

FEATURE

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9/11 Remembered
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"A plane has just hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center. I repeat-a plane has just hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center." As I listened to these harrowing words on the radio, the calm of that September morning, with its cloudless blue sky and delightful Fall weather was shattered. And, in many ways, so too was our nation's innocence. Who can forget that day? Located at the edge of Ground Zero at the northwestern perimeter of what was once the World Trade Center, the New York County Lawyers' Association (NYCLA), like the rest of the lower Manhattan community, was dramatically impacted by the September 11 attacks.

A Changed World

Our world has changed-our lives have changed. For those of us who regularly travel downtown, the reminders of the attack are still very real and very dramatic. Directly across from NYCLA, on Vesey Street, sits Saint Paul's Church--George Washington's parish chapel and the oldest continuously used building in New York. The front and sides of the Church have become a shrine to those who perished on 9/11. One year later, banners and posters from around the world, and pictures and descriptions of people who died on that fateful morning, can still be found along the surrounding fences. Once in the shadows of the World Trade Center Towers, NYCLA is now bathed in the afternoon sun. The neighborhood is brimming with tourists, construction workers, police officers, vendors selling 9/11 memorabilia, and, where the Towers once stood, there is now a 16-acre hole nearly a quarter mile deep.

The Miracle on Vesey Street

For those of us in NYCLA's leadership, the days following the attacks were very disconcerting. Our chief concern was for the safety of our staff. Seventy-two hours passed before we could account for everyone. We were also concerned about our building, known as the 'Home of Law', which was only a short block away. Was it still standing? If so, what condition was it in? I recall seeing television footage of the Towers collapsing and thinking it was unlikely our building had survived that awesome devastation. Located in the "Red Zone," NYCLA was in a no-access area. Since law enforcement had other important priorities, it was not until September 16th that we were able to determine that our magnificent building was still standing and in surprisingly good shape. For me, the NYCLA building is no longer merely the Home of Law, it is the Miracle on Vesey Street.

The Legal Community Responds

I find it difficult to reflect on 9/11 without a rush of pride at the extraordinary legal relief effort. In fact/Moreover, that effort, which continues today, is a dramatic reminder that, more than any other profession, lawyers serve the public good. While the events of that morning were dreadful, it was also the beginning of one of the bar's finest hours-the 9/11 legal relief efforts. This began with the role of volunteer lawyers in the much heralded Death Certificate Project, which has received international attention and recognition. Immediately following the attacks, lawyers were among the first volunteers and our contributions were meaningful indeed. As was well-publicized, hundreds of lawyers, senior partners and junior associates from large firms, solo practitioners and lawyers from mid-sized firms, retired judges and newly admitted, volunteered to assist victims' survivors in preparing, coordinating and filing the required documents for the issuance of death certificates. I am proud to have been one of the soldiers in this army of lawyers doing what we could to help those who had lost loved ones. This sad work involved interviewing survivors and listening to stories of fateful changes of schedules, last goodbyes, painful last telephone calls from trapped

loved ones, and the cries of children left without parents. Lawyers are not often thought of as relief workers but that is what we were doing; what we were uniquely qualified to do to help. It was very painful work-we all heard moving, heartbreaking stories. A husband told me and his late wife had learned on September 10th she was finally pregnant after trying for two years. Another husband, left with three small children, described receiving four calls from his late wife while she was trapped with co-workers in Tower One. A father, a very angry father, described his late 23 year old daughter, who had flown into New York for one day, September 11, to attend an early morning seminar at the World Trade Center. A woman told me her late husband, who had just gone back to work after having nearly died during quadruple bypass surgery, joked that he had cheated death. A Russian man, who had recently emigrated to the United States with his late wife and four year old son, told of how his wife had modeled her clothes to decide what to wear on her first day of work, September 11. In 1996, I spent a month in war-torn Bosnia shortly after the Dayton Accords, serving as an Election Supervisor. In 1999, I interviewed Kosovar refugees for evidence of war crimes. In both of those projects I was deeply moved by the human suffering I encountered. However, the post-9/11 work was the toughest.

The Court System

While many have received recognition and praise for the extraordinary jobs they did during the crisis, New York State's - Office of Court Administration, its leaders and staff, did not receive the acknowledgment they deserved for the remarkable job they did to keep our courts operating under very difficult and challenging circumstances. Our courts are a few blocks from Ground Zero and there were serious challenges-morale was low, no telephones or computers worked, and three court officers who had rushed over with twenty other court officers to the burning towers to be of assistance had made the ultimate sacrifice. The smoke and pungent smell of burning embers were constant sensory reminders of the devastating attacks. Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye, Chief Administrative Judge Jonathan Lippman,

and Administrative Judge Joan B. Carey, who are responsible for all the Courts in New York City, are to be commended for the incredible job they did in keeping the courts functioning in the days immediately following September 11.

The Lessons from 9/11

While there are lessons to be learned, I believe two important messages emerged from those cowardly attacks. First, as lawyers, as New Yorkers, and as Americans, when things are at their worst, we are at our very best. Second, there is still great nobility in our profession. I am very proud of the way the local bar associations worked together from the outset. We put aside our usual friendly, sometimes petty, rivalries and joined with the New York State Bar Association, the Association of the Bar of the City of New York and other bar associations in the effort to assist victims of the September 11 tragedy. It was the bar's finest hour. Today, our Nation faces challenges, obstacles and threats that a short time ago would have seemed unthinkable. We lawyers, as the guardians of our democracy, face great and difficult challenges as we try to balance civil liberties with our Nation's legitimate security concerns. The road is a long and formidable one, but together we shall overcome every challenge; together, we shall overcome every obstacle; together, we shall overcome every threat. And, ultimately, our Nation shall prevail.

Michael Miller is the President of the New York County Lawyers' Association (NYCLA), one of the country's largest local bar associations. As President-Elect, he coordinated NYCLA's effort to recruit and train volunteer lawyers to assist victims' families in obtaining death certificates and the entitlements to which issuance of the certificate was an essential prerequisite. He personally devoted six weeks to this project, working 12 to 14 hours per day. Long committed to pro bono work, Mr. Miller is the recent recipient of an ABA 2002 Pro Bono Publico Award for his 9/11 work. Mr. Miller is a member of the House of Delegates of both the American Bar Association and the New York State Bar Association. MICHAELMILLERESQ@msn.com