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Recovery worker reflects on months spent at Ground Zero

29 May 2002

By Jennifer Lin
Knight Ridder Newspapers

NEW YORK -- Towering floodlights filled Ground Zero with an electric glow last Friday as Joe "Toolie" O'Toole, a Bronx firefighter, descended into the 16-acre pit for his overnight shift.

For five months, O'Toole has worked with a crew of 100 firefighters, combing every shovelful of debris at the World Trade Center site for the remains of the dead.

O'Toole said he would not leave until the last mound of dirt is upended and sifted for fragments of bones.

"I'm here till the end," O'Toole said. "How can I leave?"

But that time has come. Thursday, O'Toole will join other recovery workers and the families of victims to mark a ceremonial end to the recovery effort. In the 8 months since Sept. 11, hundreds of workers have removed more than 1 million tons of concrete and steel, and retrieved almost 20,000 body parts.

Firefighters like O'Toole have spent lifetimes helping people live. But at Ground Zero, they have taken on the added task of helping people cope with death.

One of the strangers whom O'Toole has helped was Fiona Havlish, of Lower Makefield, Pa., whose husband, Donald Havlish Jr., died in the South Tower.

O'Toole met Havlish briefly during his first week on the job in January. She was volunteering at St. Paul's Chapel, a relief center for recovery and construction workers. He was on a break, warming up.




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After hellos, he didn't really know what more to say to her.

"There was a lot of pain in that woman," O'Toole recalled. "I could feel it. I didn't know what the hell to do. I was lost and I was very nervous. I really didn't want to talk to her."

He returned to Ground Zero, where a heavy machine with a clawlike grappler was lifting a steel box-beam that weighed 800 pounds a foot. O'Toole watched the claw release, sending the steel hulk crashing to the ground.

He thought of Fiona Havlish. He shuddered to picture the brute force of steel timbers hurling to the ground from 110 stories.

O'Toole went back to the chapel and, pulling Fiona aside, told her point blank that her husband didn't feel a thing.

"I felt I had to talk to her," O'Toole said. "I didn't have a right to say something, but I thought it might help her."

It did. In a note to O'Toole, she told him that knowing that her husband's death may have been swift "was about the only thing I could hold onto."

When O'Toole signed on for trade center duty in January, he thought it would be a 30-day assignment. But after one month, he volunteered for another. And another. And another. And another.

Tall and redheaded, the 47-year-old married father of three grown children speaks in an unhurried way about Ground Zero. He said he felt driven to keep working there to bring honor in death for the victims. Every time the crew discovered a body, they placed it on a stretcher, covered it with an American flag, and prayed.

"Each person was treated with the greatest dignity and respect," O'Toole said. "Everybody."

Too often, what he saw in the underground cavities was too unspeakable to share with anyone, even his wife.

"It didn't go home with me," O'Toole said. "It didn't even go to the firehouse. It remained with the people who saw it. If you didn't see it, you didn't want to see it."

He said workers found pockets that were "hot" with intact bodies. "You would find clusters and groups. It was very emotional, but you're not thinking about it. You just think, you've got to get these people out of here."

The first time O'Toole came face to face with the destruction of the twin towers was dawn on Sept. 13. He said it felt as if he were standing in the portal to hell.

"All the steel sticking up, it was like Satan's fingers," O'Toole said. "The sun was coming up and reflecting off the buildings. It made an eerie glow as it came through the haze."

In those early days, when firefighters were still hoping to rescue trapped victims, they hauled away concrete, ash and glass "by the spoonful," careful not to disturb the wreckage too much.

"We passed out metal rebar one 4-foot piece at a time," he said. "The men never gave up hope."

But by the time O'Toole started working at Ground Zero full time in January, heavy equipment was being used to haul away wreckage. Before a truck could leave to take its load to a barge, bound for the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island, the cargo would be placed in a "rake field" where firefighters worked like archeologists, searching for fragments of bones.

At the site, O'Toole's job has mostly involved handling logistics -- taking water to fellow workers, shuttling tools back and forth, getting more lights on rake fields. "I've done everything down here," O'Toole said. "I've been a tour guide, funeral director, counselor, exhumers."

Underground fires raged for months. O'Toole remembers in February seeing a crane lift a steel beam vertically from deep within the catacombs of Ground Zero. "It was dripping from the molten steel," he said.

Today, the site looks like a big rectangular pit, so scraped of debris that little is left to suggest this was the footprint of the twin towers.

In a few days, O'Toole said, he will return to his Bronx firehouse. He is looking forward to fighting fires again -- "smashing windows and cutting holes in the ceiling," he said.

He knows it will take months, maybe years, to process everything he has seen.

"I'll go see a shrink just to let him tell me if I'm nuts," he said glibly.

Years from now, if his future grandchildren ask him what he did at Ground Zero, he will answer: "I did a noble task."

Shaking his head, he added, "I don't know if I want to tell them any more than that."

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