

# Professional Issues

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## LESSONS THEY CARRY

On 9/11, first-year medical students in New York volunteered at the city morgue. A new book tells their story.

STORY BY DAMON ADAMS  
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BARRY M. GOLDSTEIN, MD, PHD

**E**UNICE KANG, MD, HAD TWO weeks of medical school behind her when terror struck New York City on Sept. 11, 2001. Initially, her main concern was for a cousin who worked in one of the World Trade Center towers.

She cried and her classmates tried to calm her down. But she soon found out that her cousin made it safely from the building, after being in the stairwell on the 10th floor when the building was hit.

For Dr. Kang, the worst part was not knowing what happened to her cousin. Though she was new to medicine, she thought volunteering at the city medical examiner's office would help others find out what happened to their loved ones.

Her story is part of *Being There*, a  
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**EUNICE KANG, MD, with her cell phone showing a call from her cousin, who was in the second tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. Her cousin survived.**

“I thought working at OCME would help people find out what happened.”



**DORON STEMBER, MD, with a photo he had taken of the view outside his family's apartment.**

“**M**y Great Aunt Sylvia was like my grandmother. She lived in this apartment on the Lower East Side my whole life. I've visited there since I was little ... She worked on the 80th floor of one of the twin towers. We'd go out on the balcony, which had a beautiful view of the towers, and count the floors. So, growing up, I always associated her with this view. Then she passed away my senior year of college. I graduated and went to live there, in the apartment. ...

I thought about her whenever I was on the balcony. One day I picked up my camera and

took this picture.

On Sept. 11th, we were in class. We went outside and heard that both towers had collapsed. They told all med students to put on scrubs and go to the Bellevue ER, but it was mobbed with doctors. We waited all day, but no one came in. We were frustrated.

At the end of the day I went back home and was afraid to go out on the balcony. I finally went out — that's when I got really upset. It really hurt me — the association with my aunt.

I'm so glad I have that picture of what I saw with her for 27 years.”

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collection of photos and interviews with students from the New York University School of Medicine who helped out at the medical examiner's morgue.

"I didn't do it to learn medicine or anatomy," said Dr. Kang, now a resident at NYU Medical Center. "I did it to feel a little more human after that experience. It was one concrete thing we could do to actually help."

Medical students, many in school less than a month, came from NYU and other schools to take part in the gruesome task of identifying the remains of victims. They mostly worked as scribes, taking notes as medical examiners, police and other officials sorted through body parts taken to the morgue.

Some students recall the faces of dead firemen and other victims who were brought in. Others remember the smell. Some said they would never look at death the same way again.

"I volunteered in the medical examiner's office because, unfortunately, that was the only place [where] help was needed," Doron Stember, MD, a medical student in 2001, wrote in an e-mail. "I've since graduated from medical school and started a surgical residency. [at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York]. The hours are long, and it sometimes seems that the ER calls



**BARRY GOLDSTEIN MD, PHD**

every five minutes with a new patient to see. I don't get frustrated, though. I just think about how lucky it is that we're past a time when the hospital was filled with doctors, but no patients."

Barry Goldstein, MD, PhD, heard about the students' efforts and became interested in their experiences. In June 2002, he interviewed and photographed many of them. The students posed with something that helped them cope with the tragedy.

"[They were] much like young soldiers sent off to war: You have some training but nothing can prepare you for this," said Dr. Goldstein, who was in New York for NYU's Master Scholars Artist-in-Residence program at the time and is associate professor of biochemistry and biophysics at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry.

Dr. Goldstein compiled the photos and stories in *Being There*, which was printed in May. The foreword was written by Charles Hirsch, MD, New York City's chief medical examiner, who headed the effort to identify remains. About 800 books were given to graduating medical students at NYU, the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and other New York medical schools, Dr. Goldstein said. The Class of 2005 is the first to go all the way through medical school since the terrorist attacks occurred, and Dr. Goldstein saw the book as a way to commemorate the students' involvement.

Dr. Kang said volunteering at the morgue provided a valuable lesson.

"I came away seeing how hard people work and how well they can work together," she said.

Dr. Goldstein hopes to use the material in a traveling exhibit at medical schools. *Being There* is not available in stores; more information is available online (<http://www.bgoldstein.net/>) or by e-mail ([barry.goldstein@rochester.edu](mailto:barry.goldstein@rochester.edu)). ♦



**HAYDEE BROWN, MD, with fellow OCME volunteer Michelle Mendoza, MD. The women became friends and lent each other support during the time they spent helping with the identification efforts.**



**ELIZABETH HACKETT, MD, with her boyfriend, Joe.**

"I found that I wasn't able to continue with it ... the images of the things that I saw there, you know, kept recurring in my dreams. ... And I realized that that was going to become a problem if I stayed there.

Joe helped me with that a lot... he told me, 'Look, you know you're crazy for feeling bad. You don't have to go and you're not a weak person and this is a perfectly normal thing to do to say you don't want to go back there.' "

"I think that we really just have that special bond from being there. ...

I think the last night I was there it was Michelle, [another student] and myself, and we were just sitting on the curb, and there were no bodies coming in and we all three of us just started hysterically crying out of the blue. And that was the first time that we had cried in the office, the office being 30th Street outside. It was like a release, I guess. ...

We'd just finished saluting the remains of whomever, fireman or policeman, and they left and we started reading the poetry on the wall and one of the poems was something about people's souls going up in the air and the burning of the buildings. It was just too much and we just sat down on the curb and just became really emotional and started crying. "



**WASIF ALI shows the emergency medical technician badge he first earned in high school. In the weeks after Sept. 11, he worked as an EMT and in the morgue on 30th Street. He's also a practicing Muslim.**

"After 9-11, I would wear my EMT shirt so I wouldn't be harassed. ... Just because I'm Muslim doesn't mean I'm 'other.' "