

AA AT GROUND ZERO

A little more than two weeks after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, a new chapter in AA's long history of working with friends outside of the Fellowship began. The Red Cross, in order to serve the thousands of firefighters, police, steelworkers, medical personnel, and other volunteers who worked in the disaster zone, established its Respite Center #1 at 101 Murray Street at the corner of West Street just north of the World Trade Center in a building that houses St. John's University. The arduous, emotionally draining work of recovering the remains of those who perished and then clearing away the enormous pile of debris's went on nonstop for days and weeks, with most volunteer's working day-long shifts that gave them little time to do much else but eat and sleep. The Respite Center was intended as a place for the volunteers to do a little of that, plus seek out medical and other services that they might need to continue their work.

Included among the volunteers were a good many members of AA, some of whom were from out of town and for all of whom it was very difficult to get to an AA meeting, even if they knew the location of one. Fortunately, some of the AA's in the uniformed services let those in the Red Cross know of this need for some kind of ready access to AA, and a Red Cross intern made a request for help from the General Service Office. This resulted in a series of events, described below, which led to an AA presence, for several crucial months that year, right in the middle of what was then known as Ground Zero.

Following the Red Cross request, calls were made on September 26, 2001, by staff members at GSO to chairpersons of New York Intergroup's Institutions Committee and to SENY's Cooperation with the Professional Community Committee. These two individuals, who as it turned out, were AA friends who had done service work together over the years, were quickly in touch with one another and with many others in AA service to begin the process of assembling the volunteers needed to bring AA to Ground Zero.

By Friday, September 28, about 15-20 volunteers gathered and were ready to go to the Red Cross headquarters in downtown Brooklyn. At this point, the extent of the AA work, or even the location for it, was unknown. Many details still needed to be worked out among the overlapping authorities who were responsible for the ongoing search and recovery work. Security clearance and ID cards would be required of all however, so on that first day the volunteers were obliged to wait many hours as the details were completed. Eventually, most of the disappointed volunteers were sent home, but around 6:00 PM that evening, a small group of three volunteers were credentialed and transported through the security lines into Respite Center #1. There they waited several more hours until finally, around 8:00 PM, Room 231 was designated as their room and became the main center for AA activity at Ground Zero for the next two and a half months. Although no formal AA meetings were held that night, the room was set up and identified for the "Friends of Bill W.," anonymity being a major concern given the mix of uniformed and non-uniformed workers streaming through the building. A few first visitors arrived, some unbelievably, simply to bask in the thought of an AA presence there, before the volunteers were obliged to leave that night.

What followed was more than a day of uncertainty until on Sunday, September 30, another group of volunteers were brought to the Red Cross headquarters and this time nine of them were credentialed and a real presence was established in room 231 by 4:00 PM that afternoon. One of the issues that had to be resolved was under what umbrella the AA volunteers were to be grouped—religion or mental health. The latter won out (to the amusement of the AA volunteers), and for the next two months all the AA work was conducted through the mental health division of the Red Cross. At 6:00 PM, that Sunday night the first official meeting gathered in room 231. The speaker was a police officer from the Bronx, who said he had opened the Big Book that morning and just happened to read in "Bill's Story" the description of his

going off to World War I. Appropriately, he used that familiar AA text as the focus of his talk, and so began AA at Ground Zero!

Soon a corps of upward of 70 credentialed volunteers were assembled (with a huge list of many more who were willing to serve), and a series of three six-hour shifts were established. It was decided that several volunteers would be present in the room at all times to talk with AA members in need of conversation, to hold impromptu meetings if enough people were on hand, or sometimes simply to give someone a hug. A more-or-less regular meeting met at lunchtime on most days, and literature and other AA information was kept on hand for any AA members to use. In mid-October, a fourth shift from midnight to 6:00 AM began, which continued into November. Also in October, an AA presence was established in Respite Center #3, which was south of the World Trade Center, in a damaged but still functional Marriott Hotel. There, too, a series of shifts were set up to assure that volunteers were present during the hours the room was open, with literature on hand as well. That center remained open until late November.

As mentioned, Respite Center #1 was a Saint John's University building, and Room 231 was a one-time classroom with a large blackboard that covered one wall. There, the three volunteers who entered the room that first Friday night wrote their names and home groups, and in the weeks that followed pretty much all the volunteers and visitors who entered that room followed suit. When the AA presence ended and Room 231 closed, that blackboard was totally filled with names and home groups. Likewise, there was a logbook for volunteers and visitors to sign at both Respite Centers. Although the blackboard was not able to be preserved, and is probably in use today as another classroom tool, photos of it at the end of AA's presence have been preserved, and the logbooks have been turned over to the AA archives at the GSO. Other mementos, such as two large "Ground Zero Group" plaques, forged by the steel workers from metal salvaged from the twin towers site, were given to New York Intergroup and to the GSO for safekeeping.

In April 2005, the volunteers who served at Ground Zero held a reunion. There, all reminisced about what the experience meant to them, and in some cases disagreed on details as to what exactly happened and when. (Most of the material contained herein has been drawn from a transcript on that occasion.) Among the shares that night was one from a New York City firefighter who was not a volunteer for AA, but who made use of that facility as an AA member. "I have no idea," he said, "how many sobrieties were saved by that meeting, but I'm telling you it was more than a handful, because there were a lot of guys and people right on the verge every night that we were there." He went on to say, "Anything that we needed there [at Ground Zero], it just seemed to pop up. When your face was dirty, somebody rinsed it off. If you lost a glove, there was somebody there to give you a glove. And this [Room 231] was just a piece of the puzzle. And for me and other guys like me, it was a big piece of the puzzle, probably the biggest piece."

AA at Ground Zero lasted from September 28 until December 7, 2001, thanks to the efforts of all the volunteers from South Eastern New York General Service and from New York Intergroup. This is another example of AA cooperation within the fellowship and with AA's friends outside.