

MANHATTAN — Ten years after the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, several resilient CSEA members who survived, witnessed or provided assistance, reflected on the response, the rebuilding and ongoing efforts to provide relief.

Omayra Camacho reported for duty at an armory near Ground Zero the day after terrorists flew two planes into the World Trade Center towers. The crime victims specialist for the Office of Victims Services was immediately embraced by a woman who mistook her for her missing daughter.

“The woman began to scream and hold me really tight,” said Camacho. “Soldiers came to take her away from me, but I stopped them.”

# Changes in state response often arise from disasters

New York's emergency response to the Sept. 1, 2001, attacks was swift and comprehensive. But what evolved from the physical response was a new model of responding to the emotional and psychological needs of victims and their families when major disasters happen.

Bill Howard was on the front line coordinating all aspects of the state's response on Sept. 11, 2001, working as deputy director of state operations for then-Gov. George Pataki. Today, Howard is the director of CSEA's Employee Benefit Fund.

"I think one of the biggest things that changed since 9/11 having to do with response to disaster has a lot to do with the human aspect of things. This is very unusual for government because they historically have not been big on information sharing but the human magnitude of those events required it," Howard said.

"One of the things that government had to address was 'how do we deal with great number of people who have experienced loss,'" he said.

"What we learned from 9/11 is that we have to create a climate and attitude of openness not just for people dealing directly with loss but for other citizens as well. If that is not done, people will turn on public officials," Howard said.

Howard was not critical of the city's initial response to hundreds of victims' family members coming to the World Trade Center site, hoping to

find news of their loved ones who were missing after the attacks, because nothing like it had been experienced.

"Dealing with that dynamic was as necessary as dealing with the disaster. There was a whole structure that emerged out of that," Howard said. As part of its emergency response, the state now takes into account the physical, psychological and emotional needs of family members. Providing them with food, water, shelter, restrooms and keeping them apprised of recovery are all now part of the state's initial response.

Howard noted that not long after the 9/11 attacks, an airliner crashed in Kentucky and the Kentucky governor reached out to New York officials for help in providing for the crash victims' families, based on New York's experiences following 9/11.

Another specific change to New York's response to disasters is better communication among local, state and federal agencies.

"I think there were people pre-9/11 who couldn't tell you who their FBI representative was, and certainly not their intelligence contact. What came out was a much-improved state, federal and city information flow. We are very intimately engaged with the FBI, CIA and NSA (National Security Administration). 9/11 is a perfect example of information sharing breaking down during



a cataclysmic event, but what has come out of that is a much more layered information-sharing approach that has helped battle terrorism since then," Howard said.

"When I think back to that day, it was the type of thing that we all feared, but we can look back and be proud and feel that we all did our best in crisis. Government continued to operate amid the crisis and chaos. CSEA members should feel proud and satisfied in the important role they played," Howard said.

— *Therese Assalian*



Above, CSEA members working in the State Emergency Management Office in Albany, the nerve center of the state's response to the terrorist attack in 2001.

In the days and weeks following 9/11 Ken Bergmann, as part of State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) planning section, worked with a team of 16 people and a disaster response center to coordinate the response of several agencies.

SEMO is the agency responsible for coordinating response to disasters. It has helped the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services.

"We had a great team. We worked closely with federal agencies and during 9/11 we created a new plan being implemented and you see the emphasis placed on how to and

safety you realize that the system in place is really attempting to reduce pain and suffering. That was an overriding feeling that was there, how can we reduce pain and suffering. We were forced by necessity to do extraordinary work. It was challenging and it brought people together, something we all shared," said Bergmann who is now retired.

"Anytime there is a disaster you learn a little and you try to incorporate what you learned into your plan. One of the big things that changed post-9/11 was federal funding for emergency preparedness, planning and response, much of it for local governments. There were many good other means available."

"The money allowed for improvement in emergency response on many levels and that makes us better prepared for the natural disaster that we face in New York from flooding to ice storms."

— Ken Bergmann

# Living for today, and being hopeful for tomorrow

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"For me, time has healed me. I don't think about it anymore," said Terrel Silver, a keyboard specialist for the Taxation and Finance Department who fled from the 86<sup>th</sup> floor of Tower 2.

"Every now and then I think of Yvette Anderson (CSEA member who perished in the attack) because she was a good friend and I wish she was still here," said Silver. "But other than that, I don't try to let it bother me. I'm just living for today and being hopeful about tomorrow."

Five CSEA members were among the 39 workers the agency lost in the attack. They were: Yvette Anderson, Florence Cohen, Dorothy Temple, Harry Goody and Marty Hrycak.

## Thankful

"I have a lot to thank God for," said Marcia Smart, a tax compliance agent.

"When we returned to work, we were there crying every day," Smart said. "We had to be there for one another because nobody knew what we were feeling."

Ignoring orders to stay at her desk on the 86<sup>th</sup> floor after a plane crashed into the north tower, Smart joined others in a desperate race to reach the ground floor.

Group counseling sessions and the support of co-workers helped Smart to cope during those first few months. "It's a blessing that I am still alive," said Smart who, along with Silver, now works in the agency's Brooklyn office.

Two blocks from the burning towers, Frank Cosentino had witnessed the horror of victims leaping from windows.

"It's a memory that will never go away," said Cosentino, a senior mail and supply clerk for state Liquor Authority. "It's etched in my mind forever."

"It also made me more aware of safety and health. It ignited me," said Cosentino. "It brought me into the forefront of safety and health issues that affect working people."

Cosentino is currently the statewide chair of the CSEA Occupational Safety and Health Committee,



**Cosentino**



**Co-workers at the state Department of Taxation and Finance and survivors who worked on the 86th floor of Tower 2 of the World Trade Center, from left, Margaret Ramsay, Terrel Silver and Marcia Smart pay their respects to 39 co-workers who perished on Sept. 11, 2001, at a memorial in their Brooklyn office.**

serves as the Metropolitan Region health and safety chair and also chairs the State Labor/Management Safety and Health Committee.

"I think our Occupational Safety and Health Department got stronger because more people became aware," said Cosentino. "They question things now that they wouldn't have questioned before 9/11."

Indeed, some of the things members have questioned and fought to correct were asbestos on windows at a Department of Motor Vehicles office near Ground Zero and also comprehensive improvements to a building next to Ground Zero, where hundreds of workers from several agencies were relocated as part of the rebuilding effort.

"We supported the effort to rebuild lower Manhattan after 9/11 but we wanted to have a say in the new location to make sure that the building would be appropriate and be safe," said Deborah Hanna, Health Research, Inc. Local president.

The building had been heavily damaged by debris during the attack and contained dangerous toxins. Hanna worked with other CSEA activists, including Cosentino, Renee Jackson from the



**Deborah Hanna, Health Research, Inc. Local president, standing in front of nation's largest construction project, the World Trade Center. Following the the attack, it was the nation's largest toxic waste site, which led Hanna and other union activists to create the 90 Church Street Coalition in order to protect the safety and health of workers and local residents being relocated. The 90 Church St. building is the smaller one on the right. On the left is the Liberty Tower under construction and next to it is World Trade Center 7, which is already occupied.**

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# We Remember



*"9/11 strengthened and increased my faith. I saw through this horrific tragedy how God works miracles. Union workers sacrificed their lives to save people; average citizens prayed and helped people to look for love ones that were missing. Average citizens cooked meals, comforted and cried with rescue workers who volunteered to help with the cleanup, and we learn that we can withstand anything with God's help."*

— Statewide Secretary Denise Berkley

*"I do not believe my perspective on life has changed necessarily, but I feel the way I conduct my daily activities has. It has been 10 years since 9/11. It was and will remain a day I will never forget. It showed me how vulnerable we can be as a country, despite our being the best and greatest nation in the world."*

*I've become much more aware when traveling and tend to keep my eyes open for anything that looks out of place. I've become a stronger union activist as a result, and the need for people being treated fairly and equally is now more focused. I'm fighting harder than ever for people's rights. It's important to enjoy every day with my family, friends and CSEA colleagues and members, knowing how quickly things can change. I will never forget."*

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*"Think about the many ways in which our lives have changed since that fateful day. Nearly 3,000 innocent people including five CSEA members were killed, countless men and women joined the military in selfless acts of patriotism, airport security was greatly increased, searches are now routinely conducted on people attending sporting events and concerts. But, the courage of the American people was revealed. Thousands of tons of debris was removed from Ground Zero by unionized city sanitation workers and construction workers in the weeks that followed, which cleared the way for the healing and rebuilding processes to begin. A good portion of these heroic acts were undertaken by union members, which is a fact that was initially not emphasized. Perhaps that was understandable, given the magnitude of the grim circumstances. But it is a testament to our union colleagues and their blue-collar work ethic that shines through in retrospect 10 years later and I suspect our respect for their sacrifice will only grow further as the years go by."*

— Long Island Region President Nick LaMorte

*"During and after the September 11 terrorist attacks, union workers courageously came together and showed the U.S. and the world how unity, strength, loyalty and commitment could get us through uncertain times. Today, as we face unprecedented attacks by another enemy, those who would destroy labor, we need to continue to show the U.S. and the world that we are just as committed and just as fearless in our struggle to protect and promote workers' rights."*

— Metropolitan Region President George Boncoraglio



*"In the 10 years since the 9/11 attacks, I've seen changes in myself and our members both on the job and off. On the job, we are much more aware of the world around us as we work in our communities. Whether you're a county social worker or doing maintenance on a bridge, you're much quicker to report suspicious activity. We've become more conscious of our safety on the job. That cautiousness extends outside of work, if we're on a train, plane or a bridge. Over the past 10 years, we've rearranged our priorities. We're spending more time with our families and we're appreciating what we have. Now that we've seen what can happen in our backyard, we have a new appreciation for what we have."*

— Southern Region President Billy Riccaldo



*"We have clearly reached a tipping point with respect to job and service cuts. I worry how cuts to services in the state and in our local governments will impact response times and emergency services. Our members are on the front lines every day and cuts will put workers and residents alike in jeopardy."*

— Capital Region President Kathy Garrison

*"To me, it's a day no one will ever forget. It changed the course of history in our country. A lot of people's lives changed that day, and a lot of policies have changed in the workplace as well. Now that 10 years have passed, we need to take the time to reflect on the people we lost, and we need to remember what happened on that day."*

— Central Region President Colleen Wheaton



*"The events of 9/11 changed all our lives. It made us appreciate more what we have – our family, our neighbors and our friends. It reminded us that those most affected, even if we didn't know them, are our neighbors and friends. It made us more conscious of what we have in this country and how lucky we are. It reinforced how fragile life is and how in less than an hour everything we know, and things we sometimes take for granted, can be changed forever. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and Flight 93 are something I will never forget. It's something I think all of us will always remember."*



— Western Region President Flo Tripi



DUNKIRK — Terrorists may have brought down the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, but they didn't bring down the spirit of Jennifer Graley of Chautauqua County.

The terrorist attack "helped me put into perspective what is really important in life," said Graley, currently a social worker and CSEA Chautauqua County Unit member. "It is always good to remember what is important, that it can always be worse, and that we are very lucky to have today."

Graley traveled to New York City following the attacks, acting on a strong feeling that she needed to be in that place, at that time, doing whatever she could for those most in need.

"I felt as if I had to go there," she said recently from her office in Dunkirk. "I was compelled."

She traveled to New York City on her own and spent 10 days doing whatever she could for the people most up-ended and displaced by the terrorism.

"My time there was really meaningful," Graley said. "It was intense but it also was important. I have never done any other social work that changed me in the way that did."

### *Tremendous loss*

Survivors of the attacks lost so much, Graley said. They lost friends and family, their jobs and income, their homes, the ability to pay bills. They had great need. Agencies gathered in a central location to meet with people and help.

There, Graley met a man named Miguel.

In the days following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Nassau County Local members John Damato and Michael Browne were deployed to Ground Zero and lower Manhattan.

Damato and Browne work for the Department of Public Works as a sewer maintenance worker and equipment supervisor, respectively, at the Hicksville DPW yard.

Both are also volunteer firefighters. Damato is with the Valley Stream Volunteer Fire Department and also a member of the National Guard. Browne is a firefighter and emergency medical technician for the Rockville Centre Volunteer Fire Department.

Damato was deployed on a six-month Guard tour during which he alternately sifted through piles of rubble at Ground Zero searching for human remains and guarded security check points at the World Trade Center site.

"The National Guard was called to duty even before the second tower fell and we were at the scene when World Trade Center Building 7 collapsed later

"So many people he loved had died and so much of what he needed to survive was gone," Graley said. "But he would tell me 'Go get your flowers, don't wait.' No matter what you're going through, grasp what is beautiful today. There is no reason to wait to be happy. Don't waste your time. Go for it."

Today, Graley works with men, women and children working through a variety of mental health challenges. Her

that afternoon," said Damato. "My guard unit was also deployed to Iraq for 18 months starting in 2004."

Browne reported to a staging area at Belmont Park with many other members of the Rockville Centre Volunteer Fire Department and was soon sent to lower Manhattan to support the search and rescue operations being undertaken by city firefighters at the station closest to Ground Zero.

"Every firefighter I encountered on 9/11 had severely bloodshot eyes and some were even bleeding from their eyes," due to the dust, smoke and toxins hanging in the air around the Ground Zero site, said Browne.

"Alocane eye wash was used in numerous cases not just to deaden the pain but to prevent a complete loss of sight so they could continue to their critical work."

— *Rich Impagliazzo*

# A bond forged from brotherhood, tempered by tragedy

CLAY — In autumn 1999, wanting to “see what a New York City firehouse looked like,” upstate volunteer firefighter Michael “Rocky” Rockdashil walked a six-block detour from a trip to Yankee Stadium to visit the closest station.

Rockdashil remembers Lt. Michael Healey of Squad 41 in the South Bronx/Harlem area, warmly greeting him, calling him “brother” and giving him a tour of the station and a shirt to take home. Over the next two years, he developed a friendship with Healey.

That afternoon, Rockdashil ate lunch with the guys at the station, gaining a stronger appreciation of the bond of “brotherhood” that exists between firefighters — one forged of bravery, dedication, shared experience, and on Sept. 11, 2001, tempered by tragedy.



**CSEA unit president and volunteer firefighter Michael “Rocky” Rockdashil holds the helmet shield of one of his brother firefighters who died in the World Trade Center collapse on Sept. 11, 2001.**

## Turn on the news. You won’t believe what you’ll see...”

Rockdashil, who serves as a lieutenant in the Baldwinsville Volunteer Fire Company, a northern suburb of Syracuse, remembers working the second shift the evening of Sept. 10, 2001, and being woken around 9 a.m. the next morning by an anxious phone call from his mother. “Turn on the news,” she told him, “you won’t believe what you’ll see.”

Like so many other Americans, Rockdashil watched the tragedy unfold on television. His initial reaction was to wonder if his friend’s fire company had been called to duty. “When I saw the devastation and the people jumping from the towers, I knew that those companies were going to work in the towers, evacuating people.”

He called Squad 41, confirming that they were indeed responding. He asked who the officer in charge was that day, and was told it was his friend, Healey.

As he watched the towers fall on television, he knew some of the firefighters he had met were either injured or worse.

“I knew those guys were in that building when it came down. They were doing their job. I knew it wasn’t going to be good. I’ve never seen a structure in my years as a firefighter collapse like that. I knew the death toll was going to be high, civilian and emergency workers. There was no doubt.”

About a day later, he again called back down to Squad 41. Firefighter Eddie Walsh told him six members of Squad 41, including Healey, were among the missing.

Rockdashil wanted to go to Ground Zero and help with rescue operations, but Onondaga County firefighters were not activated to respond. Rockdashil called a few days later, again asking Walsh if there was anything he could do. Walsh said they needed money for the families of the fallen firefighters. The Baldwinsville Volunteer Fire Department held a fund-raiser, filling boots with donations, and soliciting local businesses. They raised \$20,000 for the families. The nearby Lysander Fire Department followed suit, raising another \$25,000 for Squad 41.

A few weeks later, Rockdashil went to New York City, staying at Squad 41’s firehouse. He visited Ground Zero, paying tribute to his fallen brothers. “What I saw on TV after the towers came down was nothing like being there,” he said.

## Looking back: changes made, lessons learned

Rockdashil now works as a wastewater treatment maintenance mechanic helper at the Oak Orchard Sewage Treatment Plant in Clay, run by Onondaga County’s Water Environment Protection Department, and serves as a CSEA unit president.

Since Sept. 11, firefighting has changed, he said. The state has increased training requirements, and there is more training, especially in terrorism-related response. Firefighters also have more escape systems built into their gear. In Onondaga County, the public safety radio system has been integrated so that all emergency responders can talk with each other.

The biggest change, however, is that firefighters now have to worry about their own personal security and safety, concerned about attacks against first responders. “You keep that in the back of your mind,” he said. Now, when his company goes on calls, they secure the firehouse, instead of leaving the doors wide open.

Looking back 10 years later, Rockdashil said that time has helped heal his wounds, but he will never forget the sacrifice of the six men from Squad 41 and the 337 other firefighters who were killed when the towers collapsed. “It still bothers me,” he said, tearing up. He keeps a decal of the number “343” on his helmet, a constant reminder whenever he goes out on a fire call. “They’re still with us,” he said.

He also keeps in touch with Healey’s sister and visits Squad 41 about once a year. When he gets there, he is warmly greeted; the firefighters remember how he helped raise money for their families.

Last year, they gave him a very special gift, a leather “41” shield, found in the rubble of the World Trade Center towers, a remnant from the helmet of one of the squad’s firefighters who never came back.

— Mark M. Kotzin



# Always remember.

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Public Service Commission and Marie Rogers from the Department of Health to form a coalition with other union members who were also slated to move. They demanded to be included in conversations related to the move.

“One of the key things we obtained from our meetings with the state was the air quality testing of 90 Church St. to identify contaminants, which was necessary to get the improvements of the HVAC system,” Hanna said.

The group also launched a successful and widely covered campaign to replace every window in the building with double windows that wouldn’t allow dust and noise from the largest construction project in the U.S., the Freedom Tower construction, to seep through. Management had

initially agreed to replace windows on only a few floors.

“It transcended the divisions between various locals and reenergized everyone to be active and join forces to make these changes for the building,” said Hanna. “We also participated in other community groups looking at safety and health issues in other parts of Manhattan.”

## Rebuilding

The efforts of the 90 Church Street Coalition garnered them significant recognition for their efforts. Beyond the victories and the accolades however, Hanna believes the greatest reward is in seeing the proper rebuilding of Lower Manhattan.

“I think overall people are excited to be able to see, on a regular basis, the progress in the rebuilding of the WTC site and all the areas impacted by 9/11 in Lower Manhattan,” said Hanna, who lived nearby during the attack but now lives even closer in Battery Park.

The day after Sept. 11, 2011, Camacho knows she’ll continue to field calls and requests related to the events a decade ago. “People who were

involved in the cleanup have been calling since many have developed cancer, were exposed to asbestos and have other illnesses,” said Camacho. “Now we are dealing with the tragedy in a whole other way. It’s still painful.”

— David Galarza



*“... What was really inspiring to me every single day from Sept. 11 on was how people, for all their pain and the sense of loss, just kept understanding the need to keep doing what they had to do to bring us together and bring us through. ... And it wasn’t just doing their job. If it took to midnight, they were there. And not just the Banking Department, but all the state workers, and I just — to this day, you know, I have tremendous sadness and always will about Sept. 11; but I also have tremendous pride in how we responded. ... You’ve seen in other catastrophes where people and governments have fallen apart. We didn’t. We came together and we came together in a way that was critical for not just our state, but our country.”*

—Gov. George E. Pataki,  
CSEA 100 interview  
Nov. 2009



**Omayra Camacho, a crime victims specialist for the state Office of Victim Services, was among the first responders assisting the families and victims of the Sept. 11 attacks.**



**A woman waves the U.S. flag during a memorial service in Albany two months after the attack in 2001. Thirty-nine state Taxation and Finance employees and three state Department of Transportation employees lost their lives in the World Trade Center attacks.**