

WORLD TRADE CENTER ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CENTER PATIENT PROFILE: JILL FENWICK

When Jill Fenwick got off the Staten Island Ferry at 8:45 a.m. to go to work on the morning of September 11, 2001 she figured the loud crash she heard must have been construction noise, a not unusual sound in Lower Manhattan. But things were a little off when she boarded the subway at South Ferry. Her uptown #1 train didn't make its usual stop at Cortlandt Street and the platform, normally teeming with rush hour commuters, was completely empty.

Jill exited the subway at Franklin Street shortly before 9 a.m. Small groups of people had gathered on the street corners. They were staring up at a gaping hole in the north tower of the World Trade Center. Within minutes, she and the other bystanders witnessed a jetliner fly into the south tower.

"Then I saw what looked like puffs of confetti," Jill recalls. "It was people being sucked out of the windows."

She headed indoors to the Tribeca architectural firm where she worked in the position of administrative director. "I definitely was at the peak of my career," Jill says now. She found her colleagues watching CNN and desperately surfing the web for information about what was happening.

Within an hour, the south tower collapsed. Jill will never forget the harsh, metallic sound of the south tower collapsing. "The clack, clack, clack of the floors falling down – one on top of the other – reminded me of dominos." **Looking out the 5th floor window of her office, Jill could see a dust cloud 30 stories tall billowing up Broadway. "And right in front of it was a sea of humanity trying to escape," she says. She supervised the evacuation of her colleagues and stayed behind to lock up.**

As soon as she stepped outside, she was covered in dust. "There were drifts of ash everywhere. It looked like it was snowing, but the snow was gray, not white." **Almost immediately, she began to cough. She witnessed the north tower collapsing as she walked down**

Broadway. At some point during her escape from Lower Manhattan, she got pushed down onto a subway grating, causing several gashes to her left knee. A triage unit at the ferry dock dressed her leg.

Jill returned to work the following Monday. For the next couple of months, she had to commute by foot from the ferry. She held a handkerchief to her mouth whenever she passed by "the pile" at the World Trade Center site. "I used to think the people wearing masks were wimps, but I know better now," she says. **Her coughing fits, which**

"9/11 affected all of us who were down there that day. Everybody's got the same diseases and all of us need the same kind of care."

could last as long as 10 minutes, became so bad that her boss pressed her to do something about it. Her primary care physician prescribed an antibiotic.

In November 2001, Jill decided she needed to leave New York, if only briefly, for some peace of mind. She had been supplementing her income with part-time catering work and she was offered a job at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City for the entire month of February 2002. She had two weeks of vacation coming and her employer granted her a two-week unpaid leave of absence.

Things didn't turn out quite as she had planned. A poster depicting three firefighters, including one she knew, holding the American flag was everywhere. "I realized then I wouldn't ever be able to get away from 9/11," she says. Worse, she found herself more easily exhausted than she ever had been before. "And my constant coughing made serving food around young athletes extremely awkward."

Her situation and her health deteriorated further when she returned to New York. **Jill lost her full-time job and she couldn't afford the \$700 per month payments that would have enabled her to keep her health insurance through COBRA.** By Mother's Day, her coughing kept her up all night. She drove herself to the emergency room and was admitted to the hospital. When doctors were unable to pinpoint the cause of her coughing, she was released. But she continued to cough every day, all day long.

Within two weeks, Jill returned to the ER, but this time was unable to drive herself. "My sister was shocked at how ashen I looked when she took me back to the hospital. She cried and was afraid to leave my side because she thought I was going to die."

In the summer of 2002, Jill began seeing a social worker at Safe Horizon who diagnosed her with post traumatic stress Disorder. She also recommended that Jill check out an asthma clinic at Bellevue run by **Joan Reibman, MD. Dr. Reibman now is the medical director of the WTC Environmental Health Center.** "Joan saved my life," says Jill, "and her staff is awesome."

"I thought I was down for the count. My lung capacity was reduced to 30% of normal. I was given a diagnosis of reactive airway disease and prescribed both steroids and inhalers."

Jill was among the first of more than 4,500 patients who have been treated at the WTC Environmental Health Center. **Diagnosed with severe persistent asthma, sinusitis and non-allergic rhinitis, which makes her acutely sensitive**

to extremes in temperature, high humidity, dust, bleach and certain types of chemical cleaners, she is able to get the steroids and inhalers that allow her to breathe with no out-of-pocket costs. In addition, she has had two sinus operations, the first of which resulted in a cerebral spinal fluid leak through her nose. Jill's diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression was confirmed.

"Seeing planes at a certain angle made me extremely anxious which was a problem since I'm only 30 miles away from Newark Airport. I don't do well in crowds or under scaffolding either."

The WTC Environmental Health Center integrated physical and mental health care in 2007. Though she recently completed a course of group therapy to help her address these and other lingering fears, Jill, now 59, recognizes how 9/11 changed her life forever and that her health remains fragile. At one point, she was able to stop taking prednisone, which caused serious side effects, for nearly a year. But in 2009, her condition again worsened, and Jill had to take eight doses of the powerful steroid in 2009. **“I used to be very social, but now I’m a hermit. I’ve become a germophobe out of self-preservation because I’m so scared of getting really sick again,” she admits.** “I used to be able to do things with my grandchildren. Ride a bike, go to the beach, and even roller-skate. Now I sit at the computer all day.”

Her financial situation remains precarious, too. She was denied Workers Compensation and the monthly disability check she receives from Social Security leaves her with just \$6 dollars in spending money after she pays her rent, even though she moved to a smaller apartment two years ago to reduce her expenses. To supplement her fixed income, she works from her home as an agent for a company that offers consumer-driven health care.

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