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06 September 2003



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The man who was asked to fix the jigsaw

By New York Correspondent PHILLIP COOREY
06sep03

IT was a task beyond anything anyone had ever attempted – helping families identify the remains of thousands of victims of a terrorist attack. It was a task gene scientist Howard Cash embraced.

One cold December day – 10 weeks after terrorists murdered 2792 people in New York – scientist Howard Cash attended a funeral for one of the 343 firefighters killed in the atrocity.

Only when he arrived did he discover it was a funeral without a body – or a coffin.

"I didn't realise until I got there that there were no remains to be buried. It was a very humbling, frustrating and sad experience," he said.

"I left thinking 'my God, how many of these are going on?'"

Mr Cash is president and founder of Gene Codes Corporation, which developed DNA analysis software primarily for the human genome project.

On September 27, 2001, he received a call from the New York Medical Examiner's office. "They asked us to develop new software, beyond anything we had done before," he said.

The task ahead was immense.

Such was the violence of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and their subsequent collapse that not a single piece of office furniture was found in the rubble.

The effects on the human body were horrific.

Only 292 complete bodies were found, mainly people who were on the ground and hit by falling debris.

However, searchers collected 19,937 body parts – including teeth, pieces of flesh and bone.

In one instance, 208 body parts were found to match the same person.

The remains were painstakingly gathered from the ground zero site over eight months until the site was closed.

Then Mr Cash's team moved to a landfill site in nearby Staten Island where debris had been taken.

Fingerprints, dental records, scars and body marks were used where possible to positively identify people, or remains, but it was obvious DNA technology would be needed if even half the victims were to ever be identified.

Each part was assigned a number and stored in a refrigerated trailer in lower-east Manhattan at a site dubbed Memorial Park.

City authorities promised that as many remains as possible would be identified and returned.

Relatives submitted victims' items such as hairbrushes, razorblades, blood donations and toothbrushes which would hopefully contain samples for a direct DNA match.

Where this was not possible, parents, children or siblings gave swabs from the insides of their own cheeks to provide a cell sample for an indirect match.

When Mr Cash went to New York to meet the chief medical examiner, he found the existing DNA identification and collection system hopelessly inadequate for the unprecedented job ahead.

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