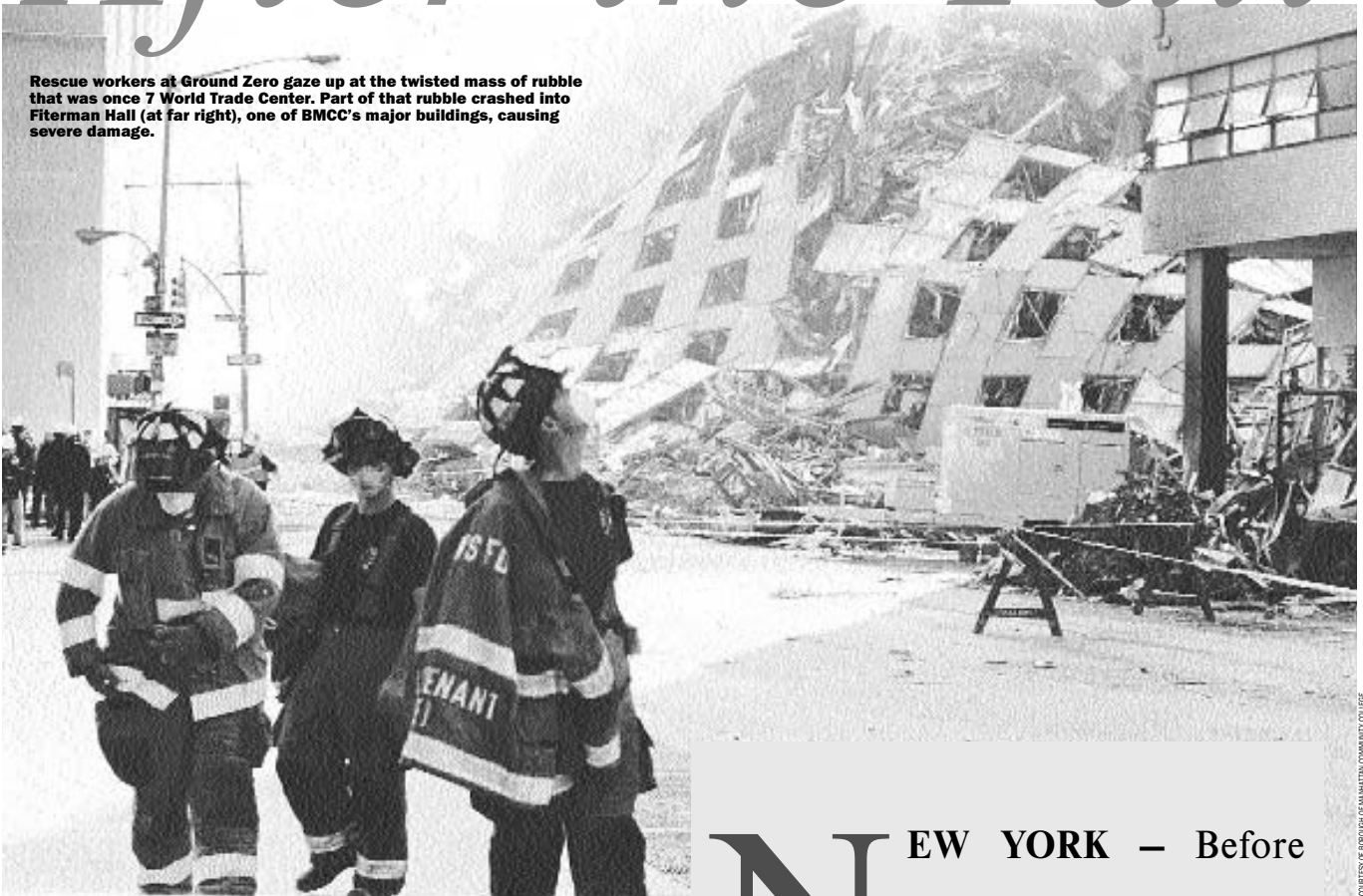


After the Fall

Rescue workers at Ground Zero gaze up at the twisted mass of rubble that was once 7 World Trade Center. Part of that rubble crashed into Fiterman Hall (at far right), one of BMCC's major buildings, causing severe damage.



COURTESY OF BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*Against the ruined backdrop
of Ground Zero,
the wounded
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
is struggling to rebuild.*

BY KRISTINA LANE

NEW YORK — Before Sept. 11, students at the Borough of Manhattan Community College worried about the kinds of things most college students do: exams, grades and how to juggle jobs, school, sleep and personal time. But since the attacks, BMCC students, faculty and staff have had to adapt to working in a disaster area, and their worries have been anything but typical.

Six students were killed, more were wounded, and untold thousands were severely traumatized by the attack on the World Trade Center, only blocks away from the main campus. The destruction of more than 40 classrooms has caused severe overcrowding. An abridged academic calendar and smashed transportation lines have obliterated the schedules of students, faculty and staff, pushing classes and exams into the holidays. Heaps of charred steel and the acrid odor of Ground Zero are constant reminders of death and destruction.

But despite persisting challenges, most within the BMCC community are focusing on the future and rallying to regain a sense of normalcy.

Rebuilding

When 7 World Trade Center caught fire and collapsed on the afternoon of Sept. 11, it staved in part of Fiterman Hall, a 15-story building across the street. No one in the building was killed or injured, but about 45 classrooms, a high-tech business incubator, student lounges and an art gallery were destroyed, as was the college's almost-completed \$65 million overhaul of the building.

It is still uncertain whether Fiterman — which is structurally unstable and still occupied by emergency crews — will have to be completely torn down.

Dr. Antonio Pérez, president of the college, said of all the considerable obstacles he has encountered since the attacks, the biggest have been related to Fiterman.

"We'll be lucky if we are back there within two to three years. We were right at the point of opening it, and now we have to look for a different approach," Pérez said.

"Financially we will be OK, but we have lost momentum."

Scott Anderson, the college's acting vice president for administration and planning and its point man on Fiterman, paints a gloomier future for the building.

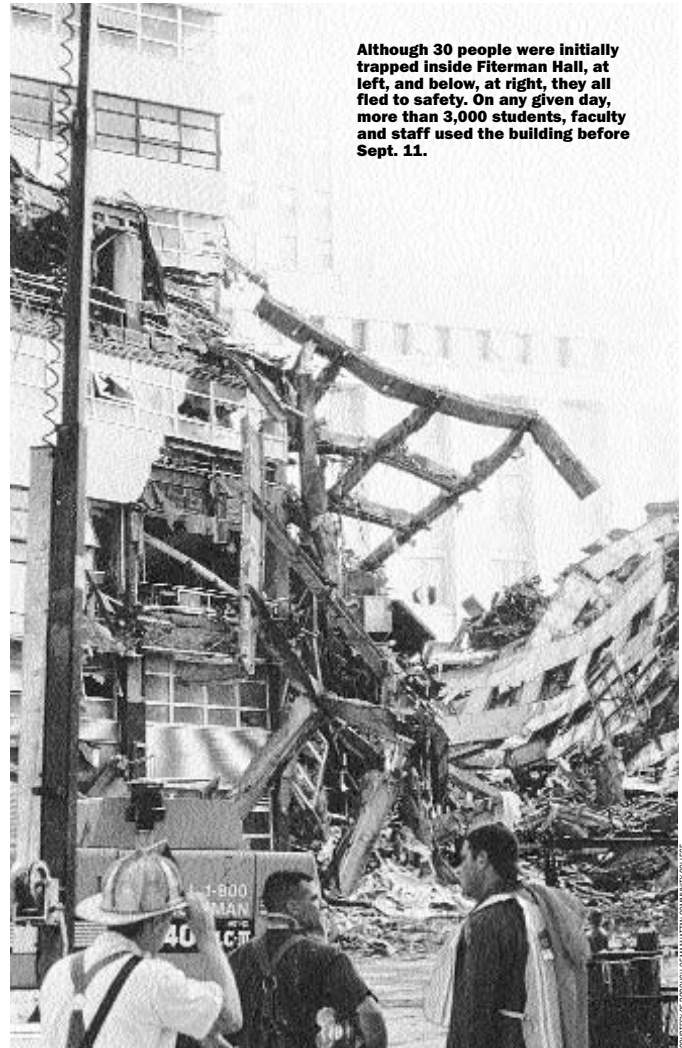
"We are not sure if it would cost more to fix the building instead of tearing it down. Will the elevators work? Will the ventilation system work? We are not sure," Anderson said. "It is easy to see the outside damage to the steel and brick, but you won't know about the internal workings until you start to rebuild, and that's scary stuff."

In late October, Pérez estimated that \$274 million would be needed to repair Fiterman. But that was a preliminary figure based on an external analysis of the building by the City of New York. Forensic engineers have only just begun inspecting the internal structure of Fiterman, looking at things like the elevator shafts and the ventilation system. It is not yet known who will be stuck with the bill.

In early December, the college's insurance company contended that the builders' insurance policy protecting Fiterman wouldn't cover damage sustained during the attacks, because the college, which received Fiterman as a gift, did not construct the building. According to the insurance company, only the windows installed during the renovations would be covered.

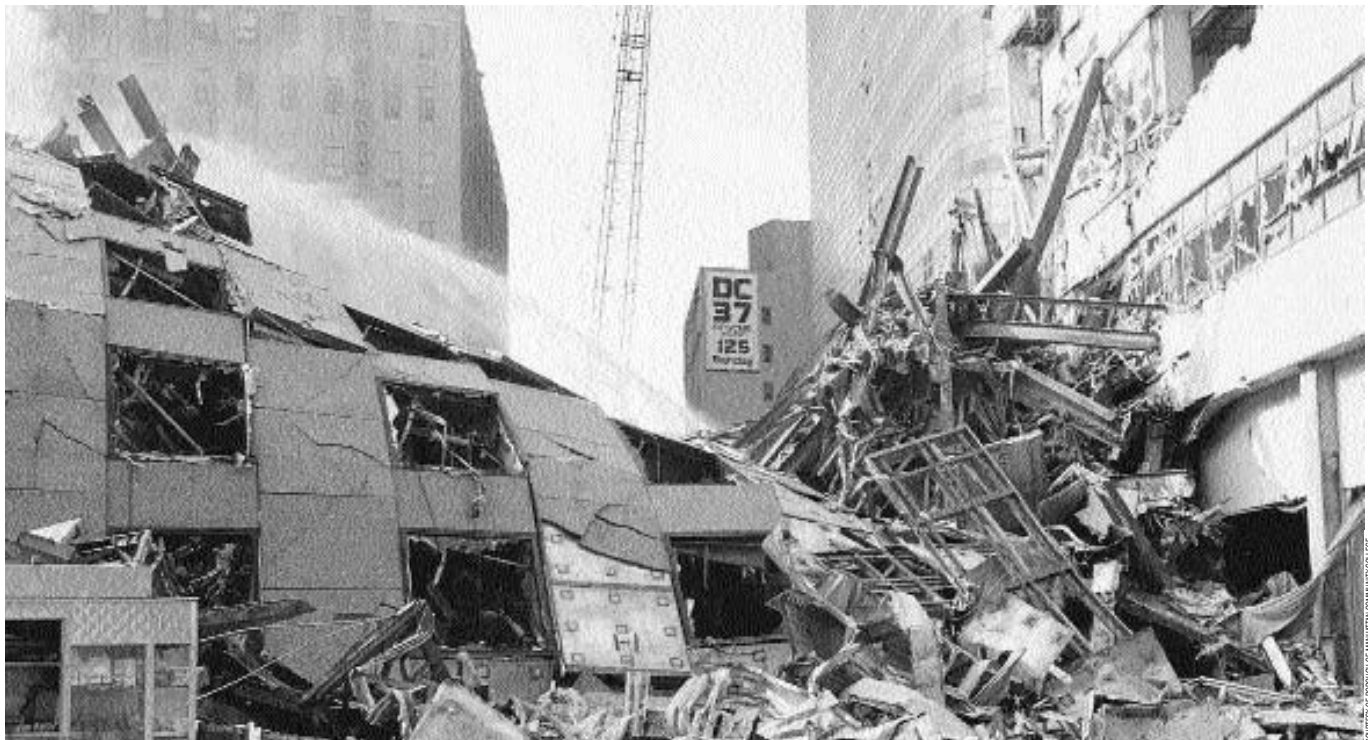
The insurance company has also refused to reimburse the school for the cost of relocating classes once held in Fiterman because it does not recognize the building as having been used for educational purposes.

"It is now about the interpretation of

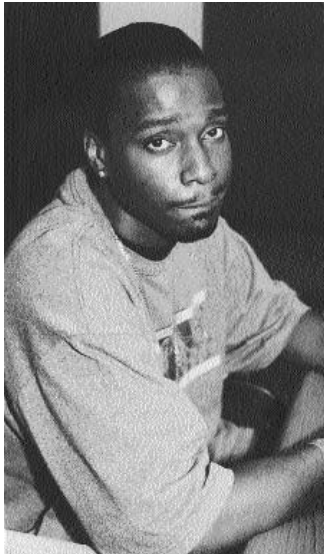


Although 30 people were initially trapped inside Fiterman Hall, at left, and below, at right, they all fled to safety. On any given day, more than 3,000 students, faculty and staff used the building before Sept. 11.

COURTESY OF BOROUGHS OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE



COURTESY OF BOROUGHS OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE



—KWAME P.L. JOSIE, PRESIDENT,
BMCC STUDENT GOVERNMENT

“We had firemen from Ground Zero come to class and talk about the chemicals and toxins there, and even though the chemicals are supposed to be just at the site, doesn't the wind blow?”

Since Sept. 11, Fiterman has been off-limits to the public because of the debris that continues to fall from it.



the insurance policy. CUNY has retained counsel and a consultant — the same consultant being used for the World Trade Center buildings,” Anderson said, referring to the City University of New York system to which BMCC belongs. “It’s a long and drawn-out process. We are hoping there is no litigation, but we are prepared for it.”

The goal, Anderson said, is to reach an agreement showing that the insurance company is responsible for reimbursing the school for expenses resulting from the attacks.

More Students, Less Space

While Fiterman’s uncertain future continues to pose financial problems, the loss of its classroom space has created almost as big a conundrum.

Anderson said the main campus was built to house 8,700 students, faculty and staff on a daily basis. But the loss of Fiterman, which accommodated about 3,000 students and staff, diverted that population into the already-crowded main campus building. College officials say between 18,000 and 19,000 people now occupy it every day — more than double the capacity for which it was built.

“We need to bleed that (overpopulation) off, and Fiterman was to be for that purpose,” Anderson said. “It was perfect for the overcrowding problem ... 25 percent of the school’s population was to be housed in Fiterman.”

Classes that were to have been held at Fiterman have been reassigned to temporary classrooms. Many of these temporary spaces have been created, cubicle-style, inside the main campus building, converting parts of the dance studio, cafeteria, faculty lounge and other common areas. There are also portable trailers, each housing two classrooms, parked outside along the West Side Highway.

While essential for education, these temporary classrooms have also tested student morale at a time when that morale is most needed.

The temporary trailer classrooms along the Hudson River overlook barges and cranes where cleanup crews unload the remains and rubble of the World Trade Center. Some students said they are distracted by the noise and air pollution across the street.

“It’s harder to study when you see cranes picking up body parts,” said Nicholas Becoats, a second-year student. “The cranes on the dock, hearing the noise — it gives you a flashback.”

Dennis Farr, a first-year student, also said the cleanup activity was disturbing. “Would you want your loved ones in those barges?” Farr said, pointing to two large cranes hoisting debris from dump trucks into floating barges.

The classrooms built inside the campus’s remaining building have also taken up nearly all of the space where students used to congregate for extracurricular activities. Kwame P.L. Josie, president of student government, said there are only two places where students can come together outside

class: a small area near the student government offices and the gymnasium.

“We have 38 student clubs,” Josie said. “Many students I know are concerned about the space issue.”

Downtown and Up

Both Pérez and Anderson said they are continually looking for ways to alleviate the emotional and physical distress caused by the space constraints.

“I would like to see the place looking and smelling better,” Anderson said. “The faculty, staff and students are feeling it.”

The college has begun to address the overcrowding issue by shifting people and resources to its nascent second campus on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Temporary classrooms and computer labs have been placed on the campus of the City College of New York, on what used to be a parking lot. So that the City College was not put at a disadvantage by hosting BMCC, CUNY agreed to pay for a new parking lot, Anderson said.

Pérez said the college is trying to raise awareness about the new location, placing 400 ads on subway platforms and 6,000 ads in subway cars. He said he expects about 800 students to initially enroll for classes uptown, and he hopes that number will eventually grow to 3,000. But the college will continue to have overcrowding problems — even with the move uptown, Anderson said.

The Ground Zero Next Door

In addition to overcrowding, Anderson said, other worries have surfaced in the wake of Sept. 11 — particularly those triggered by the school’s proximity to Ground Zero.

Josie said several of his friends refuse to eat or drink while they are in lower Manhattan, especially his classmates in organic chemistry.

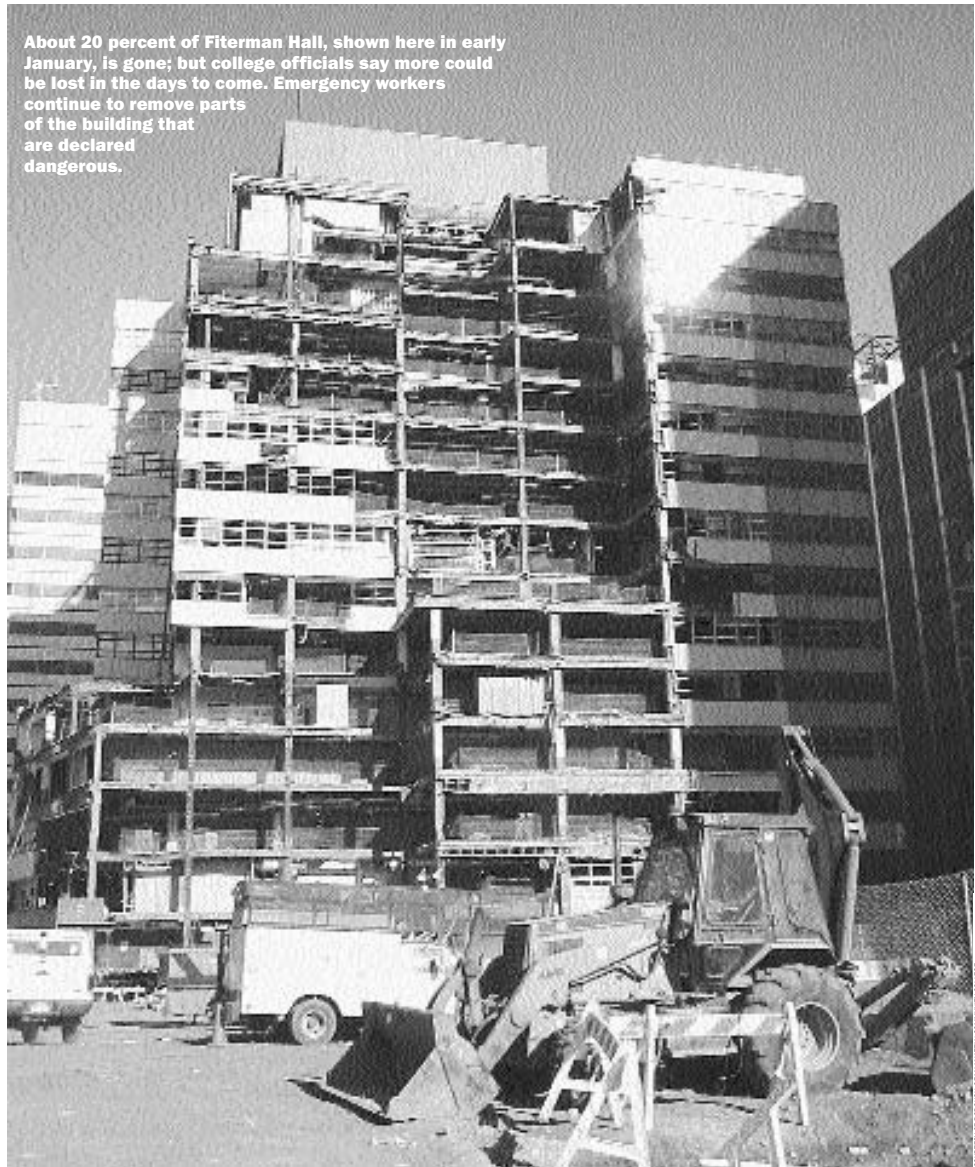
“We had firemen from Ground Zero come to class and talk about the chemicals and toxins there, and even though the chemicals are supposed to be just at the site, doesn't the wind blow?” Josie said, indicating the rubble-strewn site of the former World Trade Center towers. “Emotionally, most students are trying to put Sept. 11 behind them. But I always look in that direction.”

Josie said his parents had visited the twin towers of the World Trade Center on Sept. 10; he often wonders what would have happened if they had waited until Sept. 11 to visit.

Farr, who used to work part-time at Salomon Smith Barney in 7 World Trade Center, said he was unable to sleep for a month after the attacks and had lost about seven pounds.

“I was late for work on Sept. 11 and was in between the twin towers when the planes hit, dodging glass and falling debris,” Farr said. He has since quit his job at Salomon and is instead volunteering at BMCC in between attending classes there.

About 20 percent of Fiterman Hall, shown here in early January, is gone; but college officials say more could be lost in the days to come. Emergency workers continue to remove parts of the building that are declared dangerous.



Becoats said he worries about environmental hazards in lower Manhattan.

"I feel it is unsafe biologically and chemically. We don't know if anything was set off in those planes, and the school is not focusing on that," Becoats said.

He was on campus during the attacks, he said, and is still haunted by what he saw.

"I watched the towers fall from Greenwich and Chambers Streets," he said. "I saw the people jumping out of the buildings. I heard the people screaming. I think it affects me in a way I don't notice, and I think it will affect me in later life, too."

Anderson said there is no simple remedy for such emotional trauma, but listening helps.

"We are the first college in American history to suffer a foreign attack by terrorists. Our community witnessed things on that day, and has experienced things since that continue to remind (us) of the new environment we are in," Anderson said. "The best gift you can give people at a time like this is attention. You must pay attention even if you can't solve their problems; that's half the healing process. You must ... help them make it through the day."

To help quell environmental fears, the school has brought in both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and a private company to monitor the air quality around the school each week. Pérez said it costs the school \$1,000 each week to test the air.

And to provide an emotional outlet for students, Susana Powell, chair of the speech, communications and theatre arts department, launched "The Ribbon Project." At her behest, the college bought enough material for 4,000 ribbons, on which students could write their individual reactions to the attacks.

Powell said nearly all of the ribbon had been used, and inscribed pieces of the red, black and blue material now hang from surfaces all over the BMCC campus. She said the students who were at school or in lower Manhattan at the time of the attacks tend to be the most directly affected.

She also said the project has helped students mourn the six students who perished in the attacks.

Interrupted Routines

On top of the emotional fallout of Sept. 11, students, staff and faculty have had to adjust to a revised academic calendar and extended commutes via public transportation.

BMCC lost three weeks of its fall semester between Sept. 11 and Oct. 1, when the campus was needed to house emergency workers working at Ground Zero. To compensate for the lost time, the school held classes the day after Thanksgiving and extended its academic calendar through Dec. 30. The semester was originally scheduled to end in early December.

Josie said the revised calendar has frustrated him, and that some of his professors have not made accommodations for the time constraints.

"It's like being sick for three weeks. Some professors try to help ... others don't even acknowledge Sept. 11 happened," Josie said.

Becoats said working through the holidays had prevented him from seeing family and friends at a time when their support could have shored up his spirits.

"At Thanksgiving, I couldn't go upstate to visit my mom. At Christmas I was going to go to Jamaica and now I can't," Becoats said.

Although some students have been inconvenienced by the schedule changes, Sadie Bragg, the college's senior vice president of academic affairs, said she has worked to make sure the impact of the calendar changes upon students is minimized. She said she is pleased with how faculty, staff and students have pulled together amid the chaos.

"The crisis has never stopped our business," Bragg said. "(Between Sept. 11 and Oct. 1) faculty and staff met at an off-site campus in Harlem, and called each of our 17,000 students." Bragg said faculty and staff called students to let them know there were people they could talk to and to make sure they had not been harmed in the

attacks.

Public transportation to the campus has also become more complicated. Many of the subway express trains to the area have been discontinued, and the underground commuter train line that once connected lower Manhattan with New Jersey was mostly destroyed when the twin towers fell.

Josie, who lives in the Bronx, said the time it takes him to get to school has nearly doubled since Sept. 11.

David Gallardo, a second-year student, said it was initially impossible for him to get to school on time after Sept. 11. But he said his friends who travel to campus from New Jersey have suffered the most, losing valuable hours in transit they could otherwise use for sleeping or studying.

Tomorrow and Beyond

In spite of the destruction and disruption of Sept. 11, most at BMCC say they're focusing on rebuilding their lives and their campus.

Gallardo said he has become a better student since Sept. 11, and that the attacks made him focus on the importance of education.

"BMCC has been my sanctuary. I have been dedicated to my studies now more than ever ... Ground Zero doesn't bother me any more," he said.

He said he directed his feelings into a video he created with three other students to honor the victims of Sept. 11. He said he put all of his energy — good and bad — into the video, to show that hope could endure amid the tragedy.

Farr said Sept. 11 reaffirmed his commitment to learning and that he wants to spend the rest of his life pursuing higher education.

Bragg said enrollment is still strong, and the school continues to flourish in spite of adversity, she said: Classes are packed, and evening and weekend programs remain strong. According to Pérez, 1,000 students withdrew after Sept. 11.

Bragg is confident BMCC will eventually find a solution to the problems posed by Fiterman Hall, and that with the help of staff and faculty, students will be able to get on with their lives.

"Emotionally we will always have to live with (Sept. 11), but it doesn't mean we have to stop" our lives, Bragg said. ▲