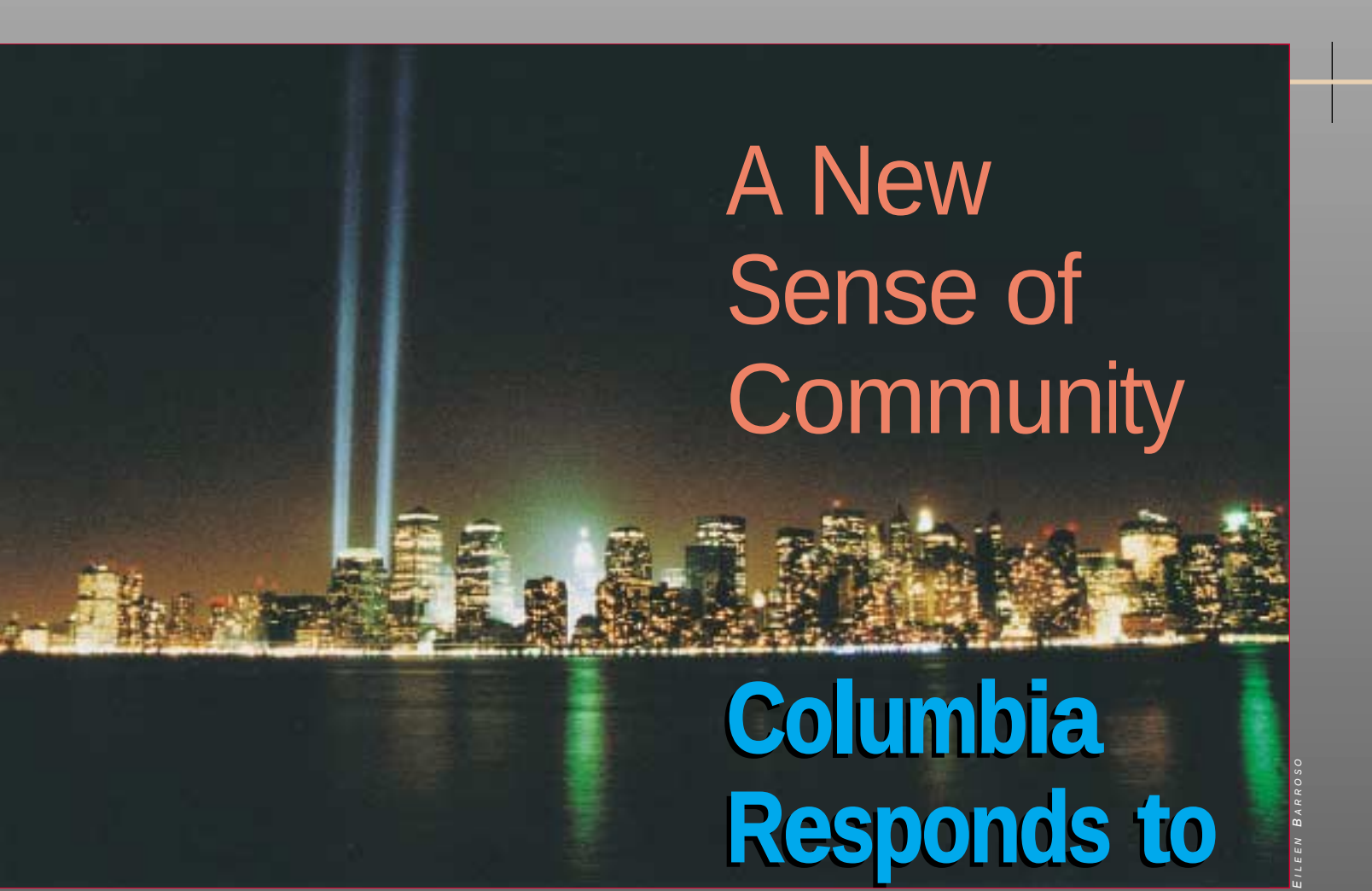




A New Sense of Community

Columbia Responds to 9/11 Attacks

EILEEN BARROSO

BY JACK LUCENTINI

The Sept. 11 attacks changed not only the world but the Columbia community as well. In the aftermath of a tragedy that killed 40 university alumni, Columbia has witnessed a new commitment to volunteerism and collaboration with the larger community, as staff, faculty, and students have worked to put New York back on its feet. The tragedies also introduced new priorities for research and study and focused the institution's expertise and resources on helping to prevent terrorist attacks.

Students volunteered at ground zero and raised thousands of dollars to help attack victims. Faculty in nursing, medicine, public health, and dentistry offered their expertise to the relief effort. Psychiatrists and others at the New York State Psychiatric Institute continue to provide needed

expertise. And the entire campus has remained on alert to respond to anthrax cases or other unusual events.

The help started within moments of the disaster.

"Literally hundreds of doctors and nurses reported to the emergency department to offer their services" on Sept. 11, says Dr. James Giglio, assistant clinical professor of medicine and director of emergency medicine at Columbia-Presbyterian. "Well over 1,000 volunteers offered their services. Many of them were Columbia University undergrads and professional students."

For these emergency workers, the pride of serving their community was mixed with sorrow at the scale of the losses and a sense of helplessness when few patients showed up.



"We received a trickle of injured patients," Dr. Giglio says. "There was a slow, profound sense of sadness that set in and filled the void left where there were no patients to treat. Our own EMS workers returned from ground zero in a state of shock, knowing—long before the rest of us—the magnitude of the devastation and witnessing first-hand the deaths of so many victims."

Dr. Mark Heath, assistant professor of anesthesiology, went to the site when the news struck and, following the advice of city officials, helped set up a temporary hospital at the Staten Island Ferry terminal.

"We were looking after about 20 people. There were broken arms, broken legs, a crushed pelvis, and bad lacerations," he recalls.

Unlike doctors who wanted to help but found few that needed it, mental health workers have been overwhelmed with work following the attacks. Psychiatric faculty and staff at the New York State Psychiatric Institute developed a multifaceted response to the ensuing

mental health issues. For example, Dr. Edward T. Kenny, assistant professor of clinical psychiatry, and colleagues formed a group of volunteer psychiatrists, Disaster Psychiatry Outreach, to help disaster victims. The group, founded in 1998, quickly went into action after Sept. 11. "We were still a small organization on Sept. 11," says Dr. Kenny, a 1995 P&S graduate. The group coordinated an effort by roughly 700 psychiatrists to work with families of victims, police officers, and firefighters at ground zero and at the family assistance center. Other founders of Disaster Psychiatry Outreach were Craig Katz'95 and the late Lisa Chertkov'94. Dr. Katz, president of the group, "deserves the lion's share of praise for its success," says Dr. Kenny.

"In most psychiatric encounters, patients come to us. But here, we're reaching out to people who may not be identifying themselves as psychiatric patients," Dr. Kenny says. That's especially important in situations where people are not inclined to seek help. "Typically, police and fire personnel are reluctant to seek psychiatric care. It's not within their culture. We make an attempt to

appeal to their altruism. We let them know we can offer them information, discussion of symptoms, and referral advice, in case their colleagues need help."

The disaster also afforded some opportunities for research and scientific investigation that could help victims of tragedies. Dr. Frederica P. Perera, professor of public health, and colleagues have begun a three-year study on the effects of air pollution from the World Trade Center fires on pregnant women and their children downtown. "We are enrolling 300 women who reside and/or work in areas that had differing exposure to the pollutants," she explains. By using biomarkers of exposure to such toxins as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, PCBs, lead, and other metals to track the newborns' exposure and health status, Dr. Perera and colleagues hope to provide a roadmap to understanding possible health problems related to such exposure. Non-exposed women will be studied for comparison. "It's not a pure research study. Our intent is to provide a service to the women in the community," Dr. Perera says. "This

The World Trade Center under siege. Trinity Church, in the foreground, was the original location of Columbia University, when it was known as King's College.

type of event is unprecedented, and we have limited data to go on. The information we obtain in this study could be very useful in determining appropriate follow-up strategies.”

Dr. Regina Santella, professor of public health and director of the Mailman School's Center for Environmental Health in Northern Manhattan, and colleagues also are studying air quality downtown. In collaboration with Johns Hopkins University, the center monitored the air breathed by Teamsters Union truck drivers at ground zero, using personal air monitoring devices worn by the drivers. In addition, specially designed high volume air samples were used to increase the sensitivity of area sampling for a wide range of exposures.

Columbia students also have done their part. Students who couldn't help at a triage site near ground zero (see Winter 2002 issue) raised about \$7,000 from the P&S community in the days following the disaster. P&S matched that sum, and the money went to the New York Times 9/11 Neediest Cases Fund. “I'd feel better if I had been allowed to help directly. Giving

money is fairly removed. But it felt better than having done nothing,” says Amanda Stein, a second-year P&S student and one of the organizers of the fund-raising effort. Calvin Ma and Brock Macdonald, also second-year students, helped in the effort. ■

FAR AWAY IN MILES BUT NOT IN SPIRIT

On the morning of 9-11-01, I was on my way to work heading eastbound on the Artesia Freeway just before 6 a.m. pacific time, with the dawn's early light starkly outlining the San Bernardino Mountains to the north. NPR's “Morning Edition” broke the news that a plane had just struck Tower 1 of the World Trade Center. I thought it was an accident at first, although the reports of clear skies made that theory seem unusual. I telephoned my parents in upstate New York on my car phone, and they tuned into CNN in time to see the second plane hit Tower 2. As an anesthesiologist, I felt like I was working in disaster mode at work and I asked everyone I worked with if they had heard any new information. One woman who works in the office said she had relatives who worked in both the WTC and the Pentagon. I checked in with CNN in between cases,

and at one point recognized Todd Wider, a surgeon and a P&S graduate, in a hard hat as he combed the streets of lower Manhattan looking for victims. A Columbia cardiac anesthesiologist working at the site was also featured. I knew that P&S students would be involved in the disaster relief efforts and to read in the winter issue of *P&S* that a student drove post-call from Bassett Hospital to the WTC site was not surprising. The physical proximity to the disaster must have had an additional impact for New Yorkers, but for me, the emotional impact was real. A constant reminder was the absence of jet noise from the skies near my house, which are usually full of planes. I enjoyed visiting the Tower 2 Observation Deck when I was at P&S, and I will visit ground zero the next time I travel to New York. ■

— **John Cross'92**
Manhattan Beach, Calif.



D.C. ALUMNUS TREATS BURN VICTIMS FROM PENTAGON ATTACK

By Peter Wortsman

James C. Jeng '86, a trauma and burn surgeon on call at Washington Hospital Center in Washington, D.C., had been up all night Sept. 10 in the OR. Exhausted and shocked by news of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, he was surprised to hear himself paged.

ing him get through it all in top form. "That morning of Sept. 11, I was so tired I just wanted to crawl into a hole and go to sleep. But P&S raised me to be a certain kind of doctor. There's no formal course on compassion there, but the whole curriculum and everyone who teaches it just reeks of compassion—in the best way. I felt privileged to put my P&S training to the test. Of the 18 patients treated in our unit, we only lost one," he reports with quiet pride. "The rest went home for Christmas." ■



"This has got to be some mistake," he remembers muttering to himself before answering the page. "Dr. Jeng, get yourself down here on the double," said the head nurse at the burn center, where he is associate director. "The nation's capitol is under attack!"

A gulp and a pot of black coffee later, he was in the OR. "I had literally been up all night operating, and I knew I was in for a very, very long day. As it turned out, I operated for another 48 hours non-stop. It was," he sums up after a pause, "very interesting."

The Pentagon attack left 184 dead or missing. Eighteen patients showed up at the burn center, including the walking wounded. Some had burns covering up to 70 percent of their bodies.

A Navy reservist, Dr. Jeng gave his surgical all and was deeply moved by the comportment of his patients. He recalls one man in particular, a lieutenant colonel from Special Forces, with severe burns over much of his body. "Don't worry about me," he said, "go look after that patient across the way. He's hurt worse." President Bush came to check on the wounded. Another badly burned serviceman, who had been intubated and had his wrists restrained, "tried to pop off a salute to the president."

Looking back, Dr. Jeng credits his P&S training for help-



RESEARCHER HELPS WHERE SHE'S NEEDED

Alejandra Ciappa, a physician in her native Argentina, is at Columbia as a postdoc research scientist in the Institute for Cancer Genetics, working on an Alzheimer's disease project.

On Sept. 11, she felt the need to go to ground zero to search for a friend who works near there and to volunteer her skills. Her friend is fine, and she volunteered with the Red Cross in several capacities from Sept. 12-14. Back in Argentina, Gente weekly magazine—similar to People magazine—featured her experience and named her one of the country's personalities of the year. The government of Tandil, her hometown, passed a resolution recognizing her volunteer work in the days following Sept. 11.

In the first few days I had a hard time describing the situation. There was a lot of confusion. God wanted me there at that moment, and I needed to help.

People outside of ground zero knew more than I did because the television showed everything. But to breathe the air of horror was not the same. We did not know how many survivors there were, but we knew there were not many. The hope to find them was all there was.

On Sept. 11, I went to Chelsea Piers, and the doctors organized us into groups that included a surgeon, clinician, nurses, etc. From there they sent us to a triage center located at Stuyvesant High School. We took care of firemen, policemen, and volunteers who were removing the debris. Many respiratory and eyes problems were caused by the toxic smoke and particles. We also treated a lot of psychological trauma. Many of the volunteers found parts of bodies, bodies that were destroyed, unrecognizable. I listened to many testimonies, to much anguish.

I walked around, without being able to believe what I saw. I spent two months of my life with my sister, Jessica, in the summer of 1999 studying English at a school near the Twin Towers. We enjoyed lunches sitting by the fountain between the towers. We danced on the 107th floor, picnicked in a nearby park with friends, shopped in Century 21. I knew the area very well.

The weather while I volunteered at the site was similar—sunny and warm—but the image was one of devastation. I could not recognize the park, the towers were not there, and neither was the happiness in my heart.

The buildings around the towers still had people living



in them, and I helped evacuate one of the buildings Sept. 11. This building was without light and water, 40 floors with terrified people who didn't want to leave their homes and didn't want to open the windows because they were afraid to breathe asbestos.

There were many volunteers working, and each one had a specific job, but each contribution was important and status was of no concern. I was a single grain of sand trying to be useful.

Somebody said to me Sept. 11, "God bless you helping my country." I said to him, "I am not helping your country, we are helping humanity." This tragedy does not have religious distinctions or borders. The people who were there were human beings from all over the world, spoke different languages, and were of different races. ■

—Alejandra Ciappa, M.D.

*I was a single grain of sand
trying to be useful.*

PARAMEDIC RUSHES TO THE SCENE

George W Contreras, a New York City paramedic, is a program coordinator at the Mailman School of Public Health. He has worked in the EMS field since 1993. In addition to his full-time work at Columbia, he works as a paramedic at NYU Downtown Hospital, Lenox Hill Hospital, and St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital. He is former director of EMS at St. Clare's Hospital in Manhattan. While driving to his job at CPMC on Sept. 11, he heard a radio report about the first plane hitting the Towers and decided to respond.

Having worked at NYU Downtown Hospital for almost six years, I had responded to the WTC countless times for calls at the PATH trains, at Windows on the World, at offices for the Port Authority, and other locations.

As I got out of my car, I looked at the clock in the dash—8:55 a.m. People were running all over the place. I never made it to the smoking building. As I approached, a security guard came out running and said that a woman was having a heart attack and I followed him into the lobby of the second tower. I remember thinking, “Well, at least this building is not on fire.”

Another firefighter brought a woman who was having an asthma attack and could not walk any more. I quickly set up the nebulizer and sat her down. As she was breathing in the medicine, I was thrown to the ground by a large rumble and what I thought was an explosion.

A firefighter ran into the lobby and made a general announcement: “The tower is leaning and the building is

going to collapse. You have to get out now!” I immediately grabbed the woman and we walked through the lobby.

People were running away from the building. I looked up and saw a large black cloud that looked like it was coming over me. Pieces of metal and concrete were falling everywhere. As we scurried into the lobby of another building, we were all thrown to the ground. It was like a strong—and I mean strong—wind had just slammed us down. We all stayed on the ground as the thick smoke poured through the lobby and the rumbling continued. And then there was silence. It was totally dark except for the occasional gleam of light from the helmets of firefighters. We could not breathe, but we were alive. We stayed on the ground for what seemed like a long time, through a constant stream of explosions and rumbling. We finally got up and worked our way to the basement. When the firefighters dug a way out through another street, we climbed our way out into darkness and smoke. I looked in awe toward the spot where WTC once stood. No more buildings, only a large pile of concrete and twisted metal. We walked toward where I knew the hospital was. It was snowing, but it was not snow. It was grayish stuff. Those few blocks seemed like a mile and when I finally stumbled into the ER at NYU Downtown Hospital I saw my paramedic supervisor standing in full personal protective equipment.

I worked at NYU Downtown Hospital for hours, then went to ground zero and volunteered some more. It would not be until days later that I would learn about the loss of many EMS people I knew and worked with. ■

— George Contreras

EYE CARE (AND MORE) AT GROUND ZERO

By Peter Wortsman

On the morning of Sept. 11, Emil W Chynn'92 peered out of his Greenwich Village apartment to the harrowing distant spectacle of the World Trade Center in flames. A refractive eye surgeon in private practice, Dr. Chynn called the hospitals with which he is affiliated—New York Eye & Ear Infirmary and St. Vincent's—only to find that they hadn't received any victims. He immediately leaped into action, pulling together essential ophthalmic paraphernalia, including office supplies and the eye surgical kit he used on a surgical mission in India, and headed downtown on roller blades.

One of the first physicians on the scene, he teamed up with 12 other health-care workers, including an anesthesiologist, a trauma resident, and several nurses, and set up a triage site. “We initially put it in a Burger King, across the street from the WTC, because it was one of the full mostly intact buildings still with electricity and also had some water left in the ice machines

“Around 1 p.m.,” he recalls, “the dense smoke sud-

denly thinned, and we saw remnants of 2 World Trade Center directly for the first time. It was strange that people watching CNN in California knew that the towers had collapsed before many people on the scene, because the visibility was just too poor to know exactly what happened. All of us volunteers came to a standstill, realizing for the first time that very few victims of the attack would become available for treatment. By early evening, we had converted the Brooks Brothers shop in that building into the first morgue, as it became apparent that there were more bodies and body parts being extracted than live victims.”

Over the six days he volunteered at the site, Dr. Chynn and other medical volunteers treated hundreds of victims, mostly rescue workers with various ophthalmic complaints, including abraded corneas and corneal foreign bodies.

In the days and weeks after the attack, he helped coordinate some of the philanthropic efforts and during the month of October donated 50 percent of fees from his LASIK practice to World Trade Center charitable organizations of each patient's choice. ■