

Photographed on Sept. 11, 2002, BMCC's Fiterman Hall is one of several buildings near Ground Zero that was pummeled during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The destruction razed an entire corner of the building, leaving it structurally unsound and welcoming a host of contaminants. The future of the building — whether it will be torn down, repaired or taken over by the government — is unknown.



A Test OF Endurance

When the World Trade Center collapsed last September, nearby Borough of Manhattan Community College lost students, a building and its innocence. Now, despite the emotional scars, the bureaucratic tangles and the severe overcrowding, the campus is trying to claw its way back to normalcy. BY KRISTINA LANE

NEW YORK — On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Dianne Simmons, a Borough of Manhattan Community College instructor, was teaching an 8 a.m. class in a building across the street from the World Trade Center when terrorists hurtled jetliners into the twin towers. Rushing her students out of the building, Fiterman Hall, Simmons darted north with a group of them and didn't look back.

But on the first anniversary of the attacks, Simmons and the rest of the campus couldn't help but look back on that apocalyptic day — and on the struggles they've grappled with in the long year since.

Six students were killed in the attacks, and thousands more who watched the towers fall have been emotionally scarred. The partial destruction of Fiterman by a collapsed building has caused severe overcrowding on the main campus. Mired in a prolonged debate, the future of Fiterman could end up costing the school millions of dollars. Because the school is just three blocks from where the towers came down, concerns about environmental pollution have cropped up, forcing the school to spend thousands on tests and cleaning procedures.

Still, many at the college, which saw increased enrollment this semester, say these hurdles have made them stronger and more unified in their determination to pull through.

A Future for Fiterman?

With the collapse of 7 World Trade Center on the afternoon of Sept. 11, 2001, tumbling debris tore out nearly a quarter of Fiterman Hall, located across the street. The large gash left the building structurally unsound and exposed to the clouds of toxins that swirled the area for months after the towers fell.

The timing of the destruction could not have been much worse. The college had almost completed a five-year, \$64 million renovation of the building. Forty-five newly finished classrooms, student lounges, computer labs and a just-opened high-tech business incubator were all either contaminated or destroyed.

The college initially contemplated repairing Fiterman — an undertaking that would cost an estimated \$274 million. But last February, dangerous levels of toxins — including asbestos, mold and dioxin — were detected in Fiter-

man, and BMCC decided the building should be torn down and entirely rebuilt.

Neither plan, however, seems likely to come to pass any time soon. The Dormitory Authority of the State of New York, a state agency that manages property for the City University of New York system — of which BMCC is a part — technically owns Fiterman, and hasn't yet decided whether it should be torn down or repaired.

According to Scott Anderson, BMCC's vice president for administration and planning, the final decision will hinge on the bottom line.

"It all comes down to numbers. The bean counters will take a look at the costs — that's what will drive the buggy. It's a given if it's cheaper to rebuild it and patch it over that they'll do that," Anderson said.

BMCC's official position, according to Anderson and President Antonio Pérez, is that Fiterman should be torn down.

"It's going to be very difficult for us to look at rehabbing that building — psychologically, emotionally, symbolically," Anderson said.

If the Dormitory Authority decides Fiterman should be repaired, Anderson said, the college and CUNY would appeal to corporations in Lower Manhattan for help with tearing the building down and rebuilding it in the same location.

But a recent announcement by Gov. George Pataki could render DASNY's ruling inconsequential. Pataki recently said redevelopment plans for Lower Manhattan might force him to use the rule of eminent domain to repossess the plot of land on which Fiterman sits.

It would be a severe blow to the college if Pataki reclaims the land, and the odds of it happening are at least 50-50, Anderson said. There is a great deal of political red tape involved with rebuilding Lower Manhattan and the land surrounding Ground Zero, Anderson said, and state and local lawmakers are being pressured by victims' families and corporate interests.

Anderson explained that the victims' families have gained widespread support for letting the footprints of the twin towers stand as open space — as memorials to the dead. This limits the amount of space for new buildings, potentially forcing developers and politicians to rely on property surrounding Ground Zero, such as

Fiterman Hall.

"If the governor were to take that space, where does BMCC get a new space to build on? That becomes a real conundrum," Anderson said.

The sooner the Dormitory Authority reaches a decision, the better, he said.

"The sooner we look like we are in charge of our building, the sooner it drops out of discussion for politicians' use. They'd just leave us alone," he said. "Right now they know it's stagnant. We are sitting there like a fat goose, the building is like a wounded sentry."

Anderson said he expects the Dormitory Authority to reach a decision within the next few

weeks.

A Tight Squeeze

As the debate about Fiterman rages, the college is also wrestling with another dilemma: severe overcrowding on the main campus caused by the loss of space at Fiterman and increased enrollment.

BMCC's main campus is a seven-story building that covers four city blocks, and it was built for about 8,700 students. But losing Fiterman meant the school had to make room for about 3,000 more students. And this semester, the college reported an enrollment of about 18,300 — about 1,000 students more than last year. On any given day, the building is packed

with nearly 20,000 students, staff and faculty. To make matters worse, college officials say, escalators and elevators are constantly breaking down, and people are jammed into the stairwells.

To alleviate the overcrowding, the college has created temporary classrooms in a number of places. Some classes are held in the temporary trailers that line the West Side Highway. Others are spread throughout the city. Twelve classrooms have been rented at City College in the Bronx, and a dozen more classrooms are being rented at St. John's University near BMCC's main campus. The college has also converted most of the main campus's communal space into classrooms, including



The BMCC remembrance ceremony on Sept. 11, 2002, was held in the college's main entrance.



The view from inside Fiterman Hall, in January 2002, before the building was sealed off. Construction and safety workers demolished and removed loose parts of the building that might fall on pedestrians and crews at Ground Zero.

parts of the cafeteria, faculty lounge and dance studio.

Many at the college say the remedies aren't exactly ample.

"Where the hell do we put everybody? We are already over double capacity of the building," said Ron Hayduk, a political science professor. "We have makeshift classrooms that are very inadequate. The infrastructure is woefully lacking and we are in more of a crisis mode than we were right after Sept. 11, because we have even more students."

Orville Ingram, a student who heads the college's Student Government Association, agreed that the overcrowding is nearly unbearable.

"We understand we need classrooms, but we don't have anywhere to sit and have lunch," Ingram said.

He said class sizes are swelling — some have 40 students — and that using the computer lab is next to impossible.

"It's terrible up there (in the computer lab). There are only 25 computers, and when you want to get in, there's no way, and at least 50 students are waiting outside to get in," Ingram said.

Before the attacks, a computer lab at Fiterman was used by students who couldn't get into the lab on the main campus.

Anderson said the overcrowding problem tops his to-do list, but he doesn't hold out much hope of getting relief any time soon.

"It's so crowded in here you wish you had something concrete to report out to the college community, that there's light at the end of the tunnel," Anderson said. "But we just don't know enough to be able to tell them it



BMCC President Antonio Pérez speaks to a crowd of about 500 people at a remembrance ceremony held at the college on Sept. 11, 2002. Pérez unveiled a plaque at the ceremony with the names of the six students and two alumni who perished in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

will get fixed."

Anderson said the only solution is another building that offers as much space as Fiterman had, or more.

Getting By

But for students like Bernice Guevara, who used to work in the north tower of the World Trade Center, the overcrowding is unimportant. Guevara, like many other students, faculty and staff, say their biggest struggles during the past year have been emotional and financial.

Guevara, who was on her way to a class at BMCC when the planes hit the towers, fled to her Lower Manhattan apartment, from which she watched the buildings topple. She said she lost a number of friends, including many of the people she rode the bus with to work each day.

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— RON HAYDUK, POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR

"We have to relive it tomorrow, that's the only thing that hangs over me," he said. "We have people on this floor who lost family members. Everyone here has some contact to what happened down there. The whole day will feel as if you are at a wake."

To help students deal with the emotionality of the anniversary, BMCC held a memorial service for the six students who perished.

Jane Young, an English professor, said the school's proximity to Ground Zero has been challenging.

"Many people fell apart. When you come out of school at night and look up and the buildings aren't there any more. ... There has been lots of psychological fallout," Young said. "Other people could just think about it, but we had to live with it for many, many months."

Young said the throngs of tourists who lined the streets to gaze at the rubble or pictures of the dead only made the situation worse.

Daisy Alverio, chair of the cooperative education department, said New York's ailing economy has made it more difficult for students to get internships. Many students lost internships they had in the World Trade Center, and others interested in the tourism and Web industries have been unable to find work.

But Alverio said the biggest obstacle has been the fear of another attack.

"You have to put it on the back burner, that's the only way to deal with a situation of this magnitude," Alverio said. "Having the (anniversary) ceremonies is important, but it's brought it all back to the front."

Alverio said the same worries she had last year have returned, including thoughts of an attack in the subway or on the many bridges that link Manhattan to other boroughs.

"It will never be the same. I know it's been said before, but things will forever be different," she said.

The End of the Beginning

But for all the predicaments that have surfaced since the attacks, students, staff and faculty haven't been deterred from a common goal: rebuilding their lives. They see this past year as an

accomplishment — as the end of their beginning to rebuild.

Guevara will complete her associate's degree in early childhood education next semester, and afterward she plans on pursuing her bachelor's degree and getting a part-time job teaching.

She said the attacks have made her appreciate the important things in life more, such as spending time with her son. Although she used to dwell on the possibility of another attack, she said now she just prays and focuses on her studies.

Orville Ingram said that after the initial shock of the attacks subsided, he was determined to get back to work — partly to defy the terrorists.

"I recognized we had to get back to education, and we cannot allow terrorism to stop us. We have to be strong, brave and constantly show resilience. That is what we are here for," Ingram said.

Ingram said the attacks made him realize he needs to work harder, as a representative of the student body, to understand the cultural and religious backgrounds of all students, especially those from the Middle East.

Diane Simmons, who had to flee Fiterman with her class last September, said she's gained strength from watching how resilient the students have been.

"I've found the students remarkably tough minded about what needs to be done. These are not people who have led easy, pampered lives," she said. "They have been more able to deal with a catastrophe than some of us who have not had the challenges in our lives that they have had."

Sadie Bragg, vice president of academic affairs, said that, immediately after the attacks, she wasn't sure if or when she'd set foot on the campus again. But in the year since she has come full circle, believing that the school can endure anything.

"At one point, before we came back (last Oct. 1), we didn't have running water, and I said to the president, 'How can we come back?' He said, 'Sadie, we will be back.'" she said. "(This year) pulled at all the strengths I didn't know I had ... but we were defiant of the terrorists, determined that nobody would stop us." ▲