

WORLD TRADE CENTER ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH CENTER PATIENT PROFILE: MARGRILY GARCIA

When word of a special treatment program at Bellevue Hospital Center for people who worked in Lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001, reached friends and family members of Margrily Garcia, better known as Maggie, a Bronx resident, they urged her to check it out.

Maggie, then a healthy woman in her late 20s, was employed as a paralegal at a firm on 90 Broad Street, about a 10-minute walk from the World Trade Center. **She and a group of her colleagues evacuated from their offices shortly after the north tower collapsed.** “We decided to head to a co-worker’s apartment in Brooklyn because we wanted to stay together and we thought we would be safer there. After all, transportation was closed down, and I had no means of getting home that fateful day. **I was covered in soot from head to feet as we crossed the Brooklyn Bridge.**” A week later, she, like thousands of other New Yorkers, returned to their jobs in Lower Manhattan, determined to do the right thing during a time of national crisis.

She quickly developed a persistent cough, even though she rarely had been sick before the terrorist attacks. In fact, her health became so bad she was forced to move back in with her mother. “My primary care doctor had diagnosed me with bronchitis and asthma but I

didn’t respond very well to the medications. I felt like I visited the emergency room on a monthly basis.” By September 2006, her constant coughing had begun to inconvenience co-workers at her new job, threatening her ability to keep her job and the private insurance that paid for her frequent doctor and ER visits.

So Maggie called Bellevue, which had begun a small WTC treatment program with grassroots support and private funding a few years earlier. “I was coughing during my phone interview with the woman who answered the phone and she advised me to immediately come in the same day. I politely declined because I had to work. I was afraid that my constant illness would compromise my employment.”

Maggie had to make another visit to the ER later that week because her coughing wouldn’t stop. But despite lack of sleep,

she was determined to keep her appointment at a clinic which helped people with symptoms similar to hers who hadn’t responded to treatment. Fortunately, New York City was about to expand the clinic into the WTC Environmental Health Center, now a multi-site facility, to keep up with the growing demand for specialized WTC physical and mental health treatment among Lower Manhattan residents, area workers and students.

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The physicians who examined Maggie found that her condition was even more serious than that of many other WTC-exposed patients they had seen. **After a series of tests, they diagnosed her with both chronic asthma and sarcoidosis, a kind of scarring that can affect many different organs. Rates of sarcoidosis increased among firefighters who responded to the WTC disaster in the first year after 9/11 compared to previous years.**



In Maggie’s case, sarcoid had scarred her heart (typically, it is found in the lungs of WTC patients) and she had to have a pacemaker/defibrillator installed. It took two additional operations to get her heart working right. Her physicians believe that the medication she has to take to control her asthma may have resulted in additional complications, but her coughing has improved. She now returns every 3-4 months for a check-up, and her visits to the ER have lessened considerably since she became a patient at the WTC Environmental Health Center more than 3 years ago.

Although Maggie, now 36, recently became engaged, her health has been permanently impaired at a young age. Both she and her fiancé must adjust to the debilitating physical—and mental—hardships that face any patient with chronic illness, including the fact

that she is easily winded and constantly sick. “I’m hanging in there,” she says, knowing that her scarred heart and asthma will require a lifetime of specialized care, monitoring, and treatment.

Maggie takes some comfort in knowing that the privately funded program that first helped her now has been funded through 2011 by the federal government. She also supports the 9/11 Health and Compensation Act (HR 847/S 1334) because she believes that federally funded monitoring and treatment must be available permanently for anyone whose health was affected by the terrorist attacks on the nation.

“I’m an upstanding American who did as I was asked on 9/11 and in the weeks, months and years that followed,” she says. “And even though I have private insurance, it would be difficult to maintain any kind of quality of life without the care of the many specialists that I depend on from the WTC Environmental Health Center which all 9/11 survivors deserve.”

This was the message that Maggie delivered to members of Congress on behalf of the more than 4,000 patients currently being treated at the WTC Environmental Health Center. **She and another patient traveled to Washington, DC in December 2009 to meet with staff from the House Energy and Commerce Committee which must approve the 9/11 Health and Compensation Act before it can move forward.**

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