



Michael Weinstock (left) treating a 9/11 victim on the Manhattan Bridge

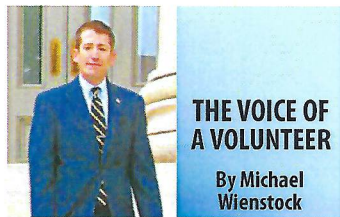
Vigilant Volunteer Ambulance: More Than Money

I joined the fire department because I knew it would make my mother angry. She loved books, she loved talking on the kitchen phone and, most of all, she loved her Popov-brand vodka.

My mother didn't like the idea of her teenage son joining the fire department. She had certain expectations when she moved to Great Neck. She liked to brag to her friends that my bar mitzvah was at Leonard's. She didn't want them to know I was carrying a pager and driving a car with emergency lights.

A few months after I joined the fire department, my mother's relationship with vodka got the best of her. I was forced to spend my senior year of high school living in a vacant apartment and occasionally sleeping on a couch at the firehouse. Thanks to the men and women of the fire department—and the lessons I learned on the ambulance—I landed on my feet and went off to college. After college, I attended St. Johns Law School and even became a New York City prosecutor.

While elected officials consider abandoning the volunteer ambulance system, it is important to remember that the patients aren't



THE VOICE OF A VOLUNTEER

By Michael Wienstock

the only people who benefit from the volunteer ambulance. The young volunteers are the real beneficiaries.

My fire department family was there for me when my biological family stumbled. The Kleins, the Goings and the Goldsteins always made sure I had a safe place to stay. I enjoyed so many Shabbat meals at the Nissimi home that I became friends with all the cousins. Sunday evenings with the Ielpis were always very special, especially when we were having pasta. (If you're following a recipe, always triple the garlic.) I'm glad I was invited to spend St. Patrick's Day with the Greens before I started keeping kosher, because Mrs. Green's corned beef was awesome. And, I will always remember Thanksgiving with the Floods immediately after 9/11, because we were all grieving and there was

a large picture of Jonathan Ielpi in the living room. Before I went off to college, two different volunteers took me aside privately and spoke with me about the importance of practicing safe sex and staying away from drugs. Both were old enough to be my grandparents.

When I was an assistant district attorney, I liked it when people assumed that I graduated at the top of my class. In truth, I was walking down the hall at my law school when the dean had a heart attack. The dean implored me to give him a can of seltzer and a little privacy, but I knew better. Thanks to my time on the ambulance, it took me about 30 seconds to diagnose his condition. The doctors in the emergency room told him that he would have died if he had waited just a couple more minutes to call an ambulance. When he returned to the law school, he not only became my mentor and friend, but he personally reached out to the district attorney of Brooklyn. "I know you have a hiring freeze," he told the district attorney, "but the young man who saved my life is about to graduate."

And, while my life changed the moment I assisted the dean, the years volunteering on the ambulance had

already provided me with skills that would push me in the right direction.

I learned to speak in a strong voice that commands authority—and I learned to speak in a loud voice that assists a person who is hard of hearing. Many people live a lifetime without understanding the difference between the two.

I learned to hold people's hands when they're scared—and not care who might be looking and judging.

I learned when to insert a little bit of humor into a serious situation. It not only calms the patient's anxieties, but it demonstrates confidence and experience. And while I may have developed this skill on the ambulance, I use it all the time in the courtroom.

I learned that good people are motivated by purpose instead of money and some of the best role models never went to college.

I learned that funerals should be ceremonious and include laughter. And you shake everyone's hand, even if you don't like them.

I am frequently invited to speak with students about 9/11. I talk and talk and talk, and I still can't teach them in 15 years what the old-timers on the ambulance taught me by example in one week.