

Statement for the EPA WTC Air Quality Expert Technical Review Panel, March 31, 2004.

Talk, talk, talk, talk and more talk, talk... The machinery of our society: the EPA, the DOH, the DOE, as well as other city, state, and federal politicians and agencies, all have so much to talk about concerning 9/11. They dominate the 9/11 scenarios: hearings, forums and press conferences. However, the victims of this tragedy, those of us who live or work at Ground Zero, like myself, have been grossly marginalized and ignored. Where have our elected officials been when we most needed them? Once and for all, our voices need to be heard because we are suffering.

I, Milton Díaz, a UFT executive board member at Stuyvesant High School, would like to share with you the atrocities that our school community has suffered since September 11th. Although we have yet to fully identify and quantify those teachers, staff members and students who have been plagued with physical and mental illnesses, the information that I received from staff members who describe their debilitating and ongoing ailments is quite alarming. It is imperative that the physical and mental health of our school population affected by September 11th be properly and expeditiously addressed. The continued negligence on behalf of our government, school officials, the EPA and the UFT is criminal and disgraceful.

I am including copies of individual statements made by our faculty and staff.

Teachers have been kept in the dark or simply misinformed concerning many issues directly affecting them. Some of these include the following:

1. The amounts and varying contaminants we were exposed to.
2. The effects of these contaminants on our bodies both short and long term.
3. The present status of air quality at our school and the removal of all toxic wastes from our building.

Stuyvesant High School was in no way ready to be inhabited just 3 weeks after September 11th. There was no air purification or filtration system in place, and we were sandwiched between Ground Zero and the barge where exposed waste products were being deposited and blown into the air over and over again.

The EPA issued a misleading press release shortly after the attacks stating it was safe for us to go back to work. There were discrepancies regarding how soon other Ground Zero employees returned to work. For example, AMEX monitored air quality for one year before allowing its employees to return to Ground Zero. Public School 234 did not open until months later and only on condition that HEPA filters be installed all over the building. While free air purifiers were being provided to residents and workers in the area we (at Stuyvesant) were left out. Our building had not been properly cleaned. Curtains, carpets and upholstery had not been removed (some are still in the building). The air vents were filthy. High concentrations of lead and asbestos were found in the building and required abatement procedures (as stipulated by law) were not followed. All

of this in a school building with a pre-existing faulty air ventilation system where unusual debris collects in places like hallway ceilings. Custodians use ordinary vacuum cleaners to clean these very dubious areas (along the fourth floor north central wing hallway). The Stuyvesant community was not even informed about the health risks it was being exposed to. On the contrary, we were constantly being misled to believe that the air was fine. This is criminal.

Whom do we turn to if our officials have failed us?

Whom do we believe if the information given to us was so contradictory?

Why has our UFT been so lame, so negligent?

Why did school officials continue to lie to us regarding our environment?

I remember being present when Mr. Orlan testified under oath at the US Court building stating that all necessary testing had not taken place before he gave the directive that our building was safe. Since then, the Board of Education has been dismantled and reorganized. It is now called the Department of Education with a new group of players. Is this reorganization a convenient way to elude any responsibility?

We owe the clean up effort to the unrelenting pressure the Parent Association exerted, as they demanded that our building be cleaned in spite of the criminal stubbornness of school officials who only obstructed that process, laboring it and delaying it. These school officials misled us regarding the detrimental health risks we were being exposed to.

At Stuyvesant High School the clean up operation lasted 2 1/2 years. It was the result of parents and individuals like myself who stuck it out. The consequences of this sinister scenario are grave. There are students, faculty, and staff who are sick, physically and psychologically. Unfortunately, no systematic and consistent health monitoring system was developed to track the health of those affected. NYOSH did a preliminary study and has yet to follow up. In fact, too much time was spent on conducting studies. A group of UFT executive board members has requested that faculty and staff fill out a health form describing illnesses they believe are directly related to the 9/11 attacks. Some the illnesses reported include the following:

- persistent coughing
- chronic asthma, asthmatic bronchitis
- other respiratory diseases
- skin diseases, eczema, and dermatitis of the ears, unusual rashes
- unusual growths in the throat, eyes and skin
- eye irritations
- stomach and intestinal irregularities
- chronic post-traumatic depression
- nausea
- recurring nightmares

- phobias
- body aches
- shortness of breath
- strong heart palpitations
- anxiety
- the list goes on

Members of our community who never suffered from any of these conditions developed them post 9/11, and those who had existing conditions developed more aggravated ones. The medication ranges from the use of inhalers, in some cases two different ones, taking antibiotics for chronic bronchitis, and cortisone and allergy treatment as well as psychotherapy. In cases where there was a pre-existing condition, the medication was either changed to a stronger drug or, at the very least, increased. Every day is like a ticking bomb when we find out that someone else has become sick.

The psychological impact has been very devastating. Soon after our return to Stuyvesant High School, Mr. Claude Chemtob, a renowned post-traumatic stress syndrome specialist, spoke to us about "mechanically reconstructing" our lives, creating those patterns that were there, that were interrupted by the tragic events. I found certain of Mr. Chemtob's comments disturbing and inappropriate. In particular, when he insisted that we must never give the enemy the impression that he has won and that we must re-occupy the area (Ground Zero) and go back to doing things as we did before. This did not make sense at a time when reports on contamination were being publicized. Was there a hidden subtext (agenda) in Mr. Chemtob's workshops?

The crimes committed against us by our officials need to be rectified not perpetuated.

We have become, not only an oversight, but also a gross and indecent criminal experiment, in the name of what?

Thank you.

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Enclosures: individual statements from teachers and staff.