

## Of lives lost, broken and honoured

**Steven Edwards**

CanWest News Service

*Monday, September 11, 2006*

NEW YORK - Being able to outrun an infield ball on a baseball diamond is just a distant memory for Marvin Bethea, a former paramedic who answered the call on 9-11 and rushed to Ground Zero.

Since fellow first responders pulled him from the rubble after the collapse of the Twin Towers, he's barely been able to mount a flight of stairs without gasping.

He's one of the thousands of emergency services personnel and construction workers who've fallen ill after breathing Ground Zero's toxins either that day or during the eight-month cleanup of the site. Hailed as heroes for their dedication and selfless help, they say they're being given the runaround now that they themselves need help.

Bethea, 46, has to take 13 different medications daily to treat a series of ailments, including asthma, sinusitis, major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. His doctors ordered him to quit his job in 2004, and he's since been fighting for disability and other forms of income so that he can pay the rent.

"I saved people's lives, and I was proud of that fact, and I took part in one of the most significant events in American history ... but I'm embarrassed and ashamed at how the government has treated the heroes and the survivors of 9-11," he said from his home in the New York borough of Queens.

"It was a toxic soup that day. There were people who were blowing out small pieces of concrete from their noses. More and more people are getting sick ... depending on their body and amount of exposure.

"It took a year for me to get the Ground Zero cough. Just a few years earlier, I could hit the ball to the second baseman and still beat the ball to first."

It's too late for NYPD detective James Zadroga, 34, whose death this year of respiratory failure was, according to autopsy results, "directly related" to Ground Zero, where he had spent over 470 hours digging through the debris.

"After we'd finished looking for survivors, what was the rush to clean up that site," said David Worby, an attorney spearheading a class-action lawsuit already representing 8,000 illness-stricken workers, and expected to be joined by many more of the 40,000 who toiled at Ground Zero. "No one should have been allowed onto the site without a hazmat suit," a full body suit worn as protection from hazardous materials.

Besides compensation for the victims, the lawsuit seeks long-term government financing of medical tests and research. Worby said up to 400,000 people could find the smouldering waste affected them as illnesses develop over the next 40 years.



CREDIT: The Associated Press, file  
Paramedic Marvin Bethea, right, gets help holding up a poster that details medications he must take after working at Ground Zero.

A widow reflects

Politically active since the death of her Canadian-born-and-raised husband, Loretta Filipov is just the sort of 9-11 widow that American conservative writer Ann Coulter claims is "enjoying" her loss.

Which might bother her if she weren't convinced Regina-born Alexander, whom she married in 1957 after they met during one of his early business trips to the U.S., continues to cheer her on.

"I think Al is shouting from the rooftops saying, 'Go, Loretta, go!' " she said from her home in Concord, Mass., where the couple settled after moving to the city from Ottawa early in their marriage.

The couple had three boys, now adults.

As a member of the steering committee for Peaceful Tomorrows, a victims' family activist group opposed to many of the Bush administration's anti-terrorism policies, Filipov is at the heart of campaigns Coulter considers subversive.

She also founded the Al Filipov Peace & Justice Forum to honour her husband, and give a platform to speakers who echo his lifelong Christian-based dedication to those issues.

An electrical engineering consultant, Al Filipov, 70, was on the American Airlines jet that struck the World Trade Center's north tower. He was on his way home to join his wife for their 44th wedding anniversary three days later.

"If Al were alive, I wouldn't be planning a forum, or going to Washington, or lobbying against the Patriot Act," said Filipov. "I'd probably still be writing to my senators and congressmen about issues, because I've always done that.

"But I've had a good life, and Al and I would still be living the good life, and we'd probably be travelling around the world."

In her book *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*, Coulter accuses the four 9-11 widows who've come to be known as the "Jersey Girls" of "enjoying their husbands' deaths." They were part of a core group of politically active relatives of Sept. 11 victims who prodded the U.S. Congress and a reluctant White House into creating the 9-11 Commission, which probed governmental failings ahead of the attack.

"Imagine the likes of Ann Coulter saying that -- and then getting all the press she got," said Filipov. "The worst thing that could happen is that my husband is dead. The second is that they politicized it by using my husband and the other victims as a reason to go to war and kill other innocent people.

"Life goes on," said Loretta. "We miss my husband and their dad very much, but we're determined not to sit here and cuss and swear and say more innocent people have got to die."

Economic casualties

As general manager of the Russian Tea Room, Michael Desiderio oversaw the closing of the New York landmark in 2002, an economic victim of the business downturn that followed 9-11.

Paradoxically, the 36-year-old executive had years earlier hired many of the people who worked at the World Trade Center's famous Windows on the World restaurant, where every employee on site on Sept. 11, 2001, perished.

"You realize you can't take anything for granted, that you have to cherish the time that you have with family, peers, friends and acquaintances," said the married father of a small boy.

Desiderio joined Windows as assistant general manager following its \$25-million revamp after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Occupying the 106th and 107th floors of the North Tower, it was destined to become America's highest grossing restaurant, taking in \$37.5 million in 2000. Desiderio recalls watching in horror as the towers burned. "When you saw people jump, you realized it was a lot more intense than even the TV showed. There were people I'd worked closely with ... ."

The attacks would cost the American economy \$11 trillion, and two million people would lose their jobs by the end of the following year.

The Russian Tea Room, opened in 1926, became an economic casualty because it was still paying off loans to help finance a \$36-million refurbishing. "After 9-11, we went from doing 150 to 200 lunches a day to two, maybe three," said Desiderio. "People were leery about being in Manhattan."

The U.S. government offered struggling firms recovery grants, but Desiderio said it would have been inappropriate for a luxury business to apply. "People had lost everything. What about the little guy with the corner store? That's what those funds needed to be used for."

© The Edmonton Journal 2006