

Hanging Tough

When terrorists attacked New York on September 11, the city's framers took a big hit. But they remain upbeat and are determined to get their businesses back on track.

by Patrick Sarver

At the World Trade Art Gallery on Trinity Place in Lower Manhattan, the morning of September 11 began as just another workday. The staff was just settling into its daily routine when American Airlines Flight 11 slammed into the World Trade Center a block and a half north of the gallery.

"When the north tower was hit and the first pieces started to fall, all of us moved down into the basement," says gallery manager Chad Collins. "We didn't know what was going on outside, and that was the worst part. We just heard rumbles every time something fell. It was scary. We knew that if the towers toppled in our direction, we would be hit. So we left—just as the second tower began to fall. The impact blew out our window and filled the gallery with ash and concrete, but at the time you couldn't see anything. First, everything was black. Then it was white. There was just smoke and a cloud of dust everywhere. Things got pretty crazy as we left because the cloud was chasing us. Some of us were covered with dust, but we still feel pretty lucky."

Today, a month after the collapse of the World Trade Center, the gallery is struggling to reopen its mid- and high-end framing business, a process that may take until late November or beyond. "We're still part of the crime scene," says Collins.

"There's a checkpoint beyond our gallery, so we don't have any foot traffic. We are allowed in to clean, but our building has to be inspected before we can reopen. And hopefully, they'll move the barricades farther north in a few weeks so we'll be able to pull in some walk-in customers."

Signs of the tragedy remain, though they're less visible now. "The wreckage is closed off, so you can't see it from the street," says Collins. "But when you go out the back of our gallery, there it is. On some days it's really smoky here, too, and there's always dust in the air irritating everyone's throats."

In the meantime, Collins says, he has been visiting customers door-to-door to pick up and deliver what work the gallery does have. "It's just hard doing business from inside a military zone, especially since we're not allowed to get any deliveries," he says. "Twenty to 30 percent of our business was in the towers, and that's gone as well. But we don't plan on leaving. We're here for the long run."

September 11 may not have hit other framers in Manhattan in such dramatic fashion, but almost all of them are looking at financial challenges over the next several months. Here in the largest art market in the country, the impact of the terrorist attacks run deep. But the one thing you hear over and over again from framers in New York is their deep determination to get their businesses back on track along with their strong

commitment to their city.

Take Heritage Frame & Picture Company on West Broadway, a mid-level shop only a block from the World Trade Center. Owner Ted Howell says he feels fortunate because, even though his offices were filled with dust, the physical damage was limited. "It did take us two weeks to get back in the shop, and our phones were out for three weeks," he says. "That was a major problem because 90 percent of my business comes from the immediate neighborhood, mostly corporate accounts, and we usually we deal with them by phone. But the worse part is that I have customers who died a horrible death. We lost hundreds of clients who are either dead or displaced."

Even now, says Howell, "it's still depressing and morbid and frightening outside. There's a huge crowd outside [our] front door because it's a really good vantage spot to see into the wreckage. But you can't set foot on the street because it's closed off with military. They have crowd control, and it's a real nuisance for anyone who wants to come in. Our office is only open from 12 to 2 pm because the air is irritating to so many people. It's physically very uncomfortable, so who's going to want to come down here for framing?"

Yet, Howell still shows his New York fighting spirit. "We've been here four generations, since the 1870s," he says. "Even though it's a big city and

it's Wall Street, it's still a neighborhood to us. We do picture framing and we love it, but in light of everything that happened, it was really hard that first week or two back at work. We just have to keep going and get our stuff done. It's a real challenge, but we're doing it. Surviving the next few months will be tough, and everyone's going to have to work a little harder and be more creative."

For others in the framing business, the impact is more personal than economic. Skip Luberto, owner of Quality Saw & Knife in West Babylon, 30 miles east of Manhattan, says, "We have many framing clients in Manhattan, and most of them are just getting back to opening. But it's not the business that really matters, it's the loss of life and the uncertainty of what's happening in the world. The biggest thing for me was that I had some good friends who worked in the Towers. They're gone, and that's the real tragedy."

For many framers in Lower Manhattan, the challenge is to just keep their businesses alive. Tracy Gill, co-owner of Gill & Lagodich Fine Period Frames on Reade Street, says, "We live a block north of our gallery, which is four blocks from Ground Zero. Right after it happened, we were inside the blockade, so we could get into the gallery the next day to start cleaning out the dust, which was everywhere. Ten days later, they moved the blockade, so we had to present ID and a piece of mail from the gallery just to get to work. Finally, last week, they moved the blockade south of the gallery so people can get here now. But you can't escape what happened. You walk out the door and the piles are right there. So are the National

Guard and a big chain link fence across the avenue. Down the street are buildings with netting over them that are probably going to be demolished. From time to time, they do some blasting. If you're on the same block, you get a warning. But if you're a couple of blocks away like we are, you don't always know—and it can be a little unnerving."

Gill, whose inventory includes 3,000 period frames, says, "We had more work than we could handle this summer, but now I haven't had a sale since Labor Day. With our overhead, that's a tremendous loss. But it's more important that we keep going. The money that's coming in now is from balances on jobs that were already in-house for restoration. But I had to furlough half my staff. Still, when I see all the people who died or had major damage, I feel thankful I'm alive and my family's okay. Maybe it's because I have a strong survival instinct and a year-old baby, but I feel optimistic about things. We've put everything we have into this business for over 10 years, and I'm not going to let it fail. I've worked too hard to let it go down for a terrorist."

Gill has received encouraging calls from all over the country, largely because of her appearance on MSNBC. "I got a call from someone in Florida who said he hadn't thought about buying a frame but saw the show and wanted to support the businesses here," she says. "He gave me a budget, and I'm trying to find him something. I also got an e-mail from a framer in Tennessee who also wanted to do something. And I got another call from an art dealer in the South who saw the show and said he was going to rally all the art dealers there to buy frames from New York

to keep the business going. People are responding in a way that's positive and sending their support. For us, that's better than accepting federal aid or insurance. I'd much rather people patronize my business and keep the economy going than for us to receive money just for being here."

Farther from the impact zone the physical effects are fewer, but framers have nonetheless suffered economic setbacks. Eric Kahan, co-owner of Goldfeder-Kahan Frame Group, 13 blocks north of the Trade Center, returned to his high-end gallery the week after the disaster. For him, the restrictions on traffic and people in the area had the most impact. "Our clients were supportive, though," he says. "Ninety-five percent of our vendors were also supportive and delivered to us. Like everyone else, we've had to put up with delays and traffic and the inconvenience of doing business in ways we're not used to—not just because we're a frame shop but a business in New York City. No one is going to let the bastards win."

Yong Yuen Kim, owner of A-Z Art Framing on Greenwich Street, a dozen blocks from Ground Zero, returned to her business the second week after the attacks to almost no business. The following week, business was still only about 20 to 30 percent of normal. "We had so much dust and smell in the shop," she says. "I have been in this business for a long time, and this is a really bad time. Most of our business is for high-end contemporary gallery shows, but there is not much of that happening right now. But I do look for it to be better after a while."

Joseph Bretano, general manager of the Grand Terminal Gallery on

Park Avenue in Midtown, felt an immediate impact even though his gallery is well away from the area of the attacks. "We have almost 3,000 square feet in a lobby, and there's been a lot less foot traffic through the building itself. Some people are afraid of going into a building if they don't have to be there right now. Most of our business is corporate, and a lot of our corporate clients are not spending. We are down about 85 percent. Besides being a tragedy for people's lives, September 11 also made a recession a reality. I'm not scared about losing the business; we just have to budget ourselves better and keep going. Now is actually the time to spend a little more on advertising in order to get some back."

While framing sales in New York were hit hard by the terrorist attacks, many in the industry are looking for a rebound in the not-too-distant future. Lou Martinez, owner of New Look, a manufacturer of high-end period frames in nearby Queens, says, "Things have definitely slowed down in New York, especially Lower Manhattan. I've also noticed a similar effect around Washington, D.C. I don't think the fine framing business in New York will be affected all that long by September 11, especially away from Lower Manhattan. People will shop farther uptown instead. This is just temporary. The second quarter of next year, we'll see a turnaround nationally, and New York is going to be the leader in that."

Others take a wait-and-see attitude. Jed Bark, owner of Bark Frameworks, which produces museum and high-end framing just across the East River in Long Island City, also has a showroom east of SoHo in

Manhattan. He says, "The week of September 11, we received 3 percent of our normal receipts. We all said, 'Oh, my' at that. Everyone's now watching the art market to see what the consequences may be. It's certainly been slower, but then, everyone's still holding back, looking over their shoulders. So far, we just can't tell how things will go. It may well be that the art market will remain strong. I heard that Home Depot and Williams-Sonoma are up because people want to stay home. So does that mean that people will be seeking the inspiration and solace of art? It may translate into that—and then it may not. It's too early to tell what's really happening."

Opinions on the near-term outlook range from a significant downturn to cautious optimism. But virtually everyone expresses a strong confidence in a significant bounce-back at some point next year. "We're coming into the holidays, and I think people will want to be framing things—family photos and things of more personal meaning to give to each other," says Gill. "Maybe framers should be thinking about promoting that. In that sense, I think the framing industry may be okay. I have actually been surprised at the number of clients who have called and say they want to come in and buy something."

"I personally think things are going to be rough for several months, but we have to stick together and try to do things to entice people to come in to our stores," says Bretano. "Within the next six months, I think we'll really see a big change here in the city, with new construction. In 1999 and 2000 a lot of companies in Midtown moved Downtown because

space there was a lot less expensive. Now, they'll be coming back up here. Our building is 41 stories; there's talk of adding another six floors in the next three years."

"Our economy is in recession and was heading into one prior to September 11; this just exacerbated the effects," says Kahan. "It will have an effect on us, but we will only know in a year what really happened economically. Hopefully those effects will be minimal."

"This is a temporary setback," says Howell. "Right now, we need to spend money on advertising and promotion to make up for the loss of business. I don't think all this is going to have a lasting effect. I'm guessing that in a year, things will be back to normal. Eventually, down the road when all the new buildings go up, there will be a lot of work."

Among framers in New York, the attitude remains tough, resilient, and optimistic. Their views reflect the city around them, with residents and businesses pulling together with their neighbors. "It's very important for us to take action so we don't feel like helpless bystanders or victims but participants in building something from this," says Bark. "One of the things we're doing is creating a fund in which our company will match donations by our employees. We're probably going to give that fund to the families of those in the food service industry at the Towers. A lot of those people have been the hardest hit."

"I would like to ask more people to go out of their way to visit New York," says Collins. "Call and stop by the gallery. I'll come get you if the street's not open. That's how we're going to get back on our feet. It's not

a lack of us trying to make it work. It's a matter of getting people to come here. All in all, New York's a good place to be. I don't doubt that everything's going to be fine. There's a real sense of camaraderie here now, and so many don't want to see this part of the city fall apart."

Indeed, among the framers and art galleries in Lower Manhattan a real sense of mission about doing

business has emerged. "Art brings us joy and helps us get through something like this," says Kahan. "It represents some of the good in the world. When people walk into their homes and see an image that makes them smile, it helps them. This is a very important part of what our industry can give back to people at this time."

To which Gill adds, "I got an invitation to an opening at a gallery

Uptown, and I called them to say I thought it was really good they were going ahead with it. They simply said, 'We have to.' People in this business need that attitude, that we have to continue trading and buying and selling art and frames. If we don't, we're all going to go under. We won't let that happen. That's the reason we didn't leave our shop or our neighborhood. This is what we do." ■