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## A Calling to the World Trade Center: One Doctor's Story

**By Ben Pearl, DPM**

Standing on the viewing platform of the World Trade Center site, I was not fully prepared for the deep emotions I experienced nearly six months after the devastation. In March, I spent a weekend volunteering at the medical clinic located in St. Paul's Chapel, which was spared by the September 11 blast and served as the immediate triage station after the disaster. The chapel has continued to be a medical clinic and source of refuge for the firefighters, police officers and recovery workers. Aid volunteers at the clinic included podiatrists, chiropractors and massage therapists.

Before my shift began, I went to the excavation site, which was not unlike the construction site at Virginia Hospital Center - Arlington. Around the perimeter, however, the heat-seared midsection of a skyscraper served as a painful reminder of the lives lost. Huge banners lined Broadway, honoring the firefighters and police officers for their heroic acts. Shrines set up by the victims' friends and families surrounded the chapel.

Inside the chapel, the clinic coordinator explained that the workers sought relief not only for their feet; they needed someone to talk to. The chapel also served as a community where workers could pray, rest on cots, or have a warm meal served by volunteers. The spirit of the police officers there spanned all emotions. Many officers shared a few jokes. Others, more solemn, sat reading

children's letters of encouragement. One officer was stoic until a group of children sang and then hugged each of the civil servants in the chapel. He closed his eyes and smiled in their embraces.

The people I treated appreciated the convenience of having care available at a moment's notice. Most of my patients worked grueling 12-hour shifts. I treated problems ranging from ingrown toenails to heel spurs. Some workers even improvised their own podiatric supports: one construction worker came in limping with a makeshift splint made out of tape slung from behind her heel to the base of her toes, holding them upright.

Near the end of the shift, a protocol officer asked me if a calling had brought me to the clinic. I told him I considered it a privilege to help make his fellow officers more comfortable. While reflecting on the conversation on the drive back to D.C., it occurred to me that the "calling" he was talking about is the reason most of us embark on a career in medicine. Sometimes it takes an experience like this to remind us why we started the journey in the first place.