

NEW YORK POST

HEROES WORRY OVER BAD NEWS

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Advocates for ailing World Trade Center responders worried yesterday that the inaccurate account of Police Officer Cesar Borja's work at Ground Zero could hurt the real heroes who showed up on 9/11 and toiled there for months.

The concern stems from a series of Daily News articles that claimed Borja had "rushed" to Ground Zero and worked "in the rubble, breathing in clouds of toxic dust."

However, The New York Times, in a lengthy and detailed investigative report yesterday, revealed that Borja, who died last month of lung-related disease, didn't arrive at Ground Zero until 3 1/2 months after the attacks, when the fire had been extinguished - mostly to direct traffic several blocks from the smoldering pile.

The Times said Borja worked there for only 17 days.

David Worby, a lawyer representing thousands of WTC responders in a federal negligence suit against the city, said numerous ailing clients called him yesterday in response to the Times report fretting that people won't believe that their illnesses were caused by breathing toxic dust at Ground Zero.

"My clients were disappointed that their credibility could be an issue," Worby said.

"I'm very disappointed with the Daily News," he added. "If you make a poster boy out of someone, you better know what the poster is about."

Detective Mike Valentin, 42, a responder who was at Ground Zero the day the towers fell and worked there for months, said he was disturbed by the disclosure that Borja had spent little time at Ground Zero.

"I think people were looking for a poster child and they picked the wrong one," said Valentin, who worries that Congress now may be wary of providing new health funding for first responders.

Publisher Mort Zuckerman's Daily News reported last month that Borja was hospitalized with pulmonary fibrosis, awaiting a lung transplant - linking his life-threatening illness to working "16-hour shifts in the rubble, breathing in clouds of toxic dust."

"He rushed to Ground Zero and started working long days there - even volunteering to work extra shifts," the News wrote in a Jan. 16 account.

Borja's son, Ceasar Jr., bolstered the account in subsequent statements to the media - drawing the sympathy of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and President Bush.

Clinton invited Borja Jr. to the president's State of the Union Address - and his father died hours before the speech. Bush met him the following week.

According to the Times, Borja Sr. didn't work an assignment at Ground Zero until Dec. 24, 2001.

Eva Borja, asked by the Times about the Daily News' claims that her husband "rushed" to Ground Zero, admitted: "It's not true."

A Daily News spokeswoman declined comment.

The Times stood by its story, saying it "sought to provide the most accurate depiction of Officer Borja's service near the disaster site at Ground Zero."

Meanwhile, the Borjas yesterday said they didn't intend to lie about Cesar's service, and were eaten alive in a media maelstrom.

"I didn't have time to be correcting everybody. I thought it didn't matter to me. What mattered to me is he got sick and he passed away," Eva Borja said.

The family also insisted that eyewitnesses told them Cesar did work on the pile at some point.

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