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Health Worries Plague Ground Zero Workers

By **Graham Rayman**
 Staff Writer

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Tom Dougherty, a union carpenter, labors at the future site of a massive office tower at Columbus Circle but, however grudgingly, he found himself thinking this week about the year he spent at Ground Zero.

Dougherty, 42, a member of carpenters Local 608, says the tradesmen he worked with were "as close to a family I've ever come across in the workplace," but like old war comrades, the group has since dispersed to job sites around the city.

"We always say we'll get together but we never do," he said. "How do you go back to what it was when you were there? You don't want to keep talking about it. You don't want to forget it, but you don't want to think about it. I don't want to talk about it and yet I'm talking about it right now."

On the second anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, Dougherty and other Ground Zero veterans said they are most concerned these days about their long-term health, particularly after recent disclosures that federal officials underplayed health risks in lower Manhattan.

On Aug. 22, the Environmental Protection Administration's inspector general declared that the agency downplayed health risks before obtaining enough data, and allowed the White House to soften statements to the public. EPA officials have disputed the findings.

Peter Thomassen, president of the New York City District Council of Carpenters, said he has union lawyers looking into possible legal action. "As time went on, FEMA and the people in charge of the site told us it was safe to work without respirators, and said the neighborhood is safe for children, and safe for office workers," he said. "Then a year and a half afterward, they come out and say we were told to fudge the reports. So we are very upset about it."

"These guys were trying to depend on the government to do the right thing, and if in fact they lied about the reports and stuff, it isn't fair to them or the people who lived and worked in the area," said Gary Shelton, a business representative for Dockbuilders Local 1456.

Dougherty said he has second-guessed the decision he made to work at the site for as long as he did. "It was one of the most incredible things I've been a part of, but now when I think about what the price might be, it makes you feel a little funny about it," he said. "If I knew how bad it was, I don't think I would

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Rick Ostrander, a shop steward with the dockbuilders who helped set new tie-backs on the retaining wall there for 309 days, draws a distinction. "The people on the ground did a fine job, but what their bosses did, I have no idea," he said. "We knew the air quality was bad down there. Anytime you can see the air you're breathing, it's not good for you."

Hugh Smith, 52, of Brooklyn spent 33 years as a union carpenter, but he says his career was cut short by Ground Zero-related asthma, along with nerve damage in his back and diabetes. He worked for a year at the site, but went on full disability about 12 months ago.

"I have a problem with my breathing," he said. "If I walk up the stairs or go up a hill I have to stop and rest. A lot of guys who worked down there have a cough and everything like that."

Today marks the two-year deadline for workers hurt on Sept. 11 to file claims with the state Workers Compensation Board. Some unions have been reminding their members of the deadline to protect their rights should a problem arise down the road.

Board spokesman John Sullivan said 5,539 people, including Ground Zero workers, have filed claims so far for injury or exposure. Thomassen estimated that about 150 of 1,000 Ground Zero carpenters have received medical help for respiratory conditions.

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