



Entrepreneurs responded to NYC's plight

By Stephen J. Adams

September 2, 2002

These days there are a lot of heroes walking around New York City. Many are recognizable. They wear uniforms. They're the ones who put their lives on the line, rescued hundreds from certain death, and sifted through the rubble for survivors. Other heroes are harder to recognize. Maybe it's because they look so much like the rest of us. Maybe it's because they don't recognize it themselves. But they are heroes just the same.

I met three of them on a recent trip to New York. Allison Hemming, Tara Lynch and Eileen Shulock are in the "new media" business. They are three New York professionals who followed their instincts to lend help in a crisis, three entrepreneurs who did what entrepreneurs do best. They saw a need that others did not and found a way to fill it.

In this case, it was the mammoth task of matching the thousands of volunteers anxious to help with the desperate needs of emergency response agencies. Like many New Yorkers, Allison, Tara and Eileen responded to the first calls for help after the September 11 attack from the Red Cross, the City and others. What they saw troubled them.

They saw waves of volunteers being recruited to staff phone banks and spend hours working the phones to find more volunteers to do the same. They saw a sea of paper forms that would be filled out by hand, processed one-by-one, and followed up with more phone calls. It was clear to them that established approaches were not equal to the scale of this disaster or people's desire to help.

Web technology is second nature to these new media entrepreneurs. They knew it was the perfect tool for the task. In fact, in the early days of the crisis, the 'net was the only reliable means of communication in New York. Major telephone lines were down and cell signals were clogged. The Internet, however, was largely untouched; e-mail and instant messaging flowed freely.

Allison and Tara turned to web designers (appropriately named Angel Network) and in 24 hours had created a simple, web-based platform that would allow volunteers to quickly and easily register their interest, their expertise, their hours and days of availability, and their e-mail address.

They then set out to connect with their colleague networks in New York's technology and new media world like Eileen's NYC Webgrrls network, who were aching to help. These contacts forwarded the information to their contact lists. Quickly, an e-mail tree was sprouting up across Manhattan and beyond directing interested volunteers to the new website. Silicon Alley Cares was born.

As Silicon Alley Cares, these three women used their website and hours of their own time to provide a single point of contact for volunteers and for organizations looking for help. Over the following days, weeks and months, they would connect thousands of volunteers to dozens of organizations working to recover from the attack. Five hundred NYC Webgrrls techies were sent to help the Red Cross manage their technology needs. They steered hundreds of unemployed MBAs and computer technicians to the New York City Partnership who were helping countless small businesses get back on their feet.

These three entrepreneurs accomplished something that government agencies and other large institutions could not. They quickly created an efficient, low-cost, zero-bureaucracy system. Instead of dozens of volunteers taking and making calls, and

dozens more processing an endless sea of paper forms, three women created a link between thousands of volunteers and the organizations that needed them.

Allison, Tara and Eileen helped blunt some of the worst aspects of terrorism. They helped reduce the confusion, uncertainty and helplessness many New Yorkers were feeling. They built an electronic bridge over the chaos of September 11. They did it for free, and without being asked. And they're still at it.

By efficiently harnessing the desire to help, Silicon Alley Cares, and other groups like it, gave people back some measure of control, the feeling that they could do something. By helping ease the terror in New York they eased it for the rest of us.

Stephen J. Adams is executive director and directs the Center for Urban Entrepreneurship at Pioneer Institute, a Massachusetts public policy think tank.