

GIVING VOICE TO IMMIGRANT VICS OF 9-11

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Body

We didn't have time to cry," said Joel Magallán, executive director of Asociación Tepeyac, about the months following the 9/11 World Trade Center terrorist attacks.

"It was a very, very intense period, and we only had time to work from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., day in and day out."

Not that Magallán and the mostly Mexican community group did not have plenty to cry about.

After all, it was thanks to their efforts that it was discovered that more than 100 undocumented immigrants - deliverymen, waiters, cleaners, cooks - had been killed at the World Trade Center.

Otherwise, probably no one - aside from their families and friends - would've ever known or cared.

In fact, for many months after 9/11, Tepeyac's offices in Manhattan became the heart of the immigrant community efforts to search for undocumented victims and find ways to help their families deal with the tragedy.

Dozens of volunteers staffed the phones and escorted relatives on sad journeys to the city's hospitals and morgues.

"It was intense work, but with many satisfactions," said Magallán. "I am grateful for the solidarity of so many people those days."

Tepeyac played a fundamental role in telling the world that the terror of that fateful September morning 10 years ago did not discriminate between legal and illegal, rich and poor. It struck at every New Yorker with its blind brutality.

But Magallán did much more.

"In the aftermath of 9/11, we helped those who lost their jobs - about 900 Latinos, 64% of them Mexican," Magallán said. "Our goal was to find jobs for them and take care of families."

Tepeyac was able to provide them with desperately needed food and rent money, thanks to the contributions that started pouring in.

"We gave all the information about the missing and the unemployed on our Web page, and many people responded," Magallán said.

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With the help of the Red Cross, churches and foundations - mainly the Robin Hood Foundation - Tepeyac also aided relatives of the victims.

"We took care of about 60 cases," Magallán said.

It was difficult work, because some families had no documents to prove the existence of their loved ones killed at the WTC.

"We researched every case and helped about 500 family members," Magallán said. "We also took care of the families outside the U.S. who had lost their only means of support."

Then, in 2004, Tepeyac began to receive workers who got sick in the recovery effort at Ground Zero due to lack of proper equipment.

"We received about 200 Latinos, who were terminally ill," Magallán said. "They ended up being the group at the greatest disadvantage because it wasn't easy to find help anymore."

"In 2008, we closed the program because of the recession: there was no help. We had to abandon them to their fate. Fortunately, Mount Sinai [Hospital] still helps them."

Although Magallán believes New York is a friendlier and warmer place after 9/11, he still reserves a great deal of anger for one particular group.

"I'm still indignant about how bosses never said they had hired undocumented workers, or were willing to identify their employees so we could confirm the existence of many who died," he said.

The plight of the immigrants, tragic enough, was compounded by the even harsher immigration measures enacted after the attacks.

That's why today, while we remember the families who lost loved ones on 9/11, we cannot forget the families of the immigrants - documented or not - who perished along with nearly 3,000 other New Yorkers.

aruiz@nydailynews.com

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