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Two Local Firefighters Reflect on Work at 'Ground Zero'

By Nick Marnell



Gil Caravantes and Darrell Lee Photo Andy Scheck

Following the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, hundreds of first responders were called in - others came voluntarily - to work on search and recovery missions, and to help with infrastructure on and around Ground Zero, the area known by these men and women as "The Pile."

The lives of two Lamorinda firefighters who helped in this effort would never be the same.

Darrell Lee - Moraga-Orinda Fire District, Station 45, Orinda

Even as a member of the incident management team for the United States Department of Health and Human Services, MOFD division chief Darrell Lee was jolted by the call he received the morning of Sept. 11.

"The phone rang; it was a call from Washington. I was on duty, at station 41, on a medic unit. They told me what happened. They needed me to come to New York," said Lee.

The terrorist attacks caused a breakdown in the New York City technological infrastructure - electric, gas, broadcasting and telecommunication networks; many key components had resided atop the World Trade Center towers. Lee was recruited to assist in rebuilding the

communication system, to get a command center up and running for the responders at Ground Zero, including police, fire and ambulance.

To relay important information, "we used runners," said Lee. "As long as crews were within a line of sight of each other, they could communicate using radios. Otherwise, it was the old fashioned 'I need you to get this message to the other side of The Pile.'"

He will never forget the smell.

It took Lee over an hour and a half to walk around the smoldering rubble of collapsed buildings. "I've been doing this a long time, and one of the things you don't see on TV, you don't see in the movies, you don't see in print, is what we call 'the smell.' It was an overwhelming smell of death," said Lee. "The smell of burning, decomposing bodies, buildings still smoldering, fuel, plastic, all mixed together. I've dealt with a lot of things, like decomposition, but ... you lock this in your memory. You'll never experience it again.

"And the sight of a firefighter, smashed. There was no structure to a body." He saw the metal self-contained breathing apparatus that firefighters carried, smashed flat. "That was on somebody's back," said Lee, pausing, collecting his thoughts. "The amount of pressure that caused it to flatten ... I couldn't imagine."

It was also the first time that Lee had seen what he termed the "big machine" in motion. "It was a teaching moment for me," he said. "To see the full arm of the federal government come in, with the state and local governments, the military - it gave me a real understanding of how the system works. It gave me a greater understanding of how to deal with a multi-casualty event."

The experience in New York also infused into Lee a stronger commitment to his profession. "It made me more dedicated to do this job," he said.

Lee is a member of five outside emergency medical and incident teams in Contra Costa County. "We are training new teams - the next generation of disaster workers," he said.

"It's going to happen again, and what I learned, I want to pass on."

Gil Caravantes - Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, Station 17, Lafayette

When ConFire captain Gil Caravantes heard the news of Sept. 11, he did not hesitate to act.

Over the years, Caravantes frequently visited New York City, and during those trips the personable Caravantes made plenty of friends, particularly among fellow city firefighters. With the news of the attacks, he knew his friends and comrades were in trouble, and they needed him. He took 10 days of vacation time and flew to New York City.

He taxied into lower Manhattan, approached the battalion chief and told him he was there to do whatever was needed.

"We need you to go down to The Pile," he was told.

Caravantes donned his fire gear, hopped onto the department bus and headed each day to the smoldering stack of collapsed buildings at Ground Zero to assist in the recovery efforts. He walked over a mile from the perimeter area, past fire engines that had been crushed and burned, into a hot, burning, smoking pile of complete devastation.

But what got to Caravantes most was not the destruction; it was the look on people's faces.

"People were around the perimeter area, they looked like skeletons walking around. They would hand us flyers as we walked toward The Pile. ... Can you look for my sister, please? My father? But we weren't finding people," he

said. ""We were finding body parts.

"I would dig and find a picture of a family, maybe from someone's desk, and I'd realize that I wasn't going to find anything that looked like what was in that picture." When Caravantes returned to California, his job became his comfort zone. One of his toughest adjustments? "It took me about five years to get through the national anthem," he said, choked up to this day as he recalled the many firefighter funerals he attended.

"This job is a passion for me," said Caravantes. "And the 9/11 experience just added to it.

"All of the petty stuff in life? None of it matters anymore."

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