

Saturday, September 22, 2001

Words of New Yorkers, the day after

By Jeffrey G. Kelly

Driving south on the New York Thruway heading for Manhattan the day after the planes flew into the Twin Towers, I heard on the radio that, except for emergency vehicles, no automobiles were being allowed into Manhattan. I pulled off at the next service area, which was deserted, and got directions to Rhinecliff on the Amtrak line in the Hudson River Valley. I caught the half-empty, 10:46 train to Penn Station.

With camera and pen and pad in hand, my destination was to go as close to Ground Zero as I could. Penn Station was packed with long lines of casually dressed people trying to leave. Southbound subways were closed, so I was walking. I wanted to check my bag, but the clerk informed me that for this week they were not checking personal bags.

In the men's room, as I was stuffing my sports coat into my briefcase, I heard the first memorable quote in a day of memorable quotes. I jotted down word for word what the homeless man said out loud to no one in particular. "Great! See something tall. Bring it down. Chicago. Los Angeles. Everybody."

From that moment on in my trek south from 32nd street along 8th Avenue and then n Hudson Street, every conversation I heard was about yesterday's disaster. And that's what I recorded—snippets of conversation.

Once outside Penn Station my overall impression was one of eerie quiet. Cabs were not honking and there were plenty available. One female driver leaning on her taxi said, "We can't get along. No one can get along."

The first unusual thing I noticed was a pinkish storm cloud way downtown, a plume of smoke and cinders and crushed cement and asbestos. Passerby were talking quietly, in pairs or alone on their cell phones, about where they had been when it happened or who did it. I was keeping a brisk pace, weaving in and out of the people comin towards me. At 25th Street the beginning phrases of three conversations were, "You know what's scary...." and "These people are hard to..." and "I sent an email off at 8:53."

I had never been to the city when nearly all the conversations were on the same topic.

At 22nd Street mobilized recruits wearing blue vests with large lime green lettering saying POLICE, were directing traffic, which was mostly pedestrian. "Step back onto the curb," they said. Behind me a man with an accent said, "That was pretty amazing, how fast they went." Coming towards me, a tall woman, like a model, was wiping tears from her eyes.

After her, a young man on a cell phone said "I think if you have I.D." At 14th Street, a major cross town street, I ran into my first checkpoint. The officer asked the two men in front of me, "Do you guys live or work in the area?" I said I was a reporter from upstate New York, showed him my card, and he let me through.

No vehicles, except ambulances and cop cars, were allowed south of 14th Street. A few people were rollerblading, biking, strolling in the middle of the street. Definitely, less people were south of 14th than north. It was even quieter. I could hear the air conditioning units operating above me. Ordinarily those noises would have been indistinguishable from the din of the city.

As I walked closer, I wasn't sure exactly what street to take. A man on a bike stopped to put air in his tire. I asked, "Where were the Twin Towers?" He repeated my question in a quizzical tone, pointed south and over, and said I'd have to walk a few blocks farther west.

At Greenwich and West, police had set up another checkpoint with barriers. I was directed to Pier 40 on West Side Drive to obtain official press credentials. At that point I was two very long downtown blocks from the wreckage of the Twin Towers.

Eventually, I was allowed into a makeshift area for the press, but after then minutes of waiting we were told another building was in danger of collapsing and there would be no more bus tours. I left to walk back uptown, away from a pinkish cloud that everyone wished was a peculiar fog hiding two tall buildings.

On the way back, stopping for a slice of pizza at Michelangelo's Pizza and Restaurant on Hudson below 14th Street, I listened to a conversation among the owner and some other neighborhood men, all different ethnic backgrounds.

"My wife's upset. She's scared. She wants me to come home," the owner said. "A knife. One plane can be hijacked that way. Not all four of them. They lived here for years. Someone from here helped those guys. Inside job," a neighbor said.

"Where is our stupid intelligence" asked another neighbor. The owner said, "Manhattan is the most sacred city in the U.S.—not anymore."

A block later, I passed a boy and his dad, who was pointing far away to an American flag on top of an uptown building. "Dad, look at that! Tell me how that flag is flying."