

9/11/01: FOR THESE STUDENTS, AN INDESCRIBABLE EXPERIENCE

For long-time P&S alumni and faculty, the most unusual event to happen to them during their medical school years was the blackout of 1965 or, more recently, the blackout of 1999. The events of Sept. 11, 2001, however, put memories of operating on or seeing patients during blackouts into a perspective thought unimaginable.

Granted, the two commercial airlines that crashed into New York City's World Trade Center was an act of terrorism that didn't happen at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, and few of the injured were treated at the medical center, despite hospital personnel being put on high alert.

For a group of fourth-year students, including four M.D./M.P.H. students, the overwhelming need to "do something, anything" gave them a learning experience unrivaled in modern American medical education history.

Eric David's journey to the World Trade Center began miles away, during his ICU rotation at Bassett Healthcare in Cooperstown, N.Y. "I was post-call, so I had not slept. I told my attending I simply had to go do whatever I could. He absolutely understood."

Katerina Christopoulos was at home in the West Village when the planes hit. "I went to St. Vincent's Hospital twice that day to see if they needed any help and there were hundreds of doctors and, sadly, no patients. That evening I grabbed a ride to a makeshift triage site that had been set up on the plaza of a building downtown but it was more of the same. On Wednesday, I decided to walk back downtown and the cops at the checkpoints told me that triage had been cen-

tralized in Stuyvesant High School, so I went there and spent the next three days involved in the efforts."

Eamonn Vitt also lives downtown. "I was having breakfast with a friend in the East Village when the first plane flew overhead. We climbed to his roof to see what was going on. After the first tower fell, I ran to Beth Israel Hospital, just a few blocks away. The atmosphere was intense. A resident gave me a white coat, and we treated some walking wounded for minor injuries. Soon things became eerily quiet. I walked up to Bellevue, and there I bumped into a classmate, **P.J. Nicholls**. Like everyone, I wanted to help. Unlike most New Yorkers I had the advantage of the white coat and a medical student ID to help me past security and actually get to ground zero."

Rebecca Bauer was at home in her Bard-Haven Towers apartment on the morning of Sept. 11. "I woke up to hear a constant stream of sirens down the West Side Highway. Because of the elevation of Washington Heights and the location of our apartment, we could see through our window straight down to the giant plumes of smoke radiating from the two towers. So many thoughts raced through my head, among them disbelief.



PHOTOS: FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

How could human beings do this to each other?"

David Spinks and **Dustin Thomason** were among the students motivated to put their education to use. "Like a lot of people with medical training, immediately after witnessing the events on Sept. 11, I felt that I should be able to help out in some way," says Mr. Spinks. "Some classmates and I went to St. Vincent's to try to volunteer. What we saw there was both moving and ominous: Vast numbers of doctors, nurses, and other people of all backgrounds were arriving to be of assistance in any possible way, but, unfortunately, not enough people were being rescued from the ruins to keep the volunteers busy."

"I made my way down toward my apartment, which is several blocks from St. Vincent's and registered as a volunteer to draw blood, do patients, or whatever else," says Mr. Thomason. "Sadly, as we all know, few patients ever made it to St. Vincent's, and after I had drawn the last blood I was going to draw for the day (when the hospital stopped accepting blood) I walked down toward ground zero to see if there was anything I could do down there."

P.J. Nicholls spent 14 days at ground zero. "Eamonn Vitt and I decided to leave the Bellevue ER and go to Stuyvesant triage to help out where there was a need. The next day we assisted where there was an even greater need: the triage in the American Express building."



WHERE WERE YOU ON 9-11-01?

This report of fourth-year students who responded Sept. 11 and in the following days is just a snapshot of the activities of Columbia students, faculty, staff, and alumni who pitched in to help in myriad ways in the days and months since.

The Spring 2002 issue of *P&S Journal* will discuss the other ways psychiatrists, dentists, nurses, public health experts, and alumni and students reacted to the Sept. 11 events and to the anthrax exposures.

The spring issue also will include accounts of what other readers did and thought. Whether you are a health professional, a student's parent, a student, or a friend of Columbia, let us know how you reacted to the events of Sept. 11 and beyond. The individual accounts from such a historical event will provide a unique perspective for the P&S and Columbia history books.

Send your thoughts by e-mail (psjournal@columbia.edu), by fax (212-305-4521), or by mail (*P&S Journal*, P&S Box 37, 630 W. 168th St., NY, NY 10032). Deadline for contributions is March 15, 2002. ■

Rebecca Bauer: "I wanted to go down to volunteer because I was becoming increasingly frustrated and anxious about not being able to help. The lack of survivors seemed to be the most stunning aspect of the situation for all of the medical volunteers. I think that every health care provider in the city wanted to do something. I felt that even though I'm far from the end of my training, I hoped I knew enough to be able to be useful in some way."

In the days following Sept. 11, the students did a variety of volunteer work. They organized supplies, distributed masks and helmets to workers, washed eyes, handed out analgesics, and transported supplies to points of need. "After we delivered the supplies, we basically looked for anything we could do to help out," says David Spinks. "I ended up spending several hours assembling hard hats for the rescue workers (they were surprisingly confusing little things). I felt the work we were doing was helpful, but certainly not essential. It seemed that all of the really important tasks were already overstaffed; there were just so many volunteers. I'm afraid that my part was more a sort of therapy for me than anything else."

P.J. Nicholls may have endured the longest as a volunteer. "P.J. has really done an amazing job," says **Jeremy Keenan**. "He has volunteered personally at a variety of places, but more importantly he has served to get other people at P&S volunteering."

"P.J. and Eric [David] and my other classmates

were so tremendously inspiring. Somehow, P.J. managed to stay down there for two more weeks. I don't know how he managed to avoid getting kicked out—he's incredible," says Eamonn Vitt. "A bunch of fourth-year medical students took real leadership roles in a time of terrible crisis and did an amazing job. I feel so lucky to have them as classmates and friends. The P&S community should be incredibly proud."

"After a few days of helping out medically," says P.J. Nicholls, "I eventually coordinated food and supply logistics throughout the disaster area. There was a handful of us—all volunteers—making sure distribution met demand, either by requesting supplies from outside sources or by redistributing supplies already in the area."

Mr. Nicholls continues to volunteer his time. "Please contact me at pjn13@columbia.edu if you want to continue helping over the next year. I'll try to pick out the highest-yield volunteer opportunities for you. There are always needs that haven't made it to the media yet."

If it's possible for anything to overpower the effect of the tragedy, the P&S students found it in the triage efforts and the unifying spirit among volunteers, rescue workers, and outsiders who cheered them on.

"There were two sights that very unexpectedly made quite a few of us cry," says Eric David. "One was the dozens of people lined up along the West Side Highway by Pier 40. They cheered every emergency worker who came through. The second strangely moving sight was along Greenwich Street a few blocks up from ground zero. Parked there in the middle of utter chaos was a McDonald's truck with workers who cooked Quarter Pounders and Chicken McNuggets around the clock. The sight of something so familiar on a street that had been transformed into something so unrecognizable was oddly comforting."

"The people I met down there are, needless to say, among the most inspiring people I have ever known," Mr. David adds, "and I am grateful for the camaraderie which we shared over such a brief and intense period. I cherish every fireman, police officer, and volunteer I met, along with the stories, fears, and hopes they shared. I am so filled with pride that I had the opportunity to work with them. In the end, nobody who works down there does it for the recognition. They do it because we are a nation united."

"The volunteer medical response of New York and the surrounding areas was tremendous," says Katerina Christopou-



los. "Not just in terms of personnel—everyone from nurses to medical students to trauma surgeons was there—but also with regard to the supplies that were donated, boxes and boxes of gloves, masks, betadine, alcohol, etc. A bunch of ortho residents from Columbia showed up with central line kits and trays to do amputations. Admittedly, this outpouring made for some crucial gaps that no one had anticipated; for instance, there was not a single glucometer or thermometer in the Stuyvesant triage. But still, the generosity of spirit was amazing and made all the more remarkable that the whole operation got up and running without one single person being in charge—it was just goodwill, plain and simple."

Eamonn Vitt remembers one woman—an actor in her late 20s—who put herself in charge of getting medical supplies from Chelsea Piers to the triage center at Stuyvesant High School. "Her only previous medical experience was playing a nurse on the TV show, 'Oz.' Everyone helped out."

The scene at Stuyvesant High School in lower Manhattan was chaotic. "There was no central chain of command," says Jeremy Keenan. "There were simply many good-hearted people trying to help. And yet, even though there were no orders given, things managed to get done. Through the help of this mishmash of volunteers, a fully functioning clinic was set up, with no help from any official agency. It was amazing to see how such different people could come together in a time of such disaster and crisis and manage to make something positive out of it."

Rebecca Bauer: "Among all of this destruction, I saw the most beautiful thing I have seen in my 26 years on this Earth: The response. The firefighters and police officers and EMTs on the site were beyond inspiring. Some of the guys had been working straight through since Tuesday morning with no rest. There was a line of about a hundred guys who were waiting to

relieve the workers at the site, but it moved at a snail's pace simply because there were few workers to relieve. Once they were down in the pit, they stayed. Only when it started raining did they come inside, and even then it seemed mostly because the welders' torches were being blown out by the wind and rain. As soon as the rain would show signs of letting up, even a bit, they'd wake each other up and head back out."

David Spinks: "I think the main thing I learned from the experience was just a little bit about human nature. Among the pounds and pounds of donated food, I saw hundreds of handmade lunchmeat and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, individually wrapped in tin foil and plastic sandwich bags, and it struck me just how much personal care had gone into all of the donations. I saw firefighters stumble in from the wreckage, flop down on a seat or a window ledge for a quick nap while sitting up, only to get back out to work a few minutes later. Even though many people had been going for hours or days with hardly any sleep, no one argued or bickered. People down there had a selflessness, compassion, resolve, and sense of deep connection with each other that was palpable. It was the kind of spirit that I've always told myself I believed existed, but that I somehow always doubted anyway. I don't doubt anymore."



The experiences of the students mostly served to reinforce their professional plans.

"I am taking this year to do an M.P.H. and am pursuing the track offered in forced migration and complex humanitarian emergencies," says Katerina Christopoulos. "I never dreamed I would have field experience in New York."

"The most intense experience for me was seeing recovered bodies," says Eamonn Vitt. "During those times I tried to

meditate on the scale of the sadness and the reality that this is mass murder, this is the true face of war, this isn't CNN, this has got to stop. Every medical student and physician at ground zero was reminded in a most unfortunate way of why they went into medicine. Undoubtedly we will all be stronger during difficult times in the future. My plan has always been to work with the urban underserved domestically, but also work with a group like Doctors without Borders. The experience at ground zero provided a real taste of what relief work in disaster conditions is like. My plans haven't changed."

David Spinks: "I have always planned to work in a medically underserved area after graduation, and that has been based on my belief that doctors can and should play a more effective social role in relieving suffering than they frequently do. Even though I wasn't able to make use of my medical training in this instance, the strong presence of doctors and nurses at ground zero reinforced that belief."

Jeremy Keenan, an M.D./M.P.H. student: "I learned that even without a pre-arranged plan, people can come together in times of crisis and draw off each other to help set up needed services. As a student of public health, I saw some things that could be improved for future disasters. God forbid anything like this happened again, I think I could approach a situation like this a little differently. I could hopefully draw off of this experience to help things run more smoothly in the future. Although I am doing the MPH because I want to do international health, I think this experience has caused me to also consider getting involved with domestic public health systems."

Rebecca Bauer, also an M.D./M.P.H. student, said the disaster and her experience as a volunteer helped her focus her plans. "I realized that I'd like to be trained in medical/public health management of disaster situations, not just because of the impact of natural disasters, but also because, unfortunately, this is probably not the last we'll hear from terrorists."

P.J. Nicholls: "The No. 1 health concern following the disaster has been mental health, so I'm glad I'm going into psychiatry. And I'm now definitely interested in posttraumatic stress disorder and other psychological effects of crises."

Dustin Thomason: "I think the most memorable thing for me was to watch grown men—firefighters and cops—who had so much pride and were so tough break down in tears in front of us because men from their ladders and battalions had gone down with the building. That was definitely the thing that affected me most. I feel like in the end, our assistance that first day was little more than cosmetic: We held their hands. If only it could have been more." ■