

He saw 'the nobility of the profession'

MARTHA NEIL

Walking
along
Vesey

Street to the Lower
Manhattan office of
the bar association
of which he is
president, Michael
Miller can't help but
think of one year
ago on Sept. 11.

Numerous
storefronts are
darkened and dusty.
The stately post

office building around the corner is closed. And then there's the decorative iron fence at St. Paul's Chapel, across the street from the New York County Lawyers' Association. It's festooned with fading T-shirts, banners, baseball caps and other mementos intermixed with handwritten messages of encouragement and preprinted sentiments such as "God Bless America."

Just beyond is an empty space of obliteration and ruin.

As a lawyer whose practice focuses on trusts and estates, Miller never expected to see such devastation on a routine basis. But the terrorist attacks have also made a less visible difference, he says, in how he feels about his work.

When a call went out Sept. 24, 2001, for lawyers to volunteer to help 9-11 victims and their families, the response was a reminder of "the nobility of the profession," Miller says. At a scheduled training session in Midtown the next night, a line of attorneys four-deep spilled out of the building for more than a block down the street.

Afterward, in a single volunteer legal project, Miller and hundreds of his colleagues postponed their usual duties for weeks and went to work in a cavernous storage building at Pier 94, on the Hudson River near 55th Street. Their mission: helping families of victims obtain death certificates. Ordinarily, without a body, this can take years. But in the project, lawyers, judges and public officials teamed together to ease the situation.

Volunteer lawyers met with surviving family members at the pier and filled out applications. City lawyers reviewed the applications on the spot and pointed out any deficiencies so that they could be immediately corrected. Family members then signed the applications, which were sent to Surrogate's Court and processed in record time.

Despite the counseling provided for all volunteers and a diary he kept, Miller says, "We literally cried on each other's shoulders" at the end of some workdays. Even today, he says, "I carry my Pier 94 badge with me all the time."

UNFORESEEN TRAGEDIES

AMONG THE PEOPLE MILLER STILL THINKS ABOUT IS THE DOMESTIC PARTNER OF A highly paid World Trade Center professional. The professional had immigrated to the United States, and his partner was African-American. The two men had lived together for nearly five years, sharing an apartment and a bank account in the professional's name. Until the professional's death, his parents didn't know their son was gay.

"They refused to accept that their son was homosexual and that he had a long, committed relationship with another man, a black man," Miller says. "And so they went to the bank, froze the bank account, had the locks changed on the door to the apartment."

This was their right as their son's next-of-kin. But it left the partner, who had a much lower-paying job, homeless.

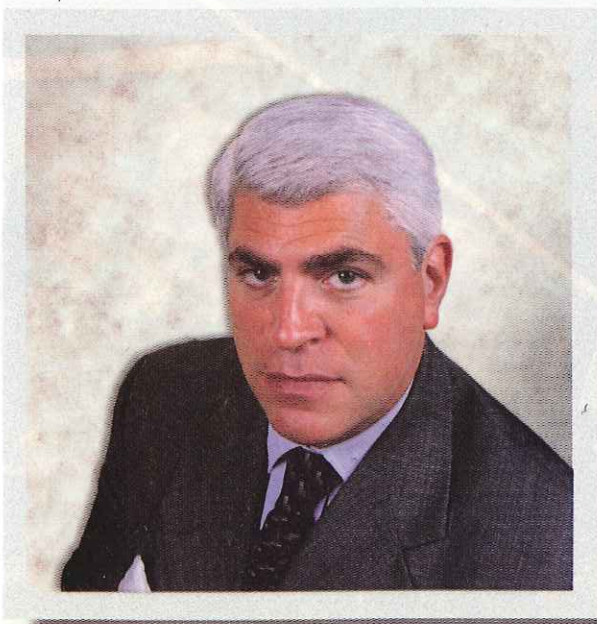
"He said to me, 'Mr. Miller, I know that they're grieving, and I know they're in pain. But I lost someone, too. And now all of my possessions are in that apartment. I don't have a change of clothes. I can't get to my money.'"

A volunteer lawyer finally persuaded the parents to release the partner's belongings.

But after that experience, Miller realized, "We can come up with something in the law to help the next person in that situation." He has asked the county bar's committee on issues concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons to make a recommendation about changing state inheritance law.

Meanwhile, Miller is busy with his practice, and he says his advice to clients hasn't changed as a result of 9-11. However, there are other differences in his daily life, such as a new emergency protocol. Bar association officials now carry lists of phone numbers for staff members.

"Our lives really have changed," Miller says, "in dramatic and not-so-dramatic ways." ■



Michael Miller