster, that flight 587's pilot intentionally dumped fuel blindsides other officials—and proves to be flat wrong.

The next night, Pataki comes uptown at the suggestion of the state assemblyman for Washington Heights, Adriano Espaillat, a Democrat who's picked up on the neighborhood's disquiet. The governor can count as well as any politician. Two weeks ago, Washington Heights gave the Republican mayor-elect, Mike Bloomberg, a surprising 42 percent of its votes.

Calculation aside, there's something undeniably stirring about Pataki ambling around for 45 minutes, towering over stunned pedestrians. He darts away from his bodyguards to chat with homeboys in their Rocawear; he grabs the hand of a startled Pakistani newsstand worker, a woman in full Muslim headdress. Then he pops into a 24-hour laundromat, where two women are folding pants. The governor points at the clothes and says, stiffly, "Todos limpios, sí?" The women nod and smile, baffled and charmed.

Pataki and company settle in for dinner at Caridad; across the street is Rivas Travel, which sold twenty tickets for the fateful flight. "We're going to try to do what we did for World Trade Center families," Pataki says. "They'll need hugs and prayers, but we know there will also be economic difficulties." What about state money to help the victims' families? "Well, that's hard to say," Pataki says, turning to his plaintains.

Rafael Ulloa, 41, and his wife, Nurys, have one daughter in college and a second in high school; in early September, Ulloa began expanding his photo store at 181st and Broadway. Business has shriveled since September 11, and Ulloa is appealing to his landlord for a break on the rent. "Nobody's happy," Ulloa says. "Nobody's going to be spending money. It's great that the governor came to show that he feels sorry. But we'll have to wait and see if there's more to it than just handshakes."

CHRIS SMITH

Who's Checking Your Bags?

The tragedy of American Airlines flight 587—whatever brought it down—raises an unsettling question: Just how easily *could* explosives end up onboard? The answer is not so reassuring: Checked baggage on flights leaving Kennedy, for the most part, makes it on the plane without so much as a sniff from a well-trained dog.

Until September 11, the number of checked bags screened on domestic airlines hovered at a dismally low 3 percent. The checked baggage that did get screened belonged to passengers whose travel patterns raised a red flag. "But that's only effective for as long as the profile remains a secret," says Bob Monetti, whose son died on PanAm 103, and who's now a security consultant for the FAA. "Now we all know that if you use cash or buy a one-way ticket, that's part of the profile—nobody's going to try that." Since September 11, airlines have "greatly increased" the number of passengers whose checked baggage is randomly screened, claims the FAA, but the Department of Transportation puts the figure at less than 10 percent. Once a bag has been pulled aside for inspection, a machine that's essentially a CAT scan for luggage sets off an alarm if materials with the density of explosives pass by (apparently salamis qualify, as do plastic ski boots, dense wads of money, and fruitcakes, among many other things). Trained personnel then check the screen and possibly inspect bags by hand, in the presence of the passenger.

At Kennedy, only in Terminal One is every piece of checked baggage screened, at the insistence of airlines that operate there (such as Japan Airlines and Air France). The FAA is currently making a push to get 100 percent of baggage screened by the year 2004, but until now, the machines have been used sparingly, for fear of delays from all those false-positive salamis. One of the few states in the country that's already established 100 percent bag screening is Hawaii, but that's to guard against what must have once seemed like the biggest threat: contraband agriculture.

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