

9/11: We Remember

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On Monday, September 11, 2006, on a morning as eerily beautiful as it was on that date five years before, the Center for Bioethics observed the fifth anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, with *9/11: We Remember*. Sixty-two guests of the Center attended the memorial tribute, which took place in the Faculty Club of the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

The events of September 11th occurred in New York City, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania; they changed world history and. The focus of this commemoration was on New York and New Yorkers: the response of the Columbia University Medical Center to the catastrophe, and, most especially, of the first responders and volunteers, many of whom are now paying for their valor with calamitous and fatal health consequences, both physical and psychological.

Dr. Ruth Fischbach, Director of the Center for Bioethics, solemnly welcomed everyone to the event, which was the first of the Center's 2006-2007 season, its fifth. She observed that the memory of that day is seared into our memory and the catastrophic event has forever altered life as we know it in America. **Dr. Gerald Fischbach**, who was Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Executive Vice President for Health and Biomedical Sciences at the Medical Center on 9/11, then followed with a vivid account of a community, galvanized into action, while ultimately recognizing the horrifying reality that there would be no survivors to assist. The unprecedented nature of the attacks was also reflected in the capacities of the Medical Center itself: Dr. Fischbach noted that it was 'immediately obvious' that the Emergency Room, for example, could handle 10 to 12 serious burn cases, but could not respond adequately to a possible 3,000 that might arrive at the door.

Every story is worth telling, **Dr. Kathleen Powderly** believes, and through her oral history project, *Voices from Ground Zero*, we heard the voices of those police officers, firefighters, EMT workers, restaurant owners, service volunteers and medical students, among others, who, whether out of a sense of altruism or professional duty, or both, gave their all to help their fellow New Yorkers. Dr. Powderly's scholarly PowerPoint presentation – of Ground Zero as workplace, its hierarchy and tasks - was enhanced by the passion in her voice and rapidity with which she spoke of her encounters with the first responders and volunteers, all

of whom participated for six to eight months in the rescue and clean-up effort at Ground Zero. She told of her two-to-four hour long interview sessions with ‘tough macho guys’ devastated when there was no longer a possibility of rescue, only recovery; of a volunteer firefighter from Westchester now dying; of families, marriages and relationships torn apart. And yet – when these individuals were asked, whether they would respond in the same way again, every single one responded with an emphatic yes.

Dr. David Rosner, in presenting the conclusions he reached in collaboration with his colleague, **Dr. Gerald Markowitz** of John Jay College of CUNY, put New York City’s response to this “unprecedented and catastrophic” event into a long-term, national, Public Health context. In their searing expose, *Are We Ready? Public Health Since 9/11*, researched over a three-year period – year one dedicated to personal stories from first responders; year two to talking to people at the state level; and year three to working at the federal level – *Are We Ready?* evolves into an increasingly unhappy and tragic tale. The unfortunate fact is, Drs. Rosner and Markowitz believe, that while the New York City and federal Public Health systems were responding effectively to the attack – even *potential* Public Health problems were being dealt with - concomitantly the Bush administration was dismantling and privatizing the very infrastructure that made 9/11 in New York City so much less devastating than it might have been. A culture of lies and denial, as evidenced in the statement by Secretary of the Environment Christine Todd Whitman that ‘there was really no reason to be concerned about the air quality,’ increased federal pressure on the office of the Mayor to quickly reopen the downtown area, which contained, in the opinion of some, “toxic waste piles the likes of which the world hasn’t seen since Chernobyl.” Finally, Dr. Rosner said, given the current lack of federal funds and level of preparedness, as for the ‘next 9/11,’ when it comes to New York, we are not to think in terms of the 2001 response, but instead to the response to 2005’s Katrina.

Michael Ragsdale presented his extraordinary collection of fliers, posters and other memorabilia collected on September 11th and the days thereafter. He presented only 1,000 items of his 3,000 item collection which illustrates the multitude of people in a city who came together to offer much needed services to those who suffered through the 9/11 attack.

Rabbi David Almog, of the Columbia/ Barnard Hillel, closed the event with three prayers – one for those who died; one for the health of those who are ill and suffering the consequences of the event; and one for the healers - noting that while the prayers were in his own Jewish tradition, that they applied to all, Jewish and not.