

Heavy toll on heroes

'I saved peoples lives, and I was proud of that fact, and I took part in one of the most significant events in American history, and I'm proud of that. But I'm embarrassed and ashamed at how the government has treated the heroes and the survivors of 9/11.'

Steven Edwards

CanWest News Service

Sunday, September 10, 2006

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 following the collapse of the Twin Towers, he's barely been able to mount a flight of stairs without gasping for air.

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 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 peoples lives, and I was proud of that fact, and I took part in one of the most significant events in American history, and I'm proud of that. 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, some sooner, some later, 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."

Former New York City police detective Robert Williamson, 45, is battling pancreatic cancer that his doctor says derived from his breathing Ground Zero dust. The father of two girls raced to Ground Zero the day of the attacks after sleeping for just two hours following a 12-hour night shift, and put in 16-hour days over the following five weeks.

John Walcott, 41, another former NYPD detective, has been diagnosed with leukemia and told he has a 50/50 chance of surviving five years after spending 18 hours at Ground Zero on 9/11, then six months sifting debris for victims' body parts at a depository on nearby Staten Island.

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."

In addition to compensation for the victims, the lawsuit seeks long-term governmental financing of medical testing and research. Worby said up to 400,000 people could find the smoldering waste affected them as illnesses develop over the next 40 years.

© Times Colonist (Victoria) 2006

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.