

PHYLLIS MERRICK REMEMBERS 9/11

“Was that a plane?” asked residents on the 32nd floor of the Gateway Apartments in Battery Park as an enormous silver streak obliterated the daylight in their apartment on September 11, 2001—a crisp, 65 degree Tuesday morning. It was a plane; and from inside Flight 11, Flight Attendant Amy Sweeney was telephoning a loved one... ***“I see water, I see buildings; we are all over the place in rapid descent. We are low; we are flying very, very low. Oh my God, we are way too low,”*** and the call ended as Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 a.m. just a block from the Gateway Apartments.

Twenty-four floors below, on the eighth floor of the Gateway Apartments, lived Phyllis Green (not yet a Merrick in 2001). An early riser, Phyllis had taken the subway under the North Tower arriving at her job at the Coleman Center, some five miles away, at 7:30 a.m. A friend on Wall Street called her to tell her about Flight 11 crashing into the North Tower, and everyone rushed to the lobby to watch on television as the second plane, Flight 175, hit the South Tower at 9:03 a.m.

That everyone was in shock and that their world was in chaos were inadequate, feeble attempts to describe what had just happened. Phyllis would not be booking conference rooms or activities today. Instead, she and her fellow New Yorkers would spend most of the day contacting family and friends saying, ***“I’m okay,”*** while others were making final phone calls saying, ***“I love you,”*** as falling buildings ended their calls.

Two days after the attack, still numb and in shock, Phyllis decided to walk to her apartment accompanied by two employees. In her pinstriped suit and black heels, they began a five-mile walk that would take them five and a half hours before reaching the Gateway Apartments. Due to the destruction of some subways and streets, they did a lot of zig-zagging as they walked through the Theater District, Times Square, and other notable areas encountering numerous police check points. One stroke of good luck for Phyllis was receiving her New York driver’s license one month before 9/11 which provided proof of who she was and where she lived.

“I never would have gone had I realized what was ahead of us,” said Phyllis.

Crowds of people were still wandering about looking for relatives or friends or pets. Empty baby carriages, abandoned after parents had grabbed their babies and run, remained as reminders of that day. Piles of shrapnel protruded from the earth of what had been buildings or cars. An avalanche of bits and pieces of paper had fallen from the destroyed buildings covering the area in an eerie whiteness, snow-like and light, but masking death and destruction. Signs were posted telling how to recognize an airplane’s black box and how to get assistance. Not apparent on TV images of the day were the predominant odors of fire and smoke from burning materials and human flesh lasting for weeks. New Yorkers wondered if they were breathing in the petrified bones and flesh of the dead. The bumper-to-bumper ambulances and the endless wailing of sirens, in the midst of sights too painful to see, were soon followed by a constant parade of funeral processions often accompanied by the haunting melodies of bagpipers bewailing the losses.

The U.S. Army had set up a staging area in Battery Park, and it took a lot of begging and the proper identification—the critical driver’s license—for Phyllis to be allowed ten minutes in her apartment. Accompanied by an Army soldier carrying a flashlight, they climbed eight flights of stairs to her apartment. Since her apartment faced the Hudson River, her windows remained intact whereas a building next to hers that faced the towers had all its windows blown out. Once back on the ground level, she walked five and a half hours back to her friend’s apartment near Central Park where she slept on a sofa for the next two and a half months.

From there, it was only a short walk to the Coleman Center where she worked, but those walks wore out three pair of shoes. When full access was permitted, dust and destruction were everywhere and nearly everything such as appliances, air-conditioning and heating units had to be discarded or replaced. The Health Department provided them with detailed instructions for cleaning their apartments, washing clothing, washing themselves and hosing down their pets along with signs of respiratory or other health conditions. Nearly everything from computers to food had to be discarded due to dust, although clothes could be sent to the cleaners. Some apartments were completely destroyed with nothing to be salvaged.

Many tenants never returned to their apartments near ground zero; but many others, with their New Yorker's resiliency and government subsidies, did return. FEMA was one of the first to offer assistance. A full-service help center was set up in Tribeca, staffed by The Salvation Army, Red Cross, auditors, chaplains, medical counselors and nurses, who themselves could only work a few days in a row due to the stress encountered as they listened to one traumatic story after another. With blankets wrapped around them and drinking cups of coffee, people waited in line to talk to someone at one of these agencies. Residents were instructed how to complete forms for financial assistance with those closest to ground zero getting the most—up to \$500.00 a month. One of the first gathering places available for grief sharing was a small bar on West End Avenue where survivors could talk or just cry, alternating between ***"I'm leaving"*** or ***"I'm staying."***

Phyllis did get financial, emotional, and medical help, the latter when she developed a cough and cold requiring four antibiotics before recovery. Even to this day, she cannot think of the stories and images without hyperventilating or tearing-up, but she is alive while nearly 3,000 others are dead and another 6,000 injured. Despite all that happened, Phyllis was one of the resilient ones remaining in New York City for another two years with the memories of 9/11 engraved on her heart and mind forever.

– Joann Dettmann –