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THE ROTARIAN

December 2001 | Vol. 179 No. 6

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Ground Zero

Rotarians unite in response to an unspeakable tragedy.

by Cary Silver

As New York Rotarian Mats Ingemanson headed for the subway on the morning of 11 September, he could not understand why his cell phone was not working. "For some reason, I couldn't make any calls. My phone was completely dead," he recalled. "Then I heard the sirens of firetrucks and police cars." As the train headed downtown, Ingemanson noticed a distraught, disheveled man who told passengers that two planes had crashed into the Twin Towers. "I thought he was a homeless man. No one took him seriously."

But
it
was

only a matter of minutes before they did. "When I got out of the subway less than three quarters of a mile from the World Trade Center, I saw a huge cloud of smoke pouring towards me. Crowds of people were running down the street, screaming in fear. I shouted, 'What's happening?' and they shouted back, 'The World Trade building is coming down!'"

Like everyone else, Ingemanson started running. "I was afraid for my life," he said. "I had no idea if there would be a domino effect — buildings collapsing on top of each other. I was in the middle of the risk zone, and I had no idea of what was going to happen next."

Ingemanson made his way to Prince and Wooster streets in Soho, just over a mile from the World Trade Center. "Then I saw the second tower come down," he continued. "I stood next to the NBC camera man who recorded the event. It was very eerie — almost like the building was falling in slow motion. None of it seemed real, like I was in a horror movie."

About two miles away, Rotary Foundation Trustee Chairman Luis Vicente Gay and his wife, Celia, watched the nightmare unfold before their eyes from the vantage point of their 35th-floor hotel window across from the United Nations Headquarters. Gay was on the telephone talking to an RI staff member in Evanston, Ill., USA, when the first hijacked plane smashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

"I couldn't believe what was happening," said Gay, who almost dropped the receiver. "The plane seemed so deliberate, I wasn't sure if this was an accident or something else. When the second plane hit the other tower, we knew it was a terrorist act."

Ironically, Gay was in town to speak about The Rotary Foundation's humanitarian and peace efforts at the UN's Annual Public Information/Non-Governmental Organizations Conference. The conference was interrupted when the UN building was evacuated as a safety precaution.

The Gays were trapped in New York for days, unable to board a flight, a train or even a bus. Police had barricaded the bridges and the roads for security purposes. "We have been in difficult situations before, including an earthquake in India and a volcano in Ecuador," said Gay. "But this was different. This was

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— Rotary Foundation Trustee
Chairman Luis Vicente Gay

an act of war."

On the fifth day, the Glays waited in long lines to rent a car, then drove 14 hours non-stop from New York to Evanston. "When we crossed the George Washington Bridge, we felt a sense of relief and said, 'Now we can pray.'"

Another New York City Rotarian, 81-year-old Bill DeLong, who also attended the conference, related, "I was in the delegates' lounge when it was announced that the United Nations building had to be evacuated." He has spent nearly every day since then at "Ground Zero" — as the World Trade Center site quickly became known — volunteering for the Salvation Army and distributing food and water to the rescue and recovery workers.

Ingemanson made it back home safely in Greenwich Village and was stunned to find scores of e-mail messages from Rotarians around the world. He quickly realized that his time would be better spent in front of his computer screen than at the disaster scene. "With the phone lines down, roads closed and mass confusion, the computer became the best way to communicate. You could post messages about missing people and facilitate relief efforts. It brought people together in a time of crisis."

Rotarians take action

Throughout New York, similar scenarios were playing out as Rotarians tried to grasp the magnitude of the attack and decide what they should do. The Rotary clubs of New York and Staten Island both were scheduled to hold their regular luncheon meetings on that Tuesday. Walter Parks, president of the Rotary Club of Staten Island, watched the Twin Towers burn and then collapse from across the bay. "I refused to cancel the meeting," he said. "I was in disbelief, hurt, angry. I felt it was important to hold the meeting like we normally would."

About 30 of the 100 club members attended — an impressive number given the extreme circumstances. "As Rotarians, we could express our feelings and grief. It was a time to share and vent," he said.

Miraculously, no Rotarians were reported killed or injured in the attack. But as Parks put it, "There wasn't anyone who wasn't affected in some way."

Authorities estimate that at least 5,000 people from 88 countries were killed in the attack on the 110-story World Trade Center, including hundreds of rescue workers who rushed to the scene. The attack has been blamed on Islamic extremists who hijacked four commercial jetliners that morning. About an hour after the first two planes hit the World Trade Center, a third crashed into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., where 125 people died. A fourth hijacked jetliner, possibly headed for Washington, crashed near Shanksville, Pa., killing all 44 people aboard.

The Staten Island Rotarians decided to take action immediately. The club authorized \$5,000 for emergency relief. "We acted as a first response team," said Parks. "All five Rotary clubs on Staten Island worked together. A member from the Gateway club donated one of his vacant buildings to use as a drop-off point for donated supplies."

Each day, a different Staten Island club manned the drop-off site, collecting and sorting clothes, blankets, axes, masks and other supplies. One Rotarian, upon hearing there was a severe shortage of beds, arranged for 350 beds to be donated from another organization. Another Rotarian arranged for the donation of 10,000 bottles of water, which had to be picked up in New Jersey.

"We rented a U-Haul to pick up the water and used our political influence to get into high-security areas. It was like a military zone," said Parks. "The new ballpark [Richmond County Bank Ballpark at St. George] on Staten Island was used as a morgue and triage area."

The success of the donation drive was due to classic Rotary networking. "It was all on a handshake and a phone call," explained Parks. "People never asked for money — they just offered."

The Rotary Club of New York also chose to hold its scheduled meeting on that ill-fated day, even though its club president, Helen Reisler, was stranded in Brooklyn. "The mood was very somber," she said. "The second meeting [the following week] was packed — people wanted to know what they could do. Almost everyone had a relative, a neighbor, a co-worker, or a friend who was killed or injured. We all felt the pain."

The New York club contributed \$250,000 to its New York Rotary Foundation to assist those victims and their families who show the greatest need.

The club was particularly concerned about one club member — attorney David Serko — whose office was located in the World Trade Center. For nearly two days, no one heard from him. "We posted messages on the Internet," said Reisler. "Thankfully, we learned he was all right. He had gone in late that day and missed the attack. His office was demolished, but he was safe."

The club nearest to the disaster scene — the 18-member Rotary Club of Downtown New York (Chinatown)

— was also scheduled to meet that Tuesday. But many members were unable to enter the restricted area, and others were coping with personal losses of their own. Two club members lost offices in the World Financial Center, which was near the World Trade Center. "Many restaurants, hotels and other businesses in the area are on the verge of bankruptcy," reported club President Chris Sang. "For the first month, they had no phone service and few customers. The hotel where we meet is laying off staff. We are seeing what we can do to help the people whose livelihoods are being affected."

Andrew Cheng, governor of the affected District 7230, personally visited Ground Zero a week after the attack. He has received more than 300 messages and phone calls offering support and condolences from Rotarians around the world. "It was shocking to see the devastation in person," he said. "It's a completely different experience than when you watch it on TV."

A parallel tragedy

In Washington, D.C., Rotarians were experiencing similar heartbreak in the aftermath of a hijacked jetliner that crashed into the Pentagon building about an hour after the first plane hit the World Trade Center. Timothy Hanson, president of the 200-member Rotary Club of Washington, D.C., said his members meet in a hotel about a block from the White House. "We had to cancel our first meeting after the attack," he said. "Our hotel meeting site was surrounded by Secret Service men and there was an army tank out in front." He described the mood as "somber," since many members are still concerned for their safety. "Because of our location, we're near many potential terrorist targets. Many people are wondering what will happen next, especially in light of the anthrax scare."

Nonetheless, the Rotarians of District 7620 and Washington, D.C., are collecting funds for the victims. The Washington Rotarians hope to help the staff of their hotel meeting site, who are suffering financially. "There is a great sense of community," said Hanson. "Rotary has an important role to play. It's still relevant in today's world."

Many Rotarians traveled from other states to offer their services. Ron Mackert, president of the Rotary Club of Haywood Country (Canton), NC., USA, works for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which helps coordinate the many relief agencies on site. "Even though I have served in 30 disasters, I have never seen anything like this," admitted Mackert, who had a 60-day assignment at FEMA's Disaster Field Office in Manhattan. "The sheer scope and magnitude of this tragedy is beyond comprehension." He and his team worked 12-hour days, seven days a week.

One of his most poignant memories is a visit to the Family Assistance Center, where families post photographs of missing loved ones on a huge plywood wall. "You can't walk by that wall without being seriously affected," he said. "It is even more painful because all the photos show people at a happy time in their lives — at a wedding, at a birthday party, at a reunion. It personalizes the tragedy."

Mackert said the experience is also emotional because of the diminishing "hope factor." He explained, "After the first couple days, you realize that these people are not just missing, but probably gone. Yet there are some families that are still holding out some extraordinary ray of hope."

Indeed, many people in the affected cities are dealing with unimaginable stress and grief. Serge Hadjolian, a certified psychoanalyst and immediate past president of the Rotary Club of New York, is offering free grief counseling through the club. More than 60 people have responded to his offer to help. "Many people have been traumatized and are dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. I am also counseling children who have lost parents," he said, adding that he has been working 12-hour days to keep up with demand.

Hadjolian observed that most Rotarians were galvanized by the crisis — not paralyzed by it. "Rotarians do not let the external environment control them," he said. "Morale seems higher than usual in our club, because the members have a purpose."

Other members of the New York club have also volunteered their expertise and the resources of their companies. Rotarian Cindy Erickson, chief executive officer of the American Lung Association in New York, directed her organization to distribute 8,000 lung health kits as part of "Operation Return Home" to residents of Ground Zero. The kits included masks and gloves to protect against the thick soot, dust and other air pollutants. She in turn called on another Rotarian, Clarence Plummer, who owns a courier service. Plummer, along with a group of Rotaractors, delivered water, masks and gloves to the affected areas.

"People were walking around in complete shock, some covered with soot," recalled Erickson. "I remember one couple — she still had debris in her hair, and he was missing a shoe. There was so much soot on their backs that I could have written my name in it."

Perhaps one of the most uniquely qualified Rotarians in the New York club is Dr. Jeff Burkes, an oral surgeon with the unusual Rotary classification of "forensic dentist." Dr. Burkes is chief dental consultant to the city's Office of Chief Medical Examiner, whose responsibility is to determine causes of death and identify human remains. Forensic dentistry is an exacting science that requires great patience and long hours. "During the first couple weeks, I worked 20-hour days and went home at 3 in the morning," he said. "We were overwhelmed by the sheer number of victims."

Dr. Burkes points out that the magnitude of the disaster is unprecedented. "This is the worst mass

murder in the history of New York," he said. "In the past, we've had practice drills to prepare teams of forensic dentists for a worst-case scenario of two planes accidentally crashing into each other, perhaps killing 500 people. But we never could have anticipated over 5,000."

It may be an unenviable job, but Dr. Burkes' efforts have resulted in closure for hundreds of families who have been desperately waiting for news — any news.

Flashback to terror

In the U.S. heartland, Rotarians in Oklahoma City could relate directly to the terrorist attacks of 11 September. It was only six years ago that they were assisting the victims of a bomb that destroyed the nine-story Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building — killing more than 800 workers and 40 children in the building's daycare center. The Oklahoma City Rotarians dispersed more than \$500,000 to assist those victims and their families. The poignant image of firefighter Chris Fields cradling the lifeless body of 1-year-old Baylee Almon is seared forever in the hearts and minds of the public.

Jim Clark, president of the Rotary Club of Oklahoma City, said, "These recent attacks really struck home with our club, since we had gone through a similar crisis. Everyone in Oklahoma City experienced a flashback. We have great empathy for the victims, their families, and what people are going through."

In response to the latest tragedy, Oklahoma City Rotarians sent \$100,000 to the Rotary Club of New York and \$20,000 to the Rotary Club of Washington, D.C. "We wanted to help in some way, and we are here if they need our support or guidance," said Clark.

Halfway around the world, a similar sentiment was expressed by Adel Mahmoud Hamdy, president of the Rotary Club of Alexandria Pharos, Egypt. He wrote, "The catastrophe of 11 September is beyond the comprehension of any sane human being. We grieve with you the human loss and the disastrous outcome that will affect everybody on the globe. We in Egypt understand the meaning and the extent of suffering resulting from terrorism, whether local or international, as we have experienced its bitter taste and saw its ugly face over so many years.

"I hope that it is clearly understood that it is neither part of the Islamic faith or part of our local culture to attack defenseless, innocent people. Islam is an honorable religion that respects the dignity of the body and soul, and highly values human life. On behalf of my club, I hope you will accept our condolences in the great loss of our community — Americans, Egyptians, or any other nationality."

A show of solidarity

Indeed, Rotarians around the world expressed sorrow, sympathy — and a strong desire to help. "I received beautiful messages and letters of condolence from all over the world," said Helen Reisler. "It was truly heartwarming to see the solidarity and support of Rotarians, whether they were from England, Colombia or Poland." Like other clubs and districts affected by the disaster, Reisler also started receiving a flood of contributions for the victims. "Whether it was a contribution of \$10 or \$100,000, every donation is meaningful," she said.



Members of the Rotary Club of New York offered their time, services and expertise in various professions to help the victims of Ground Zero. Left to right: Bill DeLong, Giorgio Balestrieri, Mats Ingemanson, President Helen Reisler, Christopher Plummer, Secretary Greg Lynch and Cindy Erickson.

Throughout the Rotary world, symbolic gestures are another sign of unity — whether it's a moment of silence at club meetings or singing inspirational songs. One Rotarian, Henry Panion of the Rotary Club of Birmingham, Alabama, USA, could not sleep at night until he composed the lyrics and score for a song to honor victims' families. Called "We Stand Strong," club members now sing the hymn at every meeting.

Rotarians in Germany, New Zealand and South Africa have offered to pay the airfare and host the children of victims in their Rotary homes. In Michigan City, Indiana, USA, Rotarians donated a van to help New York firefighters. A number of Rotarians — including Isabelle Hughes of Santa Cruz, Calif., USA, — personally delivered checks to the New York club. Hughes, born and raised in New York, wanted to express her support in person.

Many Rotarians believe that recent events prove once again the vital importance of volunteer organizations such as Rotary. RI President Richard D. King wrote on 12 September: "These events demonstrate all the more the importance of Rotary's Global Quest to keep our organization growing and thriving. Where Rotary exists in the world, there is a greater chance for peace. By swelling the ranks of Rotarians dedicated to peace, we can further strengthen Rotary's mission to foster international understanding and goodwill."

For Rotarians like Mats Ingemanson, Helen Reisler and Walter Parks, it may take years — even a lifetime

— to come to terms with the tragedy. For each, the Twin Towers were a very special symbol of the unique character of New York. "One of my favorite memories was enjoying the concerts at the Twin Towers during lunchtime," said Ingemanson. "I used to stand in the shade of those magnificent buildings. Now everything there is gone."

Reisler said that there is a "terrible void" without the Twin Towers. "Now you see only an empty sky," she said. "Sometimes, I still see the outlines of the towers. I can't seem to erase them from my memory."

Parks has experienced a similar reaction. "I was born and raised here. When I look at the skyline now, it's disturbing. You feel like something has been taken away from you."

But all agree that Rotary has given something valuable back. The crisis has inspired Rotarians to come together and rise to the occasion, despite their own personal tragedies or limited resources.

"The terrorists did not count on the fact that their actions would only galvanize the public and make people even more patriotic," said Ingemanson. "It has truly brought out the best in people. Now I understand more clearly than ever the need for an organization like Rotary."

Rotarians from around the world continue to send letters of support, make contributions, donate blood and visit the afflicted cities in a spirited show of support. Those Rotarians who reside near the disaster areas continue to rebuild their lives and reach out to those in greatest need — the so-called forgotten victims.

"It will be hard to forget the tragedy of September 11. But I will not forget the camaraderie and compassion shown by Rotarians," said Parks. "That was Rotary at its purest. I will remember that for the rest of my life."

— *Cary Silver is executive editor of The Rotarian magazine.*

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