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IT Volunteers Help Rebuild NYC

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Since Carie Lemack learned that her mother, Judy Larocque, was on American Airlines Flight 11 when it crashed into the World Trade Center, she has been trying desperately to gain some control in the midst of an out-of-control situation.

She and her sister formed a nonprofit organization called Families of September 11, which now has more than 650 members from 35 states and six countries. Lemack, the group's board president, was put in charge of building the organization's Web site.

"It was a full-time job," she said. "We had to go ask a lot of people for help."

But, she added, the Web site was mission-critical. "We're trying to tackle a whole slew of issues," she said, such as dealing with aid organizations, posting news updates, planning memorial sites and coping with legal issues.

"When you are grieving, you have moments that are very good, and you have moments that are very bad," Lemack explained. The Internet lets members digest information on their own terms and at their own pace, she said.

Families of September 11 managed to get the site up Dec. 4 after pulling together a team of donors and volunteers from nine corporations.

"It was just a lot of coordinating, and everyone was just very cooperative and realized that this was a good thing to work on," said Nancy Plaskett, field marketing coordinator at Seattle-based Internap Network Service Corp., which donated co-location services and bandwidth for the site. Lemack is still looking for a firm that can help bring the site to the next level. She says she'd like to create an online polling mechanism so members can vote on issues, as well as create an e-mail newsletter, online donation and registration forms, and sophisticated security protection. "To get that kind of work done, it's incredibly difficult," she said.

Small-Town Manhattan

After 20 years of Army drill exercises, "What do we do if ...?" is a question Stephen Breman knows well. But on Sept. 11, there was no "if."

Because of the chaos in Manhattan following the terrorist attacks, the American Red Cross designated its nearby Westchester County chapter, where Breman is director of general services, as a temporary staging area for emergency relief efforts. One problem was that the office's Internet connection, which was routed through Manhattan's financial district, was wiped out in the attacks.

"It was definitely chaos, and the question was, 'What are we going to do about it?' " Breman recalled.

A Red Cross volunteer had heard about a nearby company offering free co-location services to affected businesses, so he made a call. An hour later, Hawthorne, N.Y.-based Xand Corp. had a team on-site, and within 24 hours, the Westchester Red Cross was operational, said Breman. "When the call came in from the Red Cross saying, 'We have a problem,' there wasn't any thought involved," said Seth Oestreicher, senior vice president at Xand, who was one of the people who helped get Breman's office back online and fixed problems with its LAN. "It was just, 'Let's get it done.' "

Xand also helped restore connectivity at Pace University, which used the same hosting service as the Red Cross, said Xand spokeswoman Melissa Nacerino.

Breman said the response from individuals and organizations like Xand was extraordinary. "It was no different in New York than it is in any little country town ... that small-town feeling where you have a fire and everybody pitches in to help out," said Breman, a self-described "hillbilly" from Tennessee. "People lost a lot of sleep."

Recovering Data

After Sept. 11, Lena L. West couldn't stop thinking about the mountain of work that lay ahead of the small businesses of lower Manhattan.

"I felt for those people," she said of the business owners. "I couldn't imagine what I would do if my company was in shambles."

As CEO of Westchester, N.Y.-based xynoMedia Development, West offered businesses free disaster recovery and technology strategy consulting and wound up helping a handful of companies retrieve data and reconfigure their systems.

"Not only did they lose their physical location, they lost their virtual homes, which is tough, because you always assume you have a home on the Web," said West.

San Diego-based Overland Data Inc. pulled together a consortium of about 35 companies to help businesses recover data lost in the attacks. The consortium set up a warehouse of tapes, drives, software and other equipment on Long Island, N.Y., and established a 24-hour hotline.

"The first couple of calls, you could hear the desperation in their voices," said Mike Gearhart, marketing programs manager for Overland Data and co-chairman of the consortium.

The consortium received its last call in December, but Gearhart said the site will be maintained in case other businesses need help.

"This was about people, not about businesses," he said. "It was people's incomes and people's livelihoods that were being affected. We felt like they had been through enough."

Every Bit Counts

Some volunteers offered unlimited support -- day or night, as long as it took. But much of the recovery has been accomplished by scores of people who helped out in bits and pieces. The National Hockey League's IT department spent a day at Pier 92 helping the Office of Emergency Management's IT team, said NHL system support analyst William Stoffel.

"I think everyone, even the least patriotic people, felt a certain kind of solidarity," said Jim Wintner, president of BenefitEvents.com, a New York firm that donated its online auction system to Art for America's November auction to raise funds for victims of Sept. 11.

Daniel Mullens helped Futures & Options, a nonprofit organization that coordinates internships between New York schools and businesses, install about \$15,000 worth of equipment donated by Microsoft Corp. and Compaq Computer Corp.

Futures & Options, which was located in the World Trade Center, had just moved into a temporary downtown space when it learned of Mullens' offer to help from NPower NY, which coordinated IT volunteers and donors for nonprofit firms affected by the attacks. Mullens said he also plans to bring some friends down to help move Futures & Options once it finds a permanent space.

"That's what it's all about," he said.

Coast to Coast

For the past few years, volunteers like Scott Andrews have helped build a local ministry at the First Evangelical Free Church in Lincoln, Neb., by refurbishing and donating used PCs to needy causes. But after Sept. 11, the First Evangelical ministry went national. Through NPower NY, his group heard about a counseling center at ground zero that needed equipment. The church donated 10 Deskpro PCs and 10 new monitors paid for through church donations, said Andrews. "We're so far removed from everything, it was really, really great to help," he said. "Everyone was giving blood, and then there was too much blood. Being 15,000 miles away, we thought all we could do was pray."

Nick Bradbury, president of Bradbury Software LLC, did his part from Nashville. He donated 100% of his firm's proceeds from September and October -- \$37,000 -- to the Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund. He said he was embarrassed that it took such an immense tragedy to get him to do something for charity.

"It motivated me to do more, now and for the rest of my life," he said.

Stacey Wagoner, president of Chicago-based Phatminds Inc., has never been a stranger to charity work. She already had her hands full with volunteer projects before the attacks, but when she heard from NPower NY about the IT needs in Manhattan, she offered whatever time she had. She helped build a Web site with information to help small businesses get back on their feet after the attacks, as well as a Web site for Abraham House, a New York rehabilitation program that serves as an alternative to prison. Overall, she spent about 170 hours on the two projects during a three-month stretch, she said.

"You just don't have a life," said Wagoner. "It's exciting that way. The more you give, I think you just feel better about the other work you do in life."

Wake-up Call

Shortly after the attacks, the FBI warned of a possible increase in hacker and denial-of-service attacks. So Afentis Ltd., which simulates hacker attacks to help clients identify and patch holes, decided to offer free penetration tests to any firm that was interested, said Ross Patel, head of encryption technology at the Derbyshire, England-based information security firm.

Afentis took on an additional five full-time contractors for the month of September, and as of February, it had conducted about 90 free penetration tests, said Patel.

People ask why disaster planning services would be helpful after a disaster, said Jeffrey Williams, president of Ogdensburg, N.Y.-based Binomial International Inc., which also offered free risk management software to businesses affected by the attacks. "[They think] it's like closing the barn door after the horse is gone," he said.

But, he added, the attacks raised awareness of the need for disaster planning and risk management.

A Brain Trust

Ted Ruberti couldn't wait for 2001 to end.

First came Sept. 11. Then, a month later, his firm, Evolving Edge Communications Corp., filed for Chapter 7, leaving him jobless with his third child on the way.

"It was a long, ugly year," said Ruberti, of West Orange, N.J.

In October, he got a call from the New York Software Industry Association, and he soon began work developing a job board for workers displaced by the attacks.

"I said, 'I might as well get into this,' and it took my mind off a lot of bad things that were going on personally," he said.

"I hope it actually helps the local economy here," said Ruberti. "As an IT worker in this market, there's not a lot you can do. I'm not an iron worker. I can't go down and pitch-in in that regard. But in information technology, there's a brain trust."