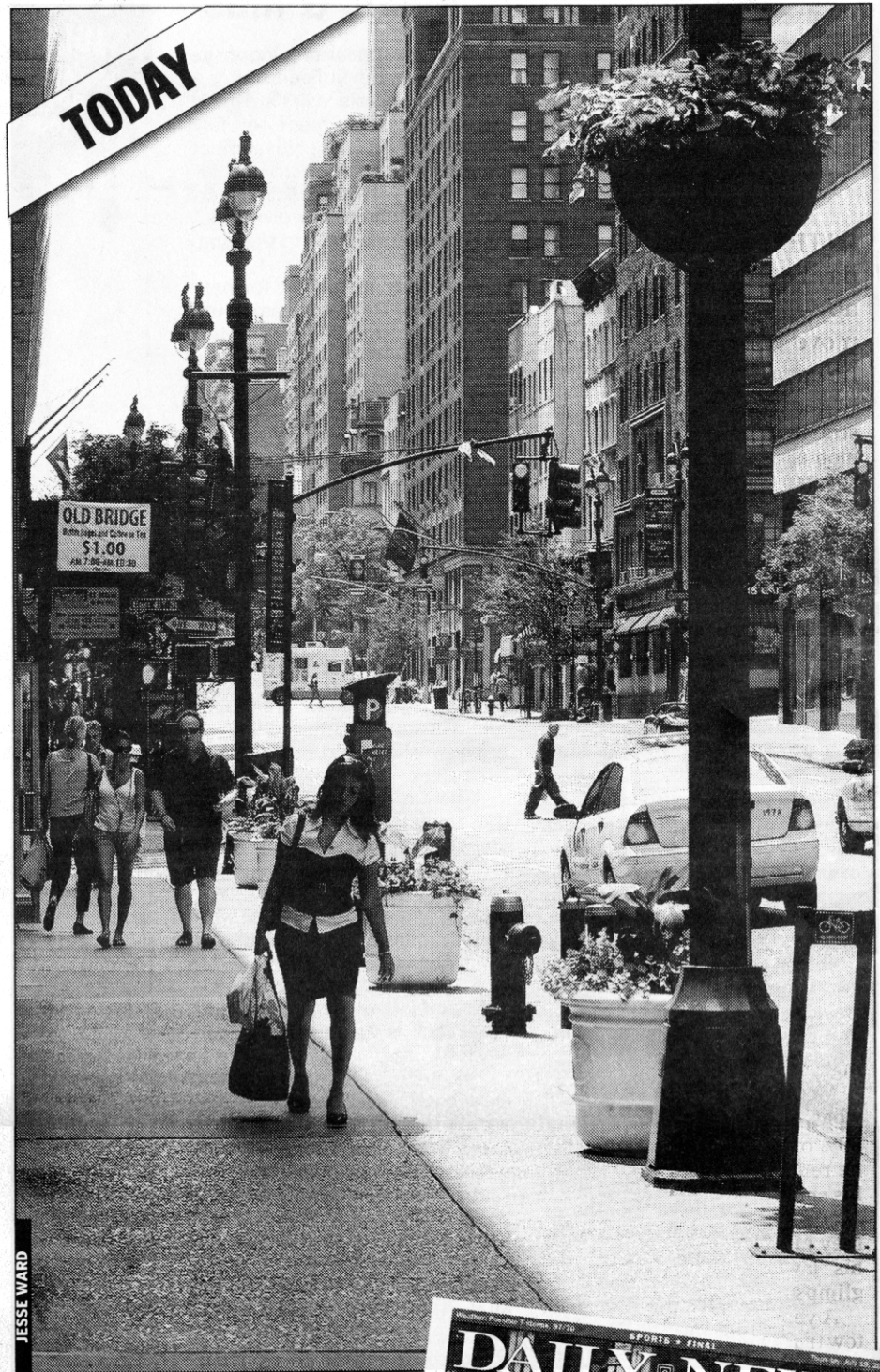
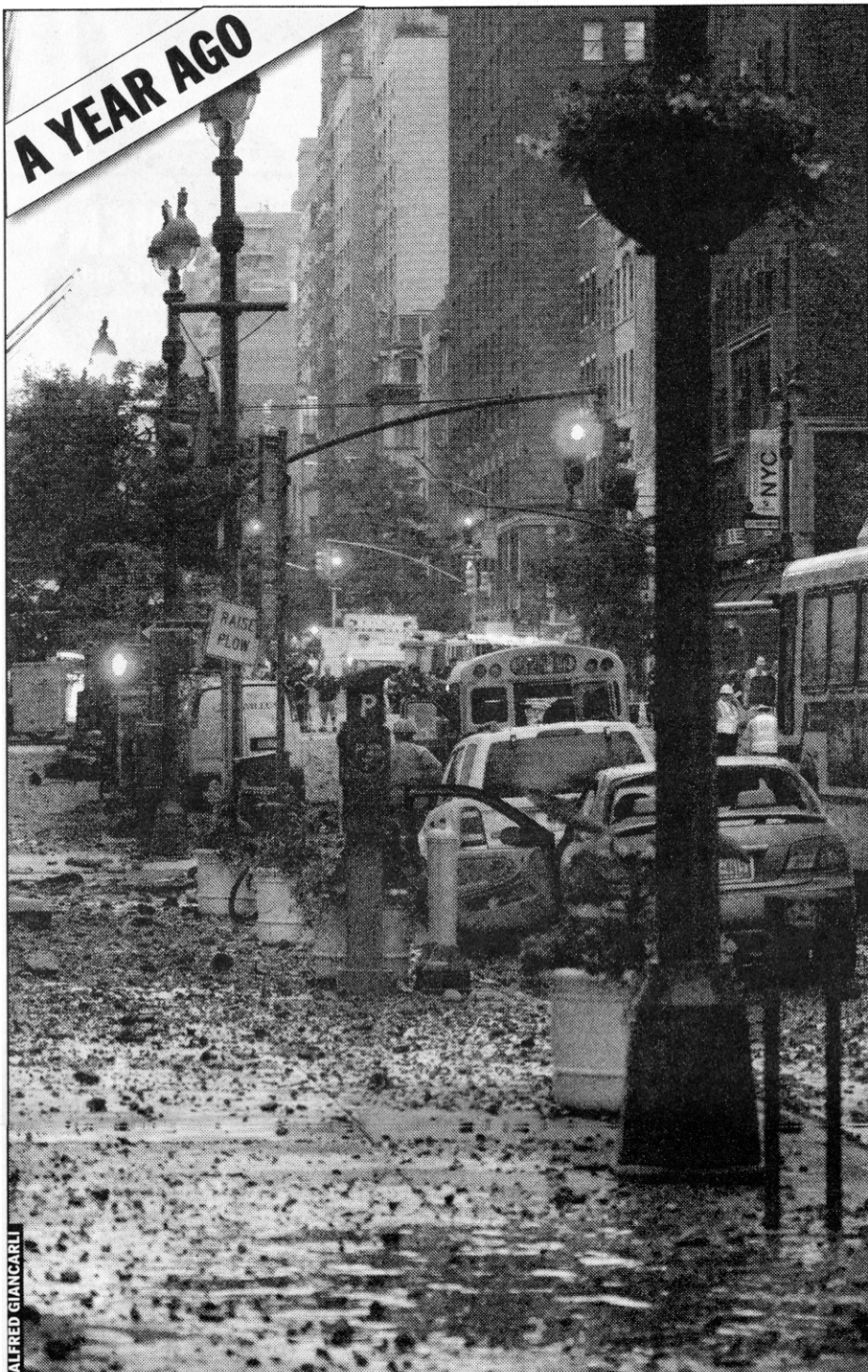


'I don't know if I'll ever be the same, but that's what I pray for every day'

MY TRIP THROUGH



In the photo on the left, the scene at the southeast corner of 42nd St. and Lexington was of gutted cars and debris-strewn sidewalks on July 18. Yesterday, on the very same corner, all seemed as if life had returned to normal.

Scars gone, memories remain

THE CONTAMINATED crater in the middle of Lexington Ave. has been repaired and repaved. The mud-spattered, asbestos-coated buildings around it have been cleaned and sterilized.

People who work at the corner of 41st St., though, still remember the terrible day when a tiny underground malfunction shot a geyser of superheated steam hundreds of feet in the air, turning midtown into a panic zone.

Even as the rest of the neighborhood recovered, workers were forced out of buildings, in some cases for months. Important papers were lost forever, computers were ruined and valuable items were

looted from offices.

"The doors were all pried open, and we weren't allowed in," lawyer Ian Polow said. "I had a Tiffany clock and I had a camera [stolen]. But considering what other people lost, that wasn't bad."

Most stores and offices have reopened, but not all. Lawyer Steven Mandel said he didn't get back into his office for six months, but he was able to keep all of his clients. But two lawyers who leased space from him weren't as lucky and had to close their practices.

"My wife and I, we had to borrow from relatives and take out a loan," Mandel said. "I never thought my entire office would be

blown up."

At least 45 lawsuits have been filed against Con Ed, 13 of which also blame the city.

"Many of the lawyers who represent plaintiffs are frustrated by the slow pace of litigation," said Ronald Berman, who represents the estate of Lois Baumerich, a New Jersey woman who died of a heart attack while fleeing the explosion. "There is a palpable sense of frustration that we're not moving forward more quickly."

Adam Lisberg



— to get back to where I was, or maybe better.'

HELL & BACK

Con Ed blast survivor marks first anniversary dreaming of his old life

IN THE YEARS SINCE GREGORY MCCULLOUGH jumped into hell, every day has brought a fresh battle. Three times a week, he endures his therapy — stretching the scarred skin that covers his body, learning how to move again. The pain blanks out other days, gripping him so tightly that he can't get out of bed.

And there are days when he stares straight ahead, endlessly replaying the moments before he was roasted alive in a spectacular steam explosion.

"I don't know if I'll ever be the same, but that's what I pray for every day — to get back to where I was, or maybe better," McCullough told the Daily News as he prepared to mark the one-year anniversary of his July 18 nightmare.

"It has changed me," he said.

"I don't think I'm as happy as I was. You just sit there and say, 'Why did this happen to me?' This could have been prevented. But because of someone's negligence, it didn't happen."

McCullough wore blue jeans and a long-sleeved shirt over the scars that encase his body. The toes on his right foot are locked in a permanent curl; the dark skin on his right hand is mottled with regrown patches of bright pink. The muscle in his right calf was burned away; teaching himself to walk again was agonizing.

"He could only take three steps at a time and had to sit down," said his father, Frank Stewart. "He was crying. He was screaming. Just listening to that was torture."

McCullough's face bears no trace of what he endured. He was burned over 80% of his body, all of it below the neck; he remains a handsome young man. But his smile hides another kind of scar.

"People get a glimpse of Gregory, and they just assume everything is fine," said his lawyer, Kenneth Thompson. "That glimpse only masks his pain."

A year ago, McCullough was driving a tow truck and going to school, a churchgoing CUNY student from Canarsie, Brooklyn, with dreams of joining the Marines and going into law enforcement — until just before 6 p.m. on July 18. A string of investigations has pinpointed what happened next.

Con Edison knew that the leakiest point in its 105-mile steam system was on an 87-year-old pipe under 41st St. and Lexington Ave. Ten times in two years, crews patched the leak by pumping it full of a sticky epoxy. A tiny clump of epoxy clogged a nearby relief valve, leading to a dangerous buildup of water in the pipe. When a bubble of hot steam got trapped in the water, it vaporized and blew the pipe apart.

The company has since beefed up its inspections, stopped using epoxy and installed different valves. When probes dug through Con Ed's maintenance records, though, they found a color photograph of the pipe with an unnamed worker's handwritten note: "Pipe is dented & pitted in several places. Should change pipe!"

McCullough knew none of this when he drove his red tow truck down Lexing-

EXCLUSIVE

BY ADAM LISBERG

DAILY NEWS CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

ton last year, with a 30-year-old customer named Judith Bailey at his side.

The road erupted under them, dropping them in a scalding torrent of 400-degree steam. They linked hands and leaped. The move saved them from certain death, and sent them into a life of unimaginable pain.

McCullough spent weeks in a coma, then months in a burn unit; he lost 50 pounds from his once-muscular frame, and prayed every day to go home.

Bailey spent three weeks in the hospital. She declined to be interviewed as the anniversary of the explosion approaches. Through her lawyer, Derek Sells, she simply sent words of thanks to the many people who have sent her sympathy and prayers.

"She has a long road to go," Sells said of Bailey, a mother of two daughters. "When she got home, they didn't even want to hug her. They didn't even want to touch her. She still cries about that."

McCullough knows he has to build up his mind as well as his body. He gets strength from his pastor, A.R. Bernard, and from his parents. When his mother, Tanya McCullough-Stewart, catches him staring blankly at the TV, she tells him to snap out of it.

For now, he leaves the house only for his therapy appointments, or an occasional trip to his church, the Christian Cultural Center. Some friends have stopped dropping by; others he tells not to visit when the pain gets too intense.

But he prays for strength. He tells himself not to recoil at the common New York sight of steam rising from a manhole. And he thinks not about the days he has endured, but about the days yet to come.

"It takes a lot of energy to be miserable. I try to be as positive as I can," McCullough said. "I don't want to look back at life and say, 'I wanted to do it but I couldn't.' I still want to become a police officer. I still want to join the Marines. I want to travel the world."

"There's just a whole bunch of things I still want to do."

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His hands showing the scars from the severe burns he suffered, Gregory McCullough talks about his struggle to regain the life he knew.

Photo by James Keivom/Daily News

