

Teaching at ground zero: Goodwill journey

Three Spring Creek teachers and their principal travel to the Big Apple to support the teachers who have endured three of the most challenging months of their professional careers

Sunday, December 9, 2001

By DAVE BREITENSTEIN, dbreitenstein@naplesnews.com

NEW YORK CITY — Nearly 1,300 miles separate Public School 42 in lower Manhattan from Spring Creek Elementary in Bonita Springs.

From the outside, the two schools don't appear to have much in common. P.S. 42 is a five-story, 103-year-old building positioned in a densely populated neighborhood; Spring Creek is a one-story, 19-year-old structure that is nestled between a gated community and an upscale entertainment complex.

P.S. 42 students primarily speak Chinese as their first language; Spring Creek children are balanced between native English and Spanish speakers. No teachers had ever seen the other school nor met any of its staff members.

The Florida teachers and students watched the horrific events of Sept. 11 unfold on television; their New York City counterparts witnessed them out their classroom windows.

The past few days, however, have bridged the gap.

Three Spring Creek teachers and their principal embarked on a goodwill journey last week to the Big Apple. They weren't sure what exactly they would do at P.S. 42 or how they could help, but they wanted to show support and respect for the teachers who had endured three of the most challenging months of their professional careers.

What the Spring Creek crew found was that no matter the cultural or language barriers, geographic or age differences, teachers at P.S. 42 just needed to know someone was thinking about them.

"At first, I thought, 'Well, we're not really directly affected by this,'" said art teacher Tom Toomey, who watched the Twin Towers collapse from P.S. 42's roof. "But really, though, everyone here was affected, even if we didn't have to evacuate the building.

"That was a very challenging day for us," he added.



Surrounded by New York City Public School 42 third-graders, Spring Creek Elementary fifth-grade teacher Marcia Beckman shows the students a digital photograph she had taken of them. Beckman was one of four Spring Creek educators who traveled on a goodwill trip to a Manhattan school shaken physically and emotionally by the World Trade Center disaster. From left are third-graders Raymond Liu, Jason Zhu, Tina Lam and Darien Lam. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)

"But that is one part of being a teacher: You can't lose it in front of the children."

New York City teachers had to put up a front that everything was OK, while at the same time wondering if their husbands, wives, children and friends were safe. Youth around the country sent cards and stuffed animals to children in New York, and firefighters and police officers were deluged with support.

Spring Creek Elementary teacher Valerie Sheckler wanted educators to know their brave efforts haven't been forgotten.

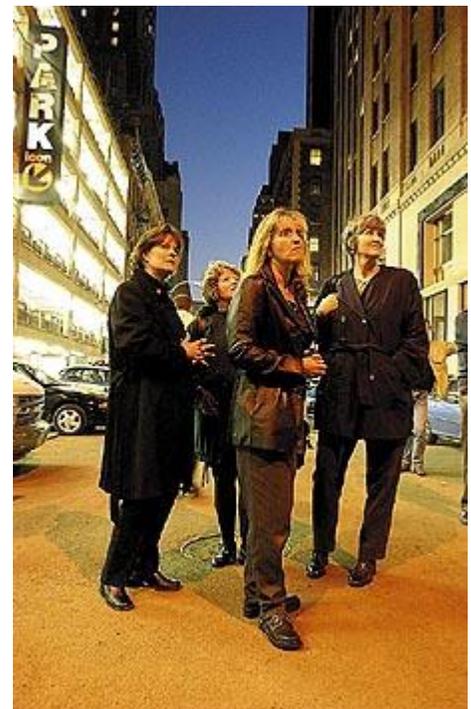
"The teachers also were heroes that day," said P.S. 42 assistant principal Linore Lindy, who ended up sleeping at the school after an exhausting Sept. 11.

Sheckler initiated the mission in Manhattan, a short stint at P.S. 42 in which Spring Creek's volunteers simply were there to listen to teachers and perform whatever tasks were needed. She was joined by fellow fifth-grade teachers Marcia Beckman and Pam Schroeder, and Spring Creek Principal Sheryl Clarke.

"This has truly been the experience of a lifetime," Clarke reflected.

Memories from Sept. 11

The stories that Spring Creek educators heard this past Wednesday, Thursday and Friday will last a lifetime. Almost three months after Sept. 11, memories of that tragic day are still vivid inside the halls of P.S. 42.



The four Spring Creek educators pause at a roadblock near ground zero to pay respect to the thousands who died in

"All you could do was gape in horror," said Principal Rosa Casiello O'Day. "The impossible was unfolding right before our eyes. To watch those buildings collapse... and what it meant..."

Fourth-grade teacher Peggy Tang's classroom is on the fifth floor, providing scenic views of the Manhattan skyline. But her students watched the towers burn, then collapse, and the view changed forever.

"They saw two buildings there one day, and nothing there the next," Tang said. "I think the children have realized that life is short and to really cherish the time they have with their family and friends."

Nayibe Lora has noticed that her 7-year-old son Fabio is not the same innocent boy anymore.

"He's grown up quickly," Lora said. "He watches the news now and asks lots of questions."

Much of Wednesday was spent popping into classrooms along the narrow corridors of P.S. 42.

The events of Sept. 11 seem to haunt everyone, frozen in time.

"Every teacher we visited had something to say about that day," Sheckler said. "Then you realize that there are a million similar stories out there. The details of that day will be etched in the minds of New Yorkers forever."

First-grade teacher Linda Sousa used the incident as a learning experience for her own children as well. In their writing exercises at home, her three daughters have expressed their adult-like views of Sept. 11 through a narrated children's book. As her daughters read their work aloud to the Spring Creek visitors, it became clear just how much comfort was needed during this trying time. The children simply needed to be hugged.

Like many of city's 8 million residents, Sousa has vowed not to let that horrible day change her life.

"We're going to continue with normalcy," she said. "We are unshakable. We're going to defy these terrorist acts and be as supportive as possible."

Memories from Dec. 5-7

As P.S. 42's honored instructional guests last week, the Florida foursome focused on environmental education, with themes relating to the Sunshine State. After news got out about the trip, Spring Creek was deluged with calls from other Southwest Floridians wanting to support the cause.

Community members and parents donated hundreds of scenic postcards, stuffed animals of uniquely Florida creatures and seashells snatched from local beaches. The lessons were designed to show children that Florida, too, has its flavor, just like New York is known for the Statue of Liberty and its subways.

attacks that toppled the World Trade Center. From left are Principal Sheryl Clarke and fifth-grade teachers Valerie Sheckler, Pam Schroeder, and Marcia Beckman. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)



The Florida guests join in the daily ritual of students reciting the Pledge of Allegiance over the school's public address system at the beginning of each school day. From left are Schroeder, Sheckler, Beckman and Clarke. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)

"New York is very different from Florida, so I brought some things from Florida to show you what it's like," Schroeder, a Long Island native, told the children.

From the moment Beckman walked through the classroom door, inquisitive children immediately began quizzing her about Florida. Does it snow in Florida? What kind of shell is this? Why are panthers becoming extinct? Each classroom received its own stuffed Florida panther, which is Spring Creek's mascot, in addition to a few stuffed manatees and turtles. Children also received postcards with messages written by their counterparts at Spring Creek, and each child was allowed to keep one shell after they completed a science exercise on shell classification.

The foursome from Spring Creek might have started a northerly migration of teachers this winter, reversing the normal snowbird pattern. Debbie Nauss, assistant principal at Clewiston Central Elementary, was inspired by the goodwill teaching mission and will spend a week in Manhattan helping P.S. 234 move back into its former facility adjacent to ground zero. She will be joined by three teachers from Naples, Lee County and Pennsylvania aiding educators on their return to the site they ran out of Sept. 11.

"Teachers steal good ideas, and we're going to steal theirs," Nauss said about her foursome's planned trip.

Ground zero

Like many visitors to New York, the Spring Creek foursome made a pilgrimage to ground zero.

What they saw there had them standing in awe. What once were pinnacles of America had been reduced to a pile of rubble, still smoldering after three months.

The air was heavy, still clogged with dust particles from someone's former office.

"There was a rush of emotion just standing there," Schroeder said. "I didn't want to be a spectator, like I was looking at a tourist spot. But I wanted to pay my respects to everyone who died there." "I'm still overwhelmed with helplessness," Clarke said. "To think of just how many lives were lost in that one spot. I didn't know anyone who worked there or had family who worked there, but it was still a horrific site."

The work area remains cordoned off by police barricades and green fencing. Visitors still light candles and place flowers along sidewalks on a daily basis. Pictures of the missing remain attached to the fence.

"It's just heartwrenching to think that so many people haven't been found yet," Sheckler said.

The educators took a shuttle service from P.S. 42 to ground



Kindergartner Julie Liang hugs a stuffed Florida panther given by Spring Creek Elementary Principal Sheryl Clarke as part of environmental lessons for P.S. 42 students. Each classroom at P.S. 42 received a panther and learned about Florida's endangered species. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)



Schroeder pauses in front of hundreds of flowers, candles and posters left by mourners near ground zero. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)

zero, riding for about five minutes along the river and fish market before cutting into the heart of lower Manhattan. Skyscrapers there create windy canyons protected from sunlight. Then, all of a sudden, the hi-rises end.

"It's overwhelming to think that the World Trade Center was once there, but now it's almost a pocket of emptiness," Beckman said.

Shoulders to lean on

By Wednesday afternoon, the visitors from Spring Creek already had made an impact on P.S. 42 staff members. The four spent their own money and their own time to support teachers and a school they knew nothing about.

Fifth-grader Karen Lee, 10, said her mother is pleased so many outsiders are supporting the school. New York City has always been one of those cities everyone loves to hate, fueled by baseball fans envious of the Yankees.

"That has really been shocking to me," said P.S. 42 parent Terry Finlayson, whose daughter now says the Pledge of Allegiance along with her bedtime prayer.

"As a New Yorker, I thought that Americans didn't really care for us too much, but it seems like we have a lot of support. It's good for the city that everybody cares how we are doing," said parent George Cordero. "I'm glad we're in a situation here where everyone is supportive."

Most of the P.S. 42 teachers couldn't explain in words how they felt about unknown colleagues from Florida coming all the way to New York, just to be there in case they needed to talk or assistance with a lesson.

First-grade teacher Silvia Chan-Tam said the trip was a nice gesture, but its effects are hard to pinpoint.

"It just feels good to have them here," said Eileen Lew, another first-grade teacher.

Linking the two schools

Spring Creek and P.S. 42 hope to build a stronger relationship, and Clarke said her school would be more than willing to reciprocate a visit from the New York teachers.



After leading a lesson in Annie Lue-Yen's kindergarten class, Spring Creek Principal Sheryl Clarke receives a warm thank you from the teacher for the Southwest Florida school's goodwill gesture at P.S. 42. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)



Schroeder gets acquainted with fifth-grader Jennifer Lee

"We hope they could come up with a plan to have some of their teachers visit us, and maybe we could have some of our local businesses helping with the costs," Clarke said. as she helps with a math lesson on fractions. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)

Some of the New York teachers already have said their students will write back to their new Florida friends, so a budding pen pal program appears to be taking place. Nearly two months ago, the fifth-grade student council at Spring Creek opted to donate all of its proceeds from a pancake breakfast fundraiser to relief efforts in New York, unbeknownst that their contribution would be helping the neighborhood of their future friends.

When the foursome returns to school Tuesday, children will see pictures of New York and the children they helped comfort. It's the first stage of a relationship educators hope to foster throughout the school year.

Those two school buildings, once so far apart, now really aren't that different after all.

Teaching at ground zero: Sept. 11 day to remember for P.S. 42 principal

Sunday, December 9, 2001

By DAVE BREITENSTEIN, debreitenstein@naplesnews.com

NEW YORK CITY — P.S. 42 Principal Rosa Casiello O'Day told the visitors from Spring Creek Elementary the following story about her most challenging day as a principal, mother, wife and New Yorker:

The sixth day of the 2001-02 school year began at 8:40 a.m. on what O'Day describes as one of the clearest New York City mornings in many years. Just 10 minutes later, the day's clarity was shrouded in smoke.

"I heard it, but didn't know what it was," O'Day said. "I heard a big boom, but it was so crisp. It sounded like a blowout on a tractor-trailer. But I looked outside and couldn't figure out what it was."

O'Day soon heard from a teacher that a plane crashed in a tower of the World Trade Center. She walked outside and dropped into the corner coffee shop, owned by a former P.S. 42 student, to get the scoop on what happened. O'Day originally thought the airplane was a small one, but then learned it was a commercial airliner.

"I said, 'I knew it.' I knew it was a terrorist attack.

O'Day's husband, Thomas, a New York City fireman, was among the hundreds of firefighters immediately dispatched to the Twin Towers. She tried to contact him, but to no avail. She didn't worry, though, because the 750 children and four dozen teachers at P.S. 42 needed her now more than ever.

"I knew I couldn't do a darn thing for him. When I looked out the window, I knew the entire city's fire department would be there."

By that point, students at P.S. 42 began to realize that something big had happened in their neighborhood. They heard the sirens, saw the smoke and sensed a change in their teachers' demeanor.

"We kept going from room to room reassuring everyone that it's over there, not here."

For the most part, children remained in the dark about exactly what had happened. School administration made a conscious decision not to announce the attacks over the PA system, but guidance counselors and psychologists were circling the school lending support to teachers.



P.S. 42 Principal Rosa Casiello O'Day points to the hole in the Manhattan skyline where the Twin Towers once stood. She took Schroeder, right, and the Florida group to the five-story school's roof to explain the chaotic events of Sept. 11. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)

P.S. 42's computer system was inoperable that day, and telephone lines were knocked out initially after the towers collapsed. There was no way to contact parents.

"It was a rough day. After a little while, we had a few parents come to get their children. Then, they all came. We had to make sure parents didn't run into the building and pick their kids right out of class. We had a long line of parents that wrapped around the building."

O'Day made it clear to parents that no matter their complaints or frustration, they weren't just going to walk into school plucking kids out of classes. They had to sign their child out, like they do on normal days, to ensure every student was accounted for.

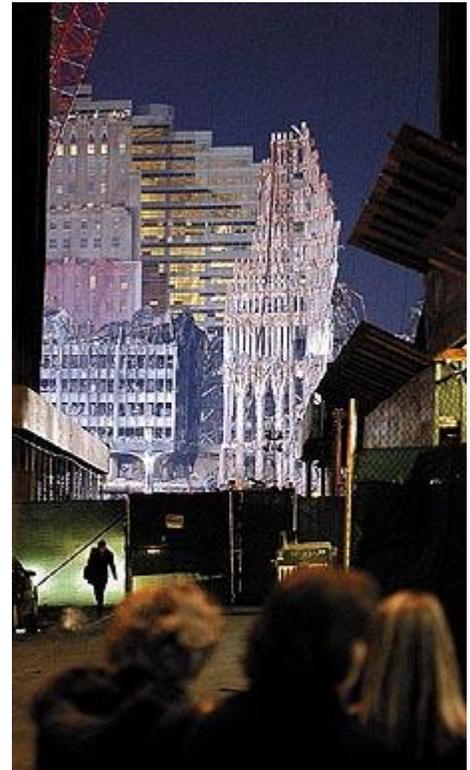
"I had to explain that it was for their child's safety. It is much safer here right now than anywhere outside. The school building is safe."

The last child was finally picked up at 6:30 p.m. O'Day had arranged for a friend to care for her son, who attends day care across the East River in Brooklyn, and she was finally able to see him after 8 p.m.

But O'Day still had not reached her husband by the end of the school day. She did, however, make contact with her nephew, who informed O'Day that her husband was not among the dead or missing. But that reassuring call from Thomas had not yet come.

"He was nowhere to be found. I couldn't reach him, but I knew he would be there helping."

She finally heard that familiar voice at 1 a.m. the next day, a full 16 hours after he and the rest of New York's finest began their heroic effort.



The Florida educators watch the Twin Towers cleanup effort at ground zero. Nearly three months after the terrorist attacks, the air around the site is still thick with dust. [Cameron Gillie/Staff](#)