

Notebook

Why we cheer — it goes both ways

BY GAIL THOMAS

I fall asleep to cheering. When I was little, I fell asleep to other kids playing, having fun outside my bedroom window, without me. Tonight, I know the noisemakers, the cheerers by name, for I just left them and the honking rescue vehicles that drive to and from work Downtown. It was hard to leave tonight as it has been every night since the cheering began five weeks ago. The cheering, it lifts my spirits, even as I fall asleep. I understand that phrase now: that you get back more than you give.

We cheer for the heroes who need a reason to continue, since their work provides no reward. A couple of weeks ago, a cop pulled over by our median, saying, "if we could just find one, just one." Lately, they have been slowing to talk to us — they need to — we need them to. One captain or supervising officer (they wear the white shirts) said, "Thank you.

You don't realize how good this is for my guys' moral — it means a lot." We've been hearing that a lot lately. We shout "Thank you," we clap, hold up our signs — now they thank us. One of the Con Ed guys made a sign that said "we love you too."

I tell my old friends if they want to see me, come to the median in the middle of the highway, at Christopher St. It's an address, a home now, we've had pizza delivered. We started calling it "Point Thank You" on "Hero Highway." Pepperoni with mushrooms, please.

Last week an entire bus of fireman from Utah pulled over and crossed the highway to thank us. They started with handshakes — which we girls quickly converted to hugs. It's a gay neighborhood after all — how often can you hug these manly heros? Every one of them gorgeous. Someone said all the vehicles slowed earlier because there was a blond in a short skirt cheering — glad to see the fellows' hormones aren't depressed. One girl's sign read "Wanna date a hero." Me too.

Earlier today, walking around, I peered into the little glass room at the front of one of the fire houses and thanked the tired guy behind the desk. It's a habit now. I had him talk to my friend, Staci, who I'd been talking to on my cell — she thanked him too. As I left, I casually mentioned that I wanted to be a fireman or marry one. He said

he wished he was married. Maybe we all do. Right now.

The Tennessee firemen were fun. They stopped by a couple of weeks ago and asked us to sign their hard hats. I met one of the dogs; I wish I could remember his name. His handler, a fireman, said he was a good dog, said that he'd come out of retirement for this job. I asked if the dog was sad because he couldn't find anyone. "It's a cadaver dog." Oh. They've gone back to Tennessee now. So has the L.A.P.D. bus, along with their chaplain — they gave us bright red hard hats that they had signed.

We cheerers are getting to know some workers by

name, and they recognize us. Sam, the ironworker from Florida, has been here since the beginning. He stops by when his shift ends at midnight, to smoke a cigar and unwind. We look forward to seeing him, hearing what happened at ground zero that day. I asked him last night if he

could take a little vacation. He looked tired.

That median, "Point Thank You," means a lot to us. Some of the guys, like Tarp and Barry the Flag Guy, stay overnight from midnight to whenever — sometimes alone, sometimes with others. There's always someone there and a constant influx of new posters as the old ones get wet or tear. We are getting a system down though — waterproof signs and flags. Even the drag queens have cheered and clapped, yuppies, homeless, some kids from the Bronx, Japanese tourists, Jen from Brooklyn, a lot of us are unemployed or freelance, but not all. I think everyone who does it once returns.

We wish we could do more. Everyone does, even the rescue workers. One night last week, a cop said we are cheering the wrong people, that we shouldn't cheer them, we should cheer the people who died, the victims. But...I think they can hear us, see us — they know. We cheer each other, we cheer the taxis, we cheer Verizon, we cheer the ironworkers, Sanitation, we cheer the car-poolers, we cheer the tourists, we cheer those we have lost. Anyone we can. We cheer.

Thomas is a cheerer, a writer and actress who has been living in West Village Houses for 10 years. Her bedroom window faces "Hero Highway."

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