



## 9/11 NUN'S DYING PLEA: AUTOPSY MY BODY TO AID WTC AILING

By **SUSAN EDELMAN** in New York and **JULIE STAPEN** in Aiken, S.C.

*August 13, 2006* -- A nun who spent six months blessing human remains in the rubble at Ground Zero says she is dying of lung disease and wants her body autopsied to prove that she and her fellow 9/11 workers were sickened by the poisonous air at the site.

Sister Cindy Mahoney, 54, summoned David Worby, the lawyer representing thousands of sick Ground Zero workers, to her Aiken, S.C., hospice last week and requested that he act as her guardian and fulfill her dying wish by overseeing her autopsy after she's gone. "I can still do God's work," Mahoney said Thursday in Aiken, her hometown, where she lay connected to oxygen tubes.

She was surprisingly upbeat, even laughing at jokes - which reduced her to violent coughing.

"She's an angel," Worby told The Post after meeting with Mahoney privately. He said she hugged him warmly, cried, and told him how her previous pleas for help had gone unheeded.

"The government should help these people - not leave them to die like I'm dying," she told Worby.

Mahoney, a former emergency-medical technician, dashed from a Midtown convent and hopped on an ambulance to Ground Zero after the first plane hit the World Trade Center's north tower on 9/11. She stayed there through the night. She then donned her habit and spent nearly every day for the next six months as a volunteer with the American Red Cross and the city medical examiner's fatality team.

Officials said Mahoney was a chaplain at Ground Zero and at Pier 94, where she consoled relatives of those killed. She was photographed for People magazine that October, and told the publication, "Some people just want to hold our hand."

According to Worby, she now suffers from asthma, reactive airways dysfunction syndrome, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and gastroesophageal reflux disease - all severe illnesses that have plagued WTC workers.

Only after spending weeks at Ground Zero was she given a respiratory mask, Worby said, but she was not told how to use it. And because her job was to pray and talk to people, "she kept taking it off."

Mahoney also suffers post-traumatic stress syndrome, Worby and others said. She witnessed WTC victims burn or jump to their deaths, and prayed over countless human remains.

Unaware until recently that many others who worked at Ground Zero were sick, Mahoney last week tracked down Worby, an outspoken advocate for the health of 9/11 workers. He filed the first lawsuit for a leukemia-stricken NYPD detective who served at Ground Zero and the Fresh Kills landfill, a case that mushroomed into a massive class action with 8,000 WTC workers.

If Mahoney joins the suit, she would leave any money to those in need, she said.

During the meeting, a priest friend, Father Scotty, gave Mahoney Communion.

"She would do it all again. She would give her life again," the priest said. "She still believes God's mission for her is to help, through her death, the other 40,000 rescue and recovery workers get medical care, testing and coverage," Worby said. "She feels that anyone who gave their lives for others should be taken care of better than she's been taken care of."

Mahoney is staying in an old, stuffy house on a semi-rural road outside Aiken. The place belongs to friends who took her in and receive a "hospice" stipend from Medicaid to house and feed her.

Mahoney's closest companions, her 24-year-old niece and her niece's 3-year-old son, sleep on a mattress on the floor in the same cramped room. "They're my reason for living," she said.

Mahoney, a nonsmoker, was an active scuba diver before 9/11, Worby said. The Guillain-Barré syndrome she suffered three decades ago flared up again last year. Worby asserts that heavy metals at Ground Zero caused immune deficiencies that triggered such neurological disorders.

Mahoney was a junior nun with the Order of St. Helena in Augusta, S.C., an Episcopal sisterhood, when she was transferred to New York City not long before 9/11, she said. She lived at the order's modest East 28th Street convent, which runs a novitiate, a program for beginning nuns who have not yet taken final vows.

When Mahoney heard the news about the first plane hitting, she asked another nun, "What's the Twin Towers?" Worby said.

A sister at the convent told The Post that Mahoney ran out the door that day. "She told me she was going down to help," the nun said. Mahoney threw on an old EMT uniform from her former post with a rescue squad in South Carolina, and raced four blocks to Bellevue Hospital to volunteer. Warned that many people were dying, she said, she jumped into an ambulance en route to the scene, using a marker to write her name, address and phone number on her arm as identification.

When the first tower fell, she hid behind a tombstone at St. Paul's Church across the street. "The air was so thick and hot I could not breathe . . . It felt to me that the sky was falling. I thought I would die," she wrote in an account of the day.

When the second tower fell, "two firefighters and I were able to get underneath a firetruck, and they shared their air with me."

In an Oct. 12, 2001, e-mail to a friend back home, Mahoney described her work at the morgue: "Sometimes I pray over a body bag that has a firefighter's complete uniform from his helmet to his jacket . . . with nothing visible inside. It gets very difficult."

She went back and forth into the pit to "bless and say a prayer for the fallen and for those who have found them," she wrote. "I am grateful I can work in this war zone and be a witness to the heroism I see every single day."

She added, "But when I get home, I do have a hard time. What I've seen has been challenging, but what will stay with me forever is the smell. It is like nothing I have ever experienced in my life."

Ellen Borakove, a city medical examiner's spokeswoman, said clergy of many faiths flocked to temporary morgues around Ground Zero and to the main morgue next to Bellevue. "Spiritual people were always allowed to bless any human remains we had. They were blessing remains as they were found at Ground Zero as well," Borakove said.

Mahoney wrote her friend, "I think I have changed inside - not bitter or angry or anything like that, just more centered and having a better understanding of my ministry and that I am committed to whatever God calls me to do."

Months later, feeling ill and distraught, she was told by a counselor that "it was a good time to start taking care of myself," she said. Mahoney left Ground Zero on Feb. 11, 2002. But she found little sympathy or support back at the Manhattan convent, she told the Aiken Standard in a front-page story in February. She left the convent that July. Over the next two years, her health worsened. Mahoney quit jobs in an animal shelter, a store and an office. "I ended up sleeping in my car because I had nowhere else to go," she told the paper.

A friend accompanied Mahoney on a train trip to Manhattan about six months ago to register with the WTC Medical Monitoring Program at Mount Sinai Hospital. She collapsed while getting a lung test and was sent to the emergency room, Worby said.

Now that Mahoney says she is dying, she wants to make a difference. "She wants her death to have meaning, so this tragedy won't happen to other rescue and recovery workers in future disasters," Worby said. "I will not let her die in vain."

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