

# A Case of Nerves

## Memories of September 11 continue to shake some New Yorkers who can't shake the jitters

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**X**iomira LeGrenade can't shake the feeling. She's still nervous. A 37-year-old officer for the Royal Bank of Canada, she no longer takes her 30-minute commuter's nap into work on the "4" train. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, "all I do is look around expecting something to happen," she admits.

Her fears were realized recently, as she waited for the subway at Grand Central Station. Three uniformed police officers ran up next to her, frantically shouting into their radios. Suddenly more officers arrived and jumped on the train with her. "I started to shake, I didn't know what to do," explained LeGrenade.

As the police ran on to the platform a crowd of straphangers followed, pulling the petrified LeGrenade with them. "Everyone was confused and I was scared," she recalls. She later found out that the commotion was just a group of teens fighting in the station.

That same morning, LeGrenade found two concrete barriers blocking the street leading to her new office building. With tears in her eyes, she asked a nearby police officer for an explanation. He explained that dignitaries were arriving in the area and told LeGrenade to drink some tea and relax.

That's not all. Even once LeGrenade arrives at work, she braces herself for a long ride on two elevators that take her to the 40th floor where the bank's offices are located. Once at her work area, her tousled hair and the frantic look in her red eyes often is enough to catch her boss' attention.

LeGrenade is one of the over 300 Royal Bank employees who were displaced after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. One Liberty Plaza, the previous site of the firm's offices, was across the street from the towers. The building collapsed during the days following the attacks. That made Royal Bank one of 1,300 downtown businesses that were affected by the World Trade Center attacks. Insignia/ESG, a large real estate broker in New York estimates that 28.7 million square feet of office space were destroyed, leaving between 80,000 to 100,000 employees displaced. LaGrenade, along with 300 other Royal Bank of Canada employees, was relocated from One Liberty Plaza to 12 East 49th Street.

Moving was the least of LeGrenade's worries, however. As Conciliation Officer for the bank, she monitors transactions for personal and corporate accounts managed by the bank. When One Liberty Plaza collapsed, a database containing information on withdrawals, deposits and payments for over 12 million personal and business accounts at the bank were destroyed. To further complicate matters, the only other



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available back-up systems were located in Pakistan, where the firm that developed them was based.

That didn't help LeGrenade, who has to review the database to fix any discrepancies that might pop up in bank transactions. After September 11th, LeGrenade faced the loss of over 75,000 account transactions that had occurred by the very next day in Royal Bank offices across the globe. "The tech guys were only trained to solve small operational glitches, not major problems," she says, so already distressed by the attacks and the relocation, LeGrenade was forced to travel to the Royal Bank of Canada's main offices in Toronto to manually recover the lost account information.

On her journey, she was destined to hit another September 11th hot spot: the airport. "I can't believe I am doing this," LeGrenade thought to herself as she scanned the crowd of passengers for any suspicious characters. She entered the plane and nervously took her seat. To calm her nerves, LeGrenade takes out a picture of her four children; 16-year-old Natshi, 7-year-old twins Jarvis and Jamel; and 3-year-old Alijah. "I held on to that picture for dear life," says LeGrenade nervously laughing.

Fortunately for her, the bank's back-up systems have been repaired, making air travel for LeGrenade unnecessary.

However, LeGrenade still has trouble facing her daily subway ride. Royal Bank's relocation has added an extra hour to



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LeGrenade's commute from Brooklyn. She must also make a transfer at Grand Central, which has had several threats this past fall. Since many bank employees have found it hard to cope, the company started a program to offer post-trauma support for workers and their families.

It helps, but only a little. "I feel suffocated," admits Susan Cella the Human Resources Director for the bank. Not only are anxieties running high, but the new office space is small and makes it difficult for the employees to work effectively. "We literally keep bumping into each other," says Cella.

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For security reasons the Human Resources Department is in an even smaller room, closed off from the rest of the employees. "It's like a closet," describes Cella. In order to create a reasonable work-

ing area, employees have been rotating workdays since there are only two phones and two computers available for the seven employees in Cella's department.

"The only good thing is that we talk to each other," says Louis Martinez, a 32-year-old manager for the bank. He says the small space makes it hard to be productive, yet it allows for closer communication. "It is easy to see when someone is not doing well," he says. Martinez remembers several instances when employees have begun to cry openly. "There aren't walls or cubicles to hide behind, anymore," says Martinez.

"Xiomira deals with her anxiety by talking - she keeps yapping and yapping.

I guess it's just her nerves," Martinez says with a wry grin. "We talk to each other instead of going to a therapist," answers LeGrenade. Still, many of the employees have noticed changes among their co-workers. "I have gained over 20 pounds; I get nervous and I eat," says Martinez. "I am smoking more cigarettes," says LeGrenade.

LeGrenade is also more apprehensive at home. "She doesn't let me go out," says 16-year-old Natshi, LeGrenade's son. To keep track of him, LeGrenade even gave Natshi a pager. "I have been asking for that pager for years," says Natshi who sadly realizes that the gift came out of fear. Now, LeGrenade's son says he calls his mother at least four times a day if he is out of the house.

LeGrenade now gets home late most nights. She spends 6 hours a day reconciling accounts - work that before the attacks would take her just two hours. Ironically, LeGrenade says it is a welcome change of pace. "I used to run out of work by 4:30[pm]. Now I stay late just to avoid the crowds," she admits.

And then, once she does brave the commute, LeGrenade clutches a picture of her children to make her ride on the trains more bearable. "I put it in my pocket everyday - they keep me going and I have to move on," she says.