

FLASHBACK: 9/11 Firefighters Rested in Cape May

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By Jack Fichter



Goodwin

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CAPE MAY — After working 24 hours shifts and enduring the unending smoke of ground zero at the World Trade Center, New York firefighters need a breath of fresh air, something a free vacation in Cape May can bring.

One woman without any bureaucracy, an office or even a telephone in Cape May scheduled free stays at bed and breakfast inn, guest houses and an area motel for 75 firefighters and their families.

New York City resident Gwen Goodwin came to Cape May after Sept. 11, where her parents own a summer condominium, in part because of the poor air quality in New York. While walking on the beach, she thought about a firefighter friend in New York, Steven Kelly, and how nice it would be for him and his wife to come to Cape May for a weekend.

“Cape May felt so far away from the death and destruction,” said Goodwin.

She asked to attend a local innkeepers association meeting and pitched the idea to the group. The innkeepers liked the idea and made rooms available at no charge to Goodwin. She named the campaign, “A Breath of Fresh Air.”

“To me that’s what Cape May is, a breath of fresh air and a temporary redemption from what we are were going through, in what we were looking at in New York City,” said Goodwin. “I think on a big scale, so I thought I would like to give everybody a breath of fresh air.”

Goodwin passed a sign-up sheet around the meeting and had 13 participating inns.

Sylvia Cooper, of Cooper’s Guest House, offered every room in the house plus solicited area businesses to donate beer, wine and soda to the cause.

Cooper, a teaching assistant at Cape May Elementary School, had her students make banners for the door of each room welcoming the fireman. She baked muffins and a neighbor made cookies.

Zoe’s and Oyster Bay Restaurants donated meals. Cooper said the firefighters avoided watching the news on television or reading a newspaper during their stay.

Firefighter Jim Powers called Goodwin to thank her for his stay. He said he “had a blast” in Cape May and felt much better for the experience.

He was from 103rd Street which rescued the men of Ladder 6 from Brooklyn from the stairwell of Tower Two, she said.

In New York, Goodwin went to a firehouse on East 85th Street where twelve men were lost. The fire captain faxed a message to all New York firehouses.

“My vision of what America is about is not giant corporations throwing slews of money around, I feel that small town America is what counts, things like this are as patriotic as you can get,” said Goodwin.

“The firefighters need peace and tranquility and a pristine environment,” she continued.

Goodwin returned to New York and set out on foot to visit firehouses. She started in her own neighborhood at 103rd Street, known as El Barrio’s finest in East Harlem. She continued on foot to firehouses 124th, 125th, Canal, 43rd and 65th streets.

Many firefighters want to come to Cape May on the weekend, when bed and breakfast inns are full.

Tracy Holden, general manager of the Marquis de Lafayette Hotel, made suites with a view of the beach available weekends and has been able to accommodate larger families, said Goodwin.

Goodwin credits Mike and Patricia Loranger, of Kate’s Cottage on Washington Street, for going the extra mile in hospitality. Patricia babysat for firefighter Chris Ferill and his wife Maureen, even providing a crib and playpen, allowing the parents to have a night on the town. Goodwin is hoping to put together a “circle of women” to babysit for firefighter families.

Vicky Seitchik, owner of the Carroll Villas Hotel, said the firefighters do not want to discuss the ordeal they have been through.

“They don’t want to sit at a table and be asked questions,” she said.

Firefighter Chris Reilly and his wife Tricia were staying at the Summer Cottage on Nov. 14. Chris said he spent 4 days.

"It's nice, very relaxing," he said of the ambience of Cape May.

Two firefighters and their wives stayed at the Brass Bed Inn on Columbia Avenue.

"They came in heavy-hearted," said Brass Bed Co-owner Theresa McCartney. "We could see the stress just draining away."

"I think they left here feeling cared for, as well as getting a breath of fresh air," said Goodwin.

Goodwin said she has put her life on hold and has not accepted any pay for her work. She said she saw the project as a race against time and connected the right people, without having to incorporate or set up a board of directors. Goodwin has taken on other charitable projects, one to save a 101 year old school building in New York, but none of this magnitude.

Acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco met Goodwin in Cape May Nov. 14 and complimented the program for giving firefighters a much needed respite in a great location.

Goodwin herself was on her way to World Trade Center 7 on Sept. 11 at 8:30 a.m. but was delayed when someone removed all the contents of her locker at the YWCA during an exercise class.

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