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Devoted N.Y. 9/11 responder dies after battle with cancer

EMS lieutenant spent 100 hours on 'The Pile' killed by cancer at 45

By Tevah Platt
Staten Island Advance

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — As an EMS worker, Lt. Brian Ellicott was best at comforting his patients: "When you're better, you'll go out dancing," he used to tell them, distracting them from their pain. Lt. Ellicott, described as a big, "teddy bear" of a guy and a father of two, did that most every day.

Sept. 11, 2001, was different; there were few injuries to dress, just toil to be done in the dust.

Lt. Ellicott spent months working in "The Pile" at Ground Zero, toiling for 100 hours in the first two weeks after the terrorist attacks, according to the Uniformed EMS Officers Union.

His partner said he'd spent those hours facing the fact that "you never know when your time is going to come."

Lt. Ellicott didn't know that his own life span may have been refigured in those first 100 hours of labor.

Physicians and researchers are hesitant to draw a link between Sept. 11 and cancer, a disease that can take years or even decades to emerge after patients are exposed to carcinogens.

But whether or not Lt. Ellicott's work was tied to his death, as his family and some of his co-workers firmly believe, his 100 hours of service in the days when the environmental risk was the greatest representation of the life he led and his commitment to the city at large.

The FDNY Emergency Medical Service worker and Great Kills resident died Monday in Staten Island University Hospital, Ocean Breeze, of non-Hodgkins lymphoma. He was 45, and the third Staten Islander this year to die from an illness potentially tied to the recovery effort, according to Advance records.

The Brooklyn native moved to Eltingville in 1972 and graduated from Tottenville High School.

His 'Soulmate'

In 1986, he wed Deborah Thoma, a friend from childhood and his absolute "soulmate," she said. After their wedding at Borough Hall, the couple remained in Eltingville until they settled in Great Kills two years ago.

Lt. Ellicott began working as a machinist at a former Champion Envelope manufactory in New Jersey. But the death of his mother, Mary Ellicott, in 1990, prompted him to pursue a career in the medical field, his wife said.

He worked for the Dell Ambulance Co. out of Brooklyn for two years before he joined the Bravest in 1993, working first at Station 4 in Manhattan's Lower East Side and later as a supervisor of emergency medical



The advertisement features a blue background with a photo of Peter Hayden and Dennis Smith. It promotes a "RESPONDER rewards" program offering "up to 40% Save" at major retail outlets. The program is a free benefit for first responders and their families. Logos for participating retailers like Petco and ProFlowers are shown. The website www.firstresponders.com is listed at the bottom.

dispatchers at the FDNY's Brooklyn headquarters.

FDNY officials confirmed that Lt. Ellicott worked at Ground Zero in 2001 out of Station 4.

He liked the thrill and excitement of the job, of not knowing what might happen from one day to the next, said his partner, Edward Cofenza, whom Lt. Ellicott trained while working at Dell.

He also loved being able to help people, and his gentle but firm manner put his patients at ease, said Mr. Cofenza. "He lived for his job and for his children."

Loved His Leisure

Lt. Ellicott was a gamer and an avid reader of science fiction and fantasy novels. He shared his love of Dungeons and Dragons with his children, especially his daughter, Rose, and he volunteered with Cub Scout Pack 6 when his son, Brandon, was a member.

His illness emerged suddenly and lasted three "short, but long" months, Mrs. Ellicott said.

Lt. Ellicott spent only 12 days at home and the rest in the hospital after he initially sought treatment for pain in his shoulder.

Doctors don't know what causes non-Hodgkins lymphoma, but exposure to certain chemicals has been identified as a risk factor.

The toxic dust-cloud that shrouded Lower Manhattan on Sept. 11 contained various dangerous substances, including dioxins, benzene and asbestos; the 14,500-some New York City firefighters and EMS workers who worked at Ground Zero had some of the greatest exposure to toxins there.

Thousands of workers have become sick after responding at the World Trade Center site; a report issued by Mount Sinai Medical Center, which operates an ongoing screening program, found that nearly 70 percent of Ground Zero workers suffered lung problems as a result of their exposure to toxins in the dust-cloud.

But the number of fatalities from illnesses tied to the recovery effort is not known, in part because it is nearly impossible to determine a causal link between exposure at Ground Zero and illnesses that arise on an individual basis.

An FDNY Report

The FDNY in September released a 64-page report, the "Six-Year Assessment on the Health Impacts of 9/11 on FDNY Rescue Workers," that contained a promissory note on the subject: "It is too soon to comment on patterns or types of cancers. We are in the process of intensive investigation and will continue to obtain information from active members and retirees before finalizing our statistical analyses. A full report will be forthcoming in the near future."

Manhattan trial lawyer David Worby has filed more than 10,000 lawsuits claiming the city failed to protect workers from toxins.

And as federal and local governments respond to pressure to pay for health treatment for first responders and others exposed to the post-9/11 toxic dust and debris, illnesses are reported in increasing numbers - including numerous cancers, police officers and firefighters say. FDNY authorities urge that rescue workers, including retirees, continue to be monitored for late-emerging diseases.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that all these healthy men who were working in their 30s are dying in their 40s now," said John Feal, head of the not-for-profit Feal Good Foundation, which advocates for 9/11 responders and their families. "In 10 years, we're going to outnumber the people who died [on Sept. 11]."

All three Sept. 11 responders who died this year on Staten Island were in their 40s; all left wives and children.

In addition to his wife of 21 years, Deborah, and his children, Rose and Brandon, Lt. Ellicott is survived by his father, William; a brother, Matthew, and a stepsister, Alice Van Pelt.

The funeral will be Saturday from the John Vincent Scalia Home for Funerals, with a mass at 10:45 a.m. in Holy Child R.C. Church, both in Eltingville. Burial will be in Evergreen Cemetery in Hillside, N.J.

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