

# World Trade Center, *continued from page 1*

## Hospital ERs Activate Disaster Plans

At hospitals across the city, disaster plans immediately went into effect. "All elective surgery was stopped and we had 17 ORs ready to go," said ER head nurse Joyce Buffolino of Bellevue Medical Center. "MDs and nurses arrived from all over. Two retired RNs came in from Connecticut, and not one call went out. Staff just appeared."

The scene was similar at Saint Vincents. "We moved ER patients out onto the floors or into the ICU, then we all went to different locations to be assigned specific tasks," said clinical instructor for the ER, Peter Allar.

"At first there was a surge of patients," said Nancy Issing, an ER nurse assigned to captain a unit for the most critical patients. They were mostly burns, smoke inhalation, and respiratory problems. Some patients had burns over 90% of their bodies." Other patients had fractures from being trampled or tumbling down the stairs at the World Trade Center or running from it. "We saw a lot of smoke-inhalation, which can be fatal," Allar said. "We put everyone on 100% oxygen and were constantly doing nebulizer treatments to open airways."

Richard Tan who was working in triage said, "I could see the emotion in the faces of staff, but it was under control and the flow of patients was very organized. The critical ones were stabilized and sent right to ICU. Those with lacerations and cuts went to a designated area. Others with minor injuries went to rehab, and some were treated and discharged." Tan estimates that normally the Saint Vincents ER sees about 150 patients in a 24-hour period. On Tuesday, they saw almost 400 patients between 9:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.

Peter Allar noted, "For once, the hospital hierarchy was completely flat. I would send attending physicians up to the floors to get IV catheters, chest tubes, burn ointments, whatever was needed—and they ran and got them."

## Where Are the Patients?

After the initial rush, the flow of patients slowed down. "RNs kept going outside to ask EMTs if there were more patients," Tan said. "We were desperate for patients," said Issing. "It was frustrating. All these trained workers dedicated to helping people and no one to help."

Then came the families looking for loved ones, often carrying photos. "The most difficult thing was having to turn them away," Yip said. "We kept a list of every patient we treated and I would slowly look down the list of names. I kept hoping I could say yes to one of them, but I had to turn away at least 80 people."

By the second day, hospitals were seeing mostly police, firefighters and rescue workers. "Some were falling in the rubble and we treated a lot of broken bones," said Saint Vincents ER nurse Muriel Smith. "There were also asthma attacks and a lot of breathing problems from all the smoke and dust in the air."

## Caring for the Rescue Workers

NYSNA organizer Jackie Cataldo, a volunteer with Red Cross Disaster Health Services, worked at a triage center near the World Trade Center on Tuesday afternoon, where she encountered "crowds of firefighters, policemen, and rescue workers. It was mayhem," she said, "debris everywhere, a huge fire truck crushed like a toy, and firemen and police officers just sobbing."

She stayed all night, giving out food and water and saline drops for workers' eyes, helping firefighters with minor injuries, and making sure they had masks. "We still hoped to find survivors," she said. But as days passed and hope faded, "everyone had a dazed look, and there was an eerie silence. People were so overwhelmed by the sights they couldn't speak."

At the hospitals, rescue workers also became the main patients and they made a powerful impression on staff. "They didn't want to give up," Smith said. "They were afraid if

they took a break they wouldn't be allowed back onto the scene." Added Buffolino, "The workers were trying desperately to find someone alive. They were so tired, but they came in and said, 'Wash my eyes, bandage my hand, so I can go back.'" That kind of dedication took a toll. "One firefighter I treated had a knee injury and was discharged," Tan said. "He must have gone back to the site, because later I saw his picture and he was listed among the dead."



Peter Allar (left) and Richard Tan both learned of the attack from a physician who rushed into the hospital screaming that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. "We thought he might be joking," Allar said.



On Friday, Lucille Yip went to ground zero and saw workers taking pictures of the scene. "I didn't need a camera," she said. "I'll never forget what I saw. Never."

## Signs of Hope

The shock and horror of the September 11 attack tapped a wellspring of compassion that comforted people even as they wept for the victims and their grieving families. "It was a recharging of the spirit to see the willingness of people to help," said Bellevue ER head nurse Marion Machado. "Phone calls came in from all sides. I'm a welder. I'm a carpenter. I'm a paramedic. Everyone wanted to do something. We received spontaneous donations of all kinds. Drug companies sent drugs. Restaurants sent food. We received socks, sweatshirts,

towels, copying machines, and pizza." Nurses also found a new affirmation of their role. "Nothing prepares you for something like this, but I am so proud to be a nurse," Yip said. "From starting an IV to giving a woman a hug made me feel good, knowing I could give of myself in some way to those who have suffered such a loss."



When Muriel Smith arrived at the ER she was assigned to the cardiac area, where six patients were in extremely critical condition, including a fireman who had gone into cardiac arrest.

Photos by Ansell Horn

# NYSNA's New York City Staff Survives, and Shines, in a Crisis

by Genie Abrams

The 23rd floor of 120 Wall Street in New York City, just four blocks from where the World Trade Center stood, is "home base" for 64 NYSNA staff members, including administrative assistants, nurse reps, labor reps, and organizers. Usually, most of them are out at healthcare facilities, negotiating and enforcing contracts and advocating for members. Only administrative staff remains in the office.

Partly because of this, and partly due to swift action on the part of Astra Bileris, director of office administration and operations, no staff members were physically injured in the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

"Astra told us it was time to leave. She kept us together and got us out safely," said administrative assistant Lorraine Earle. "She made sure we stuck together, got on the elevator together, and left the building together." Bileris led them to a first-floor office so they could all make a phone call before leaving, and also made sure they all had wet paper towels over their faces, to protect them from the smoke-filled air outside. And when they left the building, she encouraged them to stay together as they walked northwards, until they began to split off into small groups to cross the bridges or catch buses or trains home.

The city they walked through was nightmarish.

"People were covered with dust, debris, and blood," said administrative assistant Yvonne Miller. "They were all going north, and they looked ghostlike in the smoke."

People driving across the bridges were stopping to pick up pedestrians, according to Earle.

"They'd just open all their doors and say to total strangers, 'Come on, get in.'"

Mary Rodriguez added, "I could hardly breathe in that soot and smoke, and I really feared for my life. I kept praying as we followed Astra, that God would let us get home safe."

With the office shut down, professional staff continued to serve their members almost without missing a beat. Two days after the attack, Economic & General Welfare Program Associate Directors Anne Parrish and Nancy Kaleda, and other New York City staff, met at Parrish's Long Island home to plan operations during the office closure.

"We sent a letter to bargaining unit leaders, telling them that we were all safe, although we were without phones and e-mail," she said. "Our biggest concern was our ability to keep in touch with our members, and vice versa. But we were able to tell them that our field staff would continue working through it all. And they did."

The horror of September 11 was replaced exactly one week later by a heartening show of courage and solidarity. On September 18, when City inspectors certified that the building was safe, every single administrative staff member came back to work.

"They were frightened, they were anxious, but they all came back," said Economic and General Welfare Program Associate Director Anne Parrish. "They were amazing."

It wasn't perfect. Electricity and water were on, but for the first day and a half, e-mail and the part of the computer system containing membership information were not operating. The building was powered by a huge generator on the sidewalk that obstructed pedestrian traffic. The building was hot, but the air conditioning could not be set lower than 78 degrees. Mail did not start being delivered for another week. Impaired phone service in and around New York made phones unreliable. And all employees were required to show I.D. to enter the building. But the staff was all back—every one of them.

Parrish believes that reflects their feelings about the nurses they serve.

"With all the nurses had gone through that week, seeing what they'd seen and caring so courageously for people who were hurt in the attacks—helping out as professionals, volunteers, any way they could—I think our staff felt an obligation to try to show that same kind of spirit and courage."