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## Partners Bound by the Ties of 9/11

By ANTHONY DePALMA

FOR two former undercover detectives in their early 40s who cheated death time and again, no day is ordinary, not anymore, and certainly not a day like this one on the shore of Long Island — a day showered with sea spray and salt air; with clam bellies in a bucket at their sides and jigs tempting stripers in the surf; with sand and sky, wind and waves, straight talk about life and mocking chatter about death.

As they keep a watchful eye for any wiggle of their 15-foot-long fishing poles, Ernest Vallebuona of New City, N.Y., and Michael Valentin of Ronkonkoma shoot the breeze about how, as partners in one of New York City's undercover vice squads, they easily adapted to the pace of street work — long hours of waiting interrupted by spurts of dramatic action — kind of like saltwater fishing, actually.

In their line of work, however, the ultimate success of a drug bust, a raid on an illegal bar or any other vice operation, depended on carefully choreographed backup showing up precisely when it was needed.

Each of these guys has battered through steel doors while the other was inside some dingy joint, without a gun, praying for backup to arrive. But that was before they both were forced by sickness to retire on a disability pension over the past year. Now they rely on each other for backup as they confront catastrophic illnesses that they trace to working at ground zero after the towers fell.

Still pumped up with street swagger, they boast that it is not death they fear. “The physical part of dying doesn't really scare me and Mike,” Mr. Vallebuona, 42, said on the beach at [Robert Moses State Park](#) that day. He has B-cell lymphoma, now in remission. “It's your family you worry about. It's not being there to lock the door at night. But it's a nice feeling to know that Mike could still be there.”

And if fate had other plans and took his partner first, Mr. Vallebuona, with two young sons, 8 and 6, said he would look after Mr. Valentin's three teenagers. Mr. Valentin, 43, has a respiratory condition that has led to worrisome cysts in his chest and on his kidney. His lungs and esophagus are so badly burned that he sometimes sounds like a busted muffler, and he needs a nebulizer to help him breathe. Doctors have told him that his condition could lead to lymphoma or mesothelioma, an often fatal disease almost always connected to asbestos.

“There were all these unknowns,” Mr. Valentin said. “Were we going to live or die? What would happen to our families? So we helped each other out, consoled each other on the phone. It was real important, you know?”

Although experts haven't conclusively linked the contaminated dust to diseases, medical experts and city officials say that thousands of people in the region who responded to the disaster are struggling with serious respiratory and gastrointestinal problems. Doctors are starting to see some blood cancers and malignant

tumors and are concerned that the number of such cases could rise. The deaths of three New York City detectives, including that of James Zadroga last year, have been linked by their families and some doctors to 9/11, but officials do not consider the evidence conclusive.

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WHETHER it can ever be proved that the trade center dust caused life-threatening diseases, or that other factors — like Mr. Valentin’s long history of smoking Parliaments — are involved, will be determined by medical experts and in a federal courtroom, where 8,000 people, including Mr. Vallebuona and Mr. Valentin, are suing the city for negligence in a legal action led by a Westchester lawyer, David E. Worby.

But Mr. Vallebuona and Mr. Valentin have already won a major legal and financial battle. Over the last year both have won retirement and disability pensions under the so-called Zadroga laws. Signed by Gov. [George E. Pataki](#) in 2006, the laws presume that officers who develop such conditions after working at ground zero became ill because of their exposure to trade center dust.

As detectives, Mr. Vallebuona and Mr. Valentin risked death countless times. But they say the courage it took to enter a literal den of thieves is nothing compared with what it takes to stare down a disease.

They became good friends when they worked as partners, on and off, for five years. But since both men became seriously ill in 2004, they have become far more than partners or friends. In an extraordinary way, they have become each other’s psychologist and therapist, priest and protector. In the process, doctors say, they have helped each other stand up not only to death, but also to the challenge of savoring each drop of life.

“The support they give one another is a blessing,” said Dr. Benjamin J. Luft, director of the Long Island World Trade Center Monitoring Treatment Program at [Stony Brook University Medical Center](#), where Mr. Valentin is checked regularly. “Being together and seeing each other, there’s an empathy, a kind of reality check.”

As it turns out, these tough guys — Mr. Valentin was known on the street as the “White Devil” and Mr. Vallebuona had more than a thousand collars and assists during his undercover career — have a soft and sensitive side. That’s not something they would have wanted anyone to know while they were detectives.

But when Mr. Valentin had surgery to remove a mass in his chest in 2004, it was Mr. Vallebuona who called every day to find out how he was. Sometimes there were prayers; other times, tears. On a job like vice, such an emotional outpouring would be suspect. Tact and reserve go along with the macho image of a vice squad. Teardrops and tenderness do not.

“You want to have a guy on your side who’s going to pull the trigger on the bad guy,” Mr. Valentin said. “You wouldn’t want somebody who’s too sensitive to do it.”

They would be on the phone and all of a sudden they would start blubbering like babies. At first there was embarrassment. They blamed their medication. “The prednisone makes you so emotional that a McDonald’s commercial can make you cry,” Mr. Valentin said.

But as they descended deeper into their illnesses, embarrassment gave way to comfort. They realized that they could unload fears on each other that they couldn’t even raise with their wives.

When Mr. Vallebuona had a recurrence of lymphoma in 2005 and had to undergo a complicated stem cell transplant, he was put in isolation at [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center](#). Mr. Valentin was upset because he wasn’t allowed to visit.

But he called, just about every day.

Mr. Vallebuona said it was a great comfort to be able to unload on his partner all of his fears about leaving his family unprotected. “We were both going through basically the same type things, not knowing if we were going to survive to the next year,” he said. “We’d cry sometimes. It was a nice crutch to have.”

They make a complementary duo, somewhere on the character scale between Crockett and Tubbs of “Miami Vice” and Toody and Muldoon of “Car 54, Where Are You?” Both their fathers put in full careers on the police force. Mr. Vallebuona has a B.A. in business and likes to read, especially Viking adventure stories. As an undercover officer, he usually played a meek [Woody Allen](#)-type john secretly looking for a good time.

He already had several years’ experience on the job when Mr. Valentin became his partner in 1998. Mr. Valentin, who did not go to college, was a quick learner, but admitted he was sometimes too hotheaded for his own good. He got in trouble once for chasing a suspect through a schoolyard with his gun drawn. He speaks Spanish fluently, but looks as if he came from County Cork.

That mismatched identity provided a perfect cover. Mr. Vallebuona said that when his partner worked a stakeout, “the people there would say ‘He can’t be a cop.’”

“The Police Department wouldn’t be so stupid to put an Irish guy into a Spanish bar.”

Suspecting nothing, the bad guys spoke freely. Mr. Valentin listened.

Later he used the information to arrest some very surprised criminals.

After a bust, both men said, there was usually time to head back to the office and do some paperwork. Or since it was early morning, they could go near the water somewhere and bait a hook. “We can say it now; we’re not working,” Mr. Vallebuona said.

Then came 9/11. They arrived in Lower Manhattan just as the towers turned to dust. They waded into the thick plume, unable to see in front of them. Vice operations were suspended and through much of the next three months they were assigned to help retrieve body parts, escort people back to their apartments in the sealed-off zone, and do perimeter security.

Both men said they were never given a respirator. Instead, they used American flag bandanas bought by Mr. Valentin’s wife, Joanne, to filter the air.

SINCE he got sick, the combination of high medical bills and the loss of extra income from overtime pay has forced Mr. Valentin to sell his house and move in with his parents in Ronkonkoma. For a change of scenery, Mr. Vallebuona sold his house on Staten Island and moved to New City in Rockland County.

They went to Disney World together with their families in April and they said that was great. But they don’t get to spend as much time together as they would like.

Still, whenever they can, they fish. On Long Island or near Mr. Vallebuona’s parents at the Jersey Shore, it matters little to them. They sit in beach chairs at the water’s edge, both in khaki shorts with their bare feet in the sea foam, side by side as partners facing the ocean and an uncertain future. Financial security is a constant worry, but there is always time for laughs, and black humor.

“When I go I don’t want the Emerald Society playing at my funeral,” Mr. Valentin said, referring to the bagpipers who traditionally play at police funerals. “I want a mariachi band.”

As they sat by the sea on that day in May, an aerial acrobat roared overhead. The pilot took the small red plane into crazy loops, stomach-turning rollovers and terrifying death spirals — apt metaphors for the barely controlled chaos the partners have lived through the last few years.

“I never wore a seat belt before, but I do now,” Mr. Vallebuona said. “If I die of anything but cancer my family won’t get anything.”

They got out of their chairs and made one last cast, their lines soaring deep into the gray surf. Nothing was biting, but who cared?

The plane roared by again. Mr. Vallebuona packed up and headed back to Rockland County to pick up his two boys from school.

Mr. Valentin loaded the big fishing poles into the back of his blue pickup. The nebulizer he carried with him sat unused on the bench seat — no need when the air is so free.

Then he got into the truck, happy to be heading home once more.

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