

NEW YORK POST

HEROES' ADVOCATE STRICKEN WITH 'WTC' DISEASE

By SUSAN EDELMAN

September 24, 2006 -- A beloved retired firefighter who carried the body of his slain FDNY son from the World Trade Center rubble and then worked nine months to recover remains at Ground Zero now has cancer possibly linked to WTC toxins.

Lee Ielpi, 62, a highly decorated firefighter, worked 10 to 14 hours a day amid the smoking rubble. The 26-year veteran, who lost his 29-year-old son, Jonathan, in the Twin Towers, later served as vice president of the 9/11 Victims and Families Association.

Suffering a shortness of breath and slight swelling in his ankle, Ielpi went for a FDNY screening three months ago. He has Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia, a rare type of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, which is treatable but incurable.

"I'm too busy to dwell on it," said Ielpi, who rushes straight from chemotherapy treatments to his labor of love - the new WTC Tribute Center at Ground Zero, which he helped found.

Ielpi's oncologist, Dr. Jonathan Kolitz, said "it's possible" the cancer was triggered by hundreds of hours of work on the hugely contaminated site.

Ielpi was unaware until recently that 70 other WTC responders have come down with blood cancers, according to David Worby, a lawyer for 8,000 rescue and recovery workers.

Friends are amazed at Ielpi's iron-like resilience, joking that he has more hair now than before starting his chemo.

"I get a little tired, but it hasn't impacted me much so far," he said.

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