

The Model For Selfless Professionalism: Recognizing Our Unsung Heroes

Interview by Casey Hein, RDH, MBA

In September 2001, Nancy Barnes was living and working in New York City. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers inferno on September 11, 2001, she and many other dental hygienists, who are unsung heroes, worked around the clock for months in postmortem examination of human remains to help provide closure on the lives of many of 9-11's victims.

When I visited with her in January of this year, Nancy shared a story that I felt compelled to write and it seems fitting to feature this story this month, which is the third anniversary of this national tragedy. As told by Nancy, this article is a story about selflessness and love for mankind; giving away all your time, energy, and compassion; and how a group of fellow dental hygienists made a real difference in the lives of people who lost their loved ones.

There were a number of dental hygienists like myself who volunteered—no formal training, just a willingness to help.

Can you describe the call to action you and your colleagues felt during this crisis?

I was on my way to work when the planes hit the World Trade Center. The event was horrific; all we wanted to do was help somehow. I knew that the Mass Disaster Plan of Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) of City of New York and members of the New York Society of Forensic Dentistry would be called to assist with identifications. I knew Winnie Furnari and Mona Itkowitz, the 2 dental hygienists on the Mass Disaster Plan for OCME, so I contacted Winnie to offer help in anyway I could. There were a number of dental hygienists like myself who volunteered—no formal training, just a willingness to help.

Who were the dental hygienists involved with this volunteer effort?

The dental hygienists involved were Delores Belrose, Fay Brown, Cindi Callahan, Elisha Dang, Pat Delaney, Jennifer Dondero, Andrea Doria, Shizuko Egami, Winnie (lead dental hygienist/tour commander), Jeannie Guzman, Mona (lead dental hygienist/tour commander), Bernice Iwinski,

Juliana Kim, Lisa Laramée, Dinene Manz, Linda Matuseski, Linda Obermeyer, Joann Pecorella, Diane Penola, Geri Rau, Mary Ryan, Melanie Topol, Joann Villani, Cynthia Wagner, Joann Whitter, and myself. Also, Scott Rubins, an emergency medical technician and a science teacher, pitched in.

How long did it take to mobilize and organize the response of the dental profession and what agency/organization coordinated this effort?

The mobilization of the agencies within the City of New York was overseen by Charles Hirsch, MD, chief medical examiner of OCME. Jeff Burkes, DDS, is chief dental consultant of OCME and a member of the New York Society of Forensic Dentistry; he oversaw the dental volunteers and he was in charge of the tour commanders. Jeff's team had been trained to respond in an emergency and follow the protocols that were established. The Dental Identification Unit was given a trailer to use as OCME office space on 20th Street and 2nd Avenue. The Disaster Mortuary Response Team and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, federal agencies, were also dispatched to the area.

What were your responsibilities and what guidelines were you given to perform them?

Established protocols were given to the volunteers to read and become familiar with. We had to read the documents and sign them before we could volunteer. We had to present a copy of our dental license and either a driver's license with a photo or a passport. The volunteers came from all over North America and were trained by the Mass Disaster Plan leaders to follow the protocols.

What, if any, on-site training did volunteers receive?

Winnie and Mona trained me when I first arrived at OCME on the night of September 12. I



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Part of OCME's team.

was shown how to take the information necessary for collecting data for volunteers and how to assign volunteer time. I was shown the area in the morgue where we would assist in the identification of the remains. I was instructed that we would record the information, assist in taking radiographs, stock the area with supplies, secure evidence, and contact dental offices. Our work involved communications with OCME and other city agencies, such as the police and fire departments. I learned how to enter information into the computer and how to work with a partner to review records for identification.

What did you learn in undergraduate school or in private practice that prepared you best to perform these tasks?

Dental hygiene education prepared the volunteers well. Courses such as anatomy, physiology, microbiology, charting, and radiography—the knowledge that we have learned about how our records should be kept (neat, legible), the importance of proper radiographic technique and frequency, the importance of charting restorations, and updating records on each visit—were key elements in giving us the background to assist in this endeavor. Also, I think my involvement in organized dental hygiene, the friends I have, and the networking ability I have acquired was very helpful. Of course, the support of my family and friends, who sometimes didn't see me for days, was essential.

What kind of hours did the volunteers put in and where were the headquarters for performing postmortem work?

Initially, the volunteers worked very long hours until we established a schedule. During the early days, we worked 10- to 12-hour tours. As the weeks passed, we established 8-hour tours, with no more

Photo by Daniel B. Levitt, DDS

than 2 days together. The tour commanders would select the times that they would be available to be on call around-the-clock. Our Dental Identification Unit was in operation from September 11, 2001, to June 15, 2002, and we worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Was emotional/psychological support offered for volunteers who were identifying remains of victims and communicating with their families?

Emotional and psychological support was available right from the start. Clergy and grief counselors were available for us at any time and the Salvation Army canteen gave us a place to eat, socialize, and separate ourselves from our work. We talked with dental offices to secure radiographs, insurance companies, and consulate offices because of the number of foreign citizens that died. We talked to each other, tour commanders, and with members of the other professional groups. Jeff planned a number of meetings for us to talk openly. He even arranged a telephone conference call meeting for the dental hygienists to speak with him directly to voice concerns and ask advice. The dentist tour commanders had a similar meeting.

What was the most personally gratifying experience or feeling you came away with?

It is impossible to pick one defining moment. When I think back on it, what really got me through was assisting families by bringing some closure to this tragic time. The members of our team are special to me—I so respect all the dental hygienists and dentists who I worked with during that time. To this day, it is very hard to think about the tasks we performed. But I also remember the good feeling I had when I could make a positive identification of a remain. Being able to bring some peace to a family or friend makes all the work we did worthwhile. I have dear friends who have never received that closure and it is very painful.

How have the volunteers been recognized?

The team has been recognized on many levels. The dentists have been recognized in print and at the 2001 and 2002 American Dental Association Annual Meeting. Both the

International College of Dentists and the Academy of General Dentistry also have recognized them.

The dental hygienists were recognized during the 2002 American Dental Hygienists' Association Annual Session when Winnie received a plaque for all her efforts and on behalf of the 26 dental hygienist volunteers. On September 11, 2003,

Charles, on behalf of OCME, presented all 250 volunteers with a certificate for our volunteer efforts during this disaster; this was the first time OCME has recognized volunteers in this manner. Colgate Oral Pharmaceuticals presented all the dental hygienists with a small plaque in recognition of our efforts during a dinner in 2002.

On September 11, 2003, Congressman Vito Fossella (R, 13th Congressional District of New York) of Staten Island, New York, presented all the volunteers with an honorary certificate for our efforts on behalf of the State of New York. In October 2004, Winnie and Mona will receive the Gösta Gustafson Award from the German Academy of Forensic Odonto-

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Stomatology in Mainz, Germany, for their efforts.

their own lives to invest this level of love for mankind. Thank you, Nancy and colleagues.

What advice would you give to others who also may perform this difficult, but very valuable, responsibility?

My advice to anyone who is interested in becoming involved with forensic dentistry is to take courses, join a local dental forensics group, and become a member of the American Society of Forensic Odontology. Unfortunately, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences does not allow membership for dental hygienists.

On reflection, do you have any recommendations for how dental professionals might become more involved in emergency preparedness related to national disasters?

Become involved in your city, state, or school's Mass Disaster Plan team, as well as the local dental forensic society for your community and/or state. In July of this year, I discussed the topic of forensics and dental hygiene at the International Federation of Dental Hygienists' International Symposium on Dental Hygiene in Madrid, Spain. Based on this experience, I feel that the most important recommendation is the need to work together internationally to develop a universal charting system and mechanism for the world community to communicate better during a disaster.

What residual feelings do you carry as a result of this experience?

I have respect for all people and feel that life is short and you never know when it will be taken from you. Because of this, each day is important and should not be wasted. The friends that I made will be with me forever. The bonds that drew these volunteers together remain very strong as a result of the unique relationship that we share with each other and allow us to look at the tragedy of 9-11, the loss of life in so many cities, and the changes in our world community as experiences that have helped us grow. **COH**

Author's Note

Everyone needs a hero, we just don't see too many these days. I believe Nancy Barnes and her colleagues are the most vivid models for selfless professionalism in an age when most folks are too absorbed in