

## **Retiree, Wife Travel to NYC to Help Clear the Dust at Ground Zero**

Imagine not only seeing the tragedy of Sept. 11 unfold around you, but also finding yourself homeless in its aftermath. That's what thousands of residents of Lower Manhattan faced when they were evicted by the dust and debris after the collapse of the World Trade Center.

Employee Emeritus **Ken Mullen** (Line Operating Department) and his wife **Carol** went to New York as part of the American Baptist Disaster Relief team to clean apartments and help people return to their homes.

"Ten of us from Monroe County went for a week at the end of October to help out," explained Mullen. "The apartments we cleaned bordered right on Ground Zero."

Volunteers were housed in a former New York correctional facility in the Brooklyn Naval Yard, a building that once held 1,800 inmates. The accommodations were adequate but simple. "The beds were bolted to the floor, about 18 inches apart," said Mrs. Mullen. "There wasn't any privacy. No doors on showers or lavatories. But at least we weren't sleeping in cells!"

Each morning, they boarded a bus that took them three blocks to the subway stop. From there, a train traveled under the river to within a mile and a half of the where the World Trade Center once stood. They walked in from there.

Volunteers wore suits and masks to protect themselves from the fine, white dust that covered everything. Apartments were checked beforehand for structural damage and the presence of hazardous materials. Once they were okayed, groups of five or six people started in, cleaning about two apartments per day.

"We cleaned seven apartments. One place was so bad that it took us two full days to do," Mullen said. "That apartment had two inches of dust everywhere. We started work on a white couch that ended up being cobalt blue. The dust got into everything – cabinets, dishes, electronic equipment – nothing was untouched."

Apartment residents were present when the cleaning was done. "It was only the second time they'd been in their homes," continued Mrs. Mullen. "A couple days after Sept. 11, they were allowed in for just 15 minutes to pick up whatever they could grab. Then they had to wait until the apartments were inspected and cleaned."

The worst apartment they cleaned belonged to an attorney. Like each of the residents, she had a story to tell. Just as she was getting ready to leave for work, she heard the crash of the first plane. She quickly changed into sweats and started for the courtyard that bordered the World Trade Center. When she saw what was happening, she ran to the basement of her apartment building. Within moments, the lights went out, and she had no idea what was going on.

Later she headed out and came upon smoke and debris drifting over everything. She and thousands of others headed straight for the water and were ferried to New Jersey. It wasn't until she was there that she began to understand the magnitude of the destruction.

When she was allowed back into her apartment, she found two papers from the 90<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center lying in her living room.

"All over New York, you could sense that people were having a tough time comprehending it all. It was devastating to see the huge pile of rubble day after day," Mullen mentioned.

Still, people were doing their best coming to grips with the tragedy. "People everywhere were so helpful and compassionate. We were cheered when we got off the subway every day. Residents were always bringing us snacks and goodies – as if the Red Cross didn't supply us with enough!" said Mrs. Mullen.

The Mullens hadn't been to the World Trade Center prior to the attack. "No matter what you've seen on TV, nothing prepares you. When we went, firefighters were still dousing the fires. The wind carried a very strong odor, and everyone wore masks.

"You just can't imagine what 16 acres of complete destruction look like. Neither of us had any idea how large an area it covered," Mullen offered.

During the week that they helped out, a high security operation was taking place: recovering gold from vaults deep under the World Trade Center. "They brought up \$300 million of Canadian gold – only a fraction of all the wealth stored there," explained Mullen. Many countries stored massive amounts of gold under the WTC, moving it from vault to vault as transactions occurred between nations.

The Mullens count their blessings in a new way since their visit to Ground Zero. "We're the lucky ones. We came back to nice homes and a community as we left it. These people will never return to the Manhattan they knew before Sept.11," Mullen said.

**[Editor's Note:** The American Baptists cleaned 385 apartments over the course of a month. The Monroe County team was joined by more than a thousand volunteers from across the Northeast.]

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