

Rebuilding at Ground Zero

by Kathleen Rich-New, Clarity Works!

At 6:47am on July 20, I was full of anticipation as I walked into the Jacob Javits Center in New York City to be one of the 500 facilitators bringing the voices of the area residents to life. This was going to be democracy in action. We had been briefed on the logistics, the area background and reactions that could be expected, the night before. People were already lined up to check in as participants. Over 5,000 area residents came to consider plans for the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan and the creation of a permanent memorial for 9/11. Many had lost family and friends, others had run for their lives. They lost their jobs and they had helped day after day as part of the recovery efforts. The facilitators had come from all fifty states, Europe, Africa and Australia. Word went out for volunteers who were skilled in facilitation and comfortable with diversity and strong emotions. Within two weeks, AmericaSpeaks, the event designer, had almost 1,000 responses from 21 countries. For me, it was a chance to connect with those who had lived through the tragedy and hear what they thought and how they felt. I was unsure how the day was going to come together with so many New Yorkers in one room charged to create a common vision for the design of the city's future.



This modern town hall meeting addressed the basic issues of rebuilding the scarred 16 acres in lower Manhattan. There were tables of 10, with computers connected to a central computer base. Opinions were typed in and sent to a team who identified trends. Participants ranked choices and voted with wireless keypads giving real-time feedback to the sponsors. There were tables for those who spoke Russian, Spanish and Chinese Mandarin and Cantonese dialects. There were many races, religions and ethnic groups represented. There were physically challenged participants in wheel chairs and on crutches. Grief counselors were on standby. Over 200 news agencies were there to report on and record this historical event. CNN spent the day reporting live to the local area. My personal media debut was being interviewed by Tokyo and Hungry TV correspondents.

There were a lot of personal agendas. One shirt read, "I lost my company at Ground Zero and all I got was this lousy shirt." Another had stickers with "Living Wage Jobs" and "Affordable Housing." One brought his sculpture portfolio and wanted everyone to look at it. I was asked, "Why would you come here to be part of a staged, commercial process for people who will not use any of what we say here today?". Others said, "I came because they said they would listen."

The community bonding began when each participant was asked to share their stories of how 9/11 impacted them. Two members of my group had watched the attack from their balconies and said they wondered what was going through the minds of those who jumped. Each told their story and we listened. As we worked through the day, they began to clarify their visions and hopes for the future. They began to create new possibilities.

They wanted more green space, more neighborhoods with affordable housing, better transportation, jobs for all levels, a less commercial and a more vibrant and alive area. They wanted a memorial that was extraordinary and inspirational. They laughed and teased each other as they admitted they wanted conflicting options. There were times when a memory surfaced and one would fight to hold back the tears. At times we would just sit in silence as the emotions poured over us.



This was an incredibly complex process. Over 70 groups that were independently organized to give citizens input to the rebuilding design were linked together. The top decision makers were in the same room at the same time with the area residents. The decision makers stayed all day to listen and respond to the visions and hopes that were shared. The six designs presented were voted down. (Details and dialogue can be found at www.listeningtothecity.org.)



The 5,000 played well together. They listened to each other. They were thoughtful in what they said. They moved through the agenda on schedule. As their vision became clearer and new options were created, I knew I was in the right place at the right time. By the end of the day there were feelings of healing and hope that a stronger, better community will come from this tragedy. I am glad I was there.

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Follow up results from this meeting:

- 40% of the office space will be built in other sites in Lower Manhattan locations. (Oct 2002, NY Times)
- The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) has announced the two finalists out of 400 submissions in the design competition for the memorial. They plan to release the Master Plan by the end of February. It will take 10 years to complete. It will take three years to bring the site up to ground level. (February 2003)