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From dust to dust

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For six harrowing months, Sister Cindy Mahoney blessed human remains pulled from the smoldering debris of Ground Zero, prayed with the workers who painstakingly combed the rubble each day and comforted relatives of the dead when they visited the site. Now, the 54-year-old Anglican nun is lying in a hospice bed, stricken by lung cancer and hooked up to oxygen tubes 24 hours a day. Her dying wish is that her body undergoes an autopsy to prove that she was killed by her exposure to the toxic dust and air at the World Trade Center (WTC). Sister Cindy hopes that this final gesture will help to prove that thousands of rescue and recovery workers who labored for months at the site of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks sacrificed their health for their country as they inhaled the poisonous air.

On September 11, New York will commemorate the fifth anniversary of the atrocity with a series of events at the site, beginning at 8.46am - when the first plane struck - and including the reading out of the names of the nearly 3,000 people killed that day. But five years after al-Qaeda terrorists crashed planes into New York's Twin Towers and the Pentagon in Washington from the clear, blue skies of an early autumn morning, the suicide hijackers unleashed by Osama bin Laden are still killing and crippling Americans.

Thousands of rescue and recovery workers who rallied to help in the terrible hours, days and weeks after the attack on the WTC - and who were lauded as heroes by United States President George W Bush and the city's mayor, Rudy Giuliani - now feel that they are the forgotten victims of September 11.

Local and federal authorities refuse to recognize that these "first responders," as they are known in America, were poisoned at Ground Zero or pay compensation for their failing health. Of the 40,000 firemen, police officers, paramedics, construction workers and volunteers who toiled at the site after September 11, at least 12,000 have suffered serious respiratory illnesses, according to doctors monitoring their health in a widescale screening operation.

In an alarming development, increasing evidence of lethal lung-scarring and cancers is now emerging. Lawyers say that at least 375 Ground Zero workers have developed cancer and several have died.

Sister Cindy, who is being cared for by friends in her hometown of Aiken, South Carolina, is too sick to talk. But last month she gave instructions to her lawyer that she wanted her autopsy to be used to help other September 11 workers.

"The government should help these people - not leave them to die like I'm dying," she told David Worby, a New York attorney, who is part of the legal team representing a class action of about 8,000 people who worked at the site.

Earlier this year, a New Jersey coroner attributed the death of James Zadroga, a 34-year-old former police detective, to the dust that he inhaled at Ground Zero after the attacks. It was the first death officially linked to toxins at the site, although the families of several other first responders say that their loved ones have also died as a result.

For Sister Cindy, like thousands of others, it began with what New Yorkers quickly dubbed the "World Trade Center cough" - a persistent rasping wheeze that developed two or three months after working at the site. Now, according to Worby, the non-smoker and long-time scuba diver suffers from asthma, reactive airways dysfunction syndrome, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and acid reflux, and also post-traumatic stress disorder.

The nun had moved to New York from South Carolina only two weeks before the attacks to live at the Midtown convent of the Order of St Helena. She was so new to the city that when she was first told what had happened that morning, she asked "What's the Twin Towers?" Sister Cindy then ran to the nearest hospital to volunteer to help and hitched a lift to the scene in an ambulance. She took shelter behind a tombstone in a churchyard when the first tower fell, and dived under a fire engine when the second collapsed. In a subsequent email to a friend, she described the horrifying experience.

"The air was so thick and hot I could not breathe ... It felt to me that the sky was falling. I thought I would die." She described her work in the following weeks, writing: "Sometimes I pray over a body bag that has a firefighter's complete uniform from his helmet to his jacket ... with nothing visible inside. It gets very difficult."

She repeatedly visited "the pit" - the gaping, rubble-filled hole left by the attacks - to "bless and say a prayer for the fallen and for those who have found them." She continued: "I am grateful I can work in this war zone and be a witness to the heroism every single day. But, when I get home, I do have a hard time. What I've seen has been challenging, but what will stay with me forever is the smell. It is like nothing I have ever experienced."

When Sister Cindy speaks of "heroism," she is talking about the work of men such as Vinny Forras, a fireman, and Marvin Bethea, a paramedic. Both fit and in good health before September 11, they now reel off the respiratory illnesses that have struck them down since then, leaving them struggling for breath, plagued by asthma, too ill to work and dogged by the horrific images of all that they witnessed.

"It's awful to see your own kids taking care of you when they used to consider you a physical equal," said Forras, 48, a firefighter who worked at the site for days and lost his best friend in one of the towers. "We acted out of duty for our country and would do the same thing again. I'm not complaining that I'm sick, but I am very bitter at the way we have been treated. We should not have to fight for

recognition of our illness."

He coughs and wheezes as he describes his health problems after yet another day of medical check-ups. Forras, buried under rubble for 90 minutes at one stage when a beam gave way, encountered his first breathing problems on just his second day at the site. Medics gave him steroids then, but serious respiratory problems developed within three months. He now takes a series of medications and survives on disability payments.

Bethea, 46, was twice left choking and fighting for breath as the two towers collapsed, burying him in dust and debris. "Everyone was screaming and panicking, and I was swallowing all this toxic dirt and waste ... but my health was the last thing on my mind that day," he said, his voice a rasp.

"I just counted myself lucky to be alive. I've had guns put to my head and been shot at as a paramedic, but nothing compared to that day."

He returned to the site on September 14 as a volunteer in the rescue and retrieval operation, sorting through the rubble and helping to pull out fingers, hands and other body parts. Five weeks later, despite no significant illnesses before September 11, he collapsed from a stroke and his health deteriorated rapidly - he now takes 15 medicines for ailments ranging from asthma and sinusitis to high blood pressure and anxiety. As with thousands of others, he is also receiving psychiatric help.

"Everyone told us we were the heroes then, but look how quickly they forgot us. As survivors, we're having to fight tooth and nail for any recognition of our problems. After what we went through, it's a disgrace that we are still having to fight. It's very frustrating and it's also just humiliating."

Last week, in a belated breakthrough for the victims, New York's health department issued radical new guidelines to doctors for identifying and treating illnesses picked up at Ground Zero - a signal that the authorities are finally addressing the scale of the crisis.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has opposed laws that would automatically extend medical benefits to emergency workers who participated in the recovery effort if they become sick. But last month, Governor George Pataki signed legislation to increase pension and death benefits for first responders and their families, including a bill scrapping the two-year statute of limitations for applications - a deadline that ruled out Ground Zero workers who did not start suffering symptoms or did not make the connection to the terror attacks until more than two years afterwards.

The WTC Medical Monitoring Program at New York's Mount Sinai hospital has screened the health of about 16,000 of the September 11 workers, half of whom, according to doctors, have lung-related medical conditions. At the fire department, 3,400 front-line staff have been diagnosed with respiratory problems and more than 600 have had to retire. Mount Sinai's medical experts, who previously focused on respiratory and mental health conditions, recently extended their screening to cover cancers and other serious diseases, such as lung scarring, amid increasing evidence that first responders are facing worse problems than was initially thought.

An estimated one million tonnes of dust carpeted the 6.5 hectares of Ground Zero and neighboring streets, showering anyone who worked there with a noxious mix of asbestos, chlorofluorocarbons from

air conditioning units, lead, specks of glass, cement particles and byproducts of the intense heat, such as sulphuric acid.

Worby and other lawyers have launched class-action lawsuits against the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the site's owner, the Port Authority, alleging negligence and lax safety oversight after the disaster. The accusations are fiercely denied - the EPA says that it took 10,000 air and dust samples after September 11, and, with other agencies, told clean-up workers to wear protective clothing and provided respirators, masks and goggles. But officials also said workers faced "minimal risk."

According to Thomas Cahill, a University of California professor and air pollution expert, who studied conditions at Ground Zero: "The EPA said there was no danger, but this was the perfect storm of environmental toxins and now we're paying the price. It was wildly toxic and the EPA knew that. Hopefully, this will lead to a renewed effort not to forget these people."

As the controversy rages, construction work is under way at the site on the new 540-meter Freedom Tower and the memorial to those who died. Ground Zero has become an essential stop for tourists who take pictures of the seven-storey deep foundations and the photographs of September 11 that hang on the perimeter fence. But a group of survivors, volunteers and relatives of the dead are determined to make sure that visitors do not leave with just a superficial look at the atrocity. Each day, they give deeply moving tours.

Last week, Ann Van Hine, 52, led a group of 15 around, describing the dimensions of the towers and giving some grimmer statistics (110 floors, each a half-hectare wide, 99 elevators, 43,600 windows, 20,000 body parts, only 178 corpses) and the events of that fateful day. "Only about half the families got anything back of their loved ones so this has become a very sacred place for the relatives," she said.

Then as she looked down at Ground Zero from a raised walkway, she revealed that her husband, Bruce, had been a New York City firefighter. The group listened rapt as she described how September 11 unfolded for her family, until the moment when three firefighters arrived at her door shortly before midnight. "They hummed and hawed, so finally I said: 'Just say it'," she recalled. "And Charlie said that Bruce was unaccounted for. I thought to myself: 'I have no doubt that God will get me through this, it's just that I don't want to have to go through this.'"

Fortified by her Christian faith, she, and her two teenage daughters, did go through it. "A week later, Bruce was still officially missing. I asked the girls where they thought their Daddy was. They said, 'Heaven,' so I said, 'Right, we are going to start planning his memorial service.' I told them life would never be normal again, but we were going to learn to live a new normal.

"I lead these tours because I want people to understand that there are human faces to what happened that day," she said.

As Van Hine headed on to the next stop on the tour, much of the group stood quietly, wiping away tears, as they stared out across the gaping hole of Ground Zero.

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