

## **Lutheran Schools Still Face 9/11 Hardships**

*A Special Report by Mikki Baloy, LDRNY Coordinator*

The 188 Lutheran schools of New York and New Jersey serve close to 20,000 children, from toddlers to teenagers. The Lutheran Schools Association, representing all Lutheran schools in the area, provides these students with an alternative to the public system, offering a solid education with the stability of a Christian institution. Students and teachers are encouraged to reach their full potential intellectually, physically, and spiritually.

On September 11, 2001, many children and staff members lost relatives or close friends, and those at two schools in Queens had a view of the Manhattan skyline. They watched the destruction as it happened, and for days afterwards were unable to walk into classrooms with that view. Children waited nervously for their parents to pick them up at school, or to return home that night, as evacuating Lower Manhattan and traveling through the city was not an easy task. Forty-seven Lutheran school children lost a primary caregiver in the Towers.

In the weeks that followed, New Yorkers were astonished by the outpouring of support that seemed to come from all over the world. The LSA offices were flooded with letters, cards, and stuffed toys: gifts from children as far away as Japan and South Africa intended to be given to their counterparts in New York. These were tokens of love and support that meant so much to the healing process, not only for the children, but for the staff and coordinators who helped to distribute them. LDRNY was able to be a connecting point between the donors and the children, as cubicles and offices were filled with deliveries of beanie babies and other toys. Teachers from Lutheran schools in the Midwest even donated gift certificates for their New York colleagues. Students were so inspired and overwhelmed by these gifts that they began collecting donations for firefighters in an effort to give back. These relationships did not fade when the cameras left the city. High-schoolers have continued to correspond with early childhood students in a post-9/11 pen pal program, and when a youth group from New Jersey visited Europe this past summer, Bosnian children made Peace Cards for children in New York City. Many of them read, "We love America" and "We want peace in the world." These cards were distributed this fall to Lutheran schools as a sign of the continued love and support from around the world.

LDRNY partnered with the LSA to continue this healing process, providing tuition assistance to families who lost income as a result of the attacks. One such family, facing enormous financial hardship, had twin sons enrolled in a Lutheran school. Unable to pay for two tuitions, they applied to the LDRNY scholarship fund. With that support, their sons were able to stay in their school and eventually graduate junior high with their friends. Economic instability in New York City is far greater than that in other parts of the country. While the national unemployment rate was 5.5% in July 2004, New York City was at 7.5%. Within the city, Bronx had the highest rate of unemployment, at 9.6%.

Considering those dropped from unemployment roles and the undocumented immigrant workforce, the actual jobless rate is over 10% in the city. Jobs being created now are at salary levels more than a third below pre-9/11 salaries. Food pantries around the city have seen a doubled or even tripled increase in the number of meals served per week. Property taxes have been raised, as have unemployment insurance taxes levied on small business owners. Hundreds of families have left the area to seek work or establish normalcy elsewhere. With such indicators as these, it is clear that New York is still recovering from the economic impact of 9/11. The decline in enrollment at Lutheran schools is therefore not surprising, although it is distressing. In the wake of such insecurity and distress, continuing in a familiar school can help a family cope by providing a sense of consistency. LDRNY scholarships were an effort to help these families.

Counseling was another component of LDRNY's mission to address the mental health and emotional needs of the children of the LSA. People across the country, including school-aged children, saw terrifying images repeated for weeks on television. These children also saw their parents and other adults become anxious, angry, and possibly grief-stricken. In one LSA school, a psychotherapist visited twice per week to tend to the initial impact of 9/11. It was originally anticipated that she would counsel eight to ten children; in actuality, she consistently saw more than twice that number. These were children whose parents had lost jobs, whose fathers or older siblings were sent to Afghanistan or Iraq, or who had fears that terrorists would hurt their family. Some were Arabic children, both Christian and Muslim, who were struggling with issues of race and identity. Individual and small-group interventions have proved necessary for these children and countless peers.

Three years after the attacks, children are still processing the impact of violence, especially since the hostage situation in Russia may have reopened some wounds and fears. Many are afraid that something will happen to their parents while they're at work in Manhattan, or that other tragedies will occur. New York remains under heightened security, and one teacher remarked that her students react to sirens they hear from campus. They are still drawing pictures of planes crashing into the Towers, still praying in Chapel that they will be kept safe. Unsolicited questions and discussions begin with "will they do it again?" Older students regularly voice their concerns that the war will continue and they will be drafted. Fewer field trips are taken now than before 9/11, as parents feel more vigilant and protective and hesitate to sign permission slips. The traditional eighth grade trip to Washington, DC has been cancelled until further notice.

In the face of such distress, ordinary life events become doubly traumatic. Deaths or illnesses in the family, for example, create a ripple effect of fear and doubt, as children believe that bad things will keep happening. When a Lutheran school student passed away recently of cancer, the normal grieving process was exacerbated by thoughts of the death toll at Ground Zero and the uncertainty of life in New York. Grief and anger manifest in children through changes in their behavior, academics, and physical wellness. Even those who appear to be coping still need and deserve to talk about their feelings and fears with an adult they trust, and this often happens within the school structure.

Lutheran school staff and administration continue to make their students' concerns a priority, and are challenged to continue educating them in the midst of anxiety. Each school received a two-day crisis-training workshop and was helped in developing their crisis plan. All of these plans are on file with local police and fire officials. LDRNY also compiled the *Emergency Management Guide for Lutheran Congregations, Schools, and Agencies*, which is available **here/ on our website**.

Teachers and administrators are not immune to their students' anxiety. As with first responders, there has been an increased incidence sleep disturbances, weight gain, and other indicators of stress among educators and others in positions of responsibility. There can also be a similar reluctance to ask for help. One teacher asked a colleague how she was supposed to make the children feel safe when she was terrified herself. Even 20-year veterans of the school system have called Lutheran Schools director Marlene Lund as they neared the breaking point of compassion fatigue, saying things like "I just can't do it anymore." Because of this, LDRNY provided a grant to the LSA to enable many teachers to seek a few days' respite. Teachers, too, lost friends and loved ones in the attacks, and even for those that did not, compassion fatigue has become nearly epidemic as they have tried to maintain mental and spiritual stability for their students while dealing with the everyday stresses of their careers. Since September of 2001, a total of 160 Lutheran schoolteachers in the metropolitan area have left their positions, 115 of which were from within New York City. Similarly, 50% of the administrators from within the five boroughs have moved on to other employment, or left the city entirely. When a leader leaves his or her school, the entire dynamic changes for teachers, students, and parents alike. Enrollment in the area's Lutheran schools has declined since 9/11, as well, because of economic hardship and family relocation. Three schools have closed.

The LSA is committed to finding solutions to these post-9/11 problems. One school is experimenting with a group-administration approach, working as a team to make policy and scheduling decisions. School officials are considering new marketing strategies. Peace and tolerance have become mainstays of the Lutheran schools' curriculum, to invite dialog and dispel fear. Teachers and administrators are encouraged to take time for themselves whenever possible.

A recent survey of LSA staff showed that there is still a great need for counseling for students and their families. Teachers are also concerned with updating and reviewing crisis plans in the event of future disasters and with the economic hardships that may prevent their students from returning to school next term. LDRNY will continue to partner with Lutheran schools to ensure that every measure is taken to comfort the city's children, and to support the teachers and administrators who work so hard for them every day.