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## After keeping an eye on victims of the Hyatt disaster, KC shrinks have bad news for the grief-counseling industry

By **Peter Rugg**

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• Michael McClure



Richard Gist says if you try to hug him, he'll probably hit you.

• Courtesy Bryan Bledsoe

Five days after the attacks on September 11, 2001, **Vickie Taylor** led a group of firefighters from Pennsylvania into the pile at Ground Zero. By this time, it was clear that there were no survivors in the rubble. But families in mourning wanted the remains of their loved ones, and firefighters wanted to bring their brothers home, so that was the job.

The site was cluttered with signs and stations — places to get fitted for gas masks to filter out the particulate matter still heavy in the air, a table where workers could stop for some soup donated by Campbell's. Church

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Bryan Bledsoe

groups, **Scientologists** and every type of grief counselor had set up shop. Some firefighters had told Taylor to avoid areas of the wreckage where well-meaning but unthinking people would grab them for forcible therapy sessions.

In the previous 120 hours, as bodies were recovered, funeral services had been conducted continuously. Many of the victims were Roman Catholic, and the priests there were exhausted.

One called Taylor's command post, requesting help to spread the word about an upcoming Mass. "I've had a hard day and I've done a number of funerals," he told her.

So now Taylor and the firefighters were hanging laminated signs announcing that a service — not a funeral but an opportunity for people to pray together if they needed to — would be held later that day. They had just finished hanging a new sign when Taylor felt someone take hold of her hand.

Before she knew what was happening, Taylor and her crew were holding hands in a circle with a group of strangers. Taylor only half-listened to the words, which sounded like a sermon, because she was busy watching the firefighters who were all standing in silence, looking at one another with expressions of confusion. Then the clipboards appeared, and the sermonizers started asking questions from a checklist of psychological trauma symptoms.

"They started putting these pamphlets into our hands — something about our grief and how to deal with it, I think. I

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think it was religious," says Taylor, a social worker who deals with first responders such as firefighters and paramedics in **Prince William County**, Virginia. "Later on, I saw a lot of those brochures lying on the ground. People threw them away as soon as they were left alone. If I hadn't experienced being grabbed like that, I don't think I would've believed it."

As Taylor continued her work at Ground Zero, she would come to appreciate the counselors who carried broad placards announcing themselves or the long pieces of plywood with the words "Trauma Counseling" lettered roughly in red paint.

"Those at least you could see coming and avoid," she says.

his clients were 100 percent drunk.

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On the day that Taylor was forced into a prayer circle, a psychologist in Kansas City named **Richard Gist** was dealing with the fallout here. People were stranded at the airport as planes were grounded, and requests for assistance were still coming in from all over the country. In the middle of the night, he found time to grab a laptop and send an e-mail to members of the **Society of Clinical Psychology**, warning that the practice Taylor had been seeing was more than a benign annoyance.

It was important to stay focused on meeting people's needs in ways that would help, Gist wrote. "In some cases, this will mean protecting them from the convergence of 'trauma tourists' who come to offer untested and ill-conceived fringe therapies for trauma to the desperately frightened and grieving."

And, he warned, "We must also be aware that some approaches that seem intuitively reasonable and have been widely embraced have proven ineffective and even harmful."

At the time, Gist was an adjunct professor of psychology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and principal assistant to the director of the **Kansas City, Missouri, Fire Department**. Today, he lives in Old Briarcliff. A modestly built man with a bristling mustache, he has an expression that tends to make him look a little incredulous and he has a way of talking that takes long, scenic detours.

mental health were considered far less sexy fields of study — he compares it with the monster that **Mary Shelley** created in *Frankenstein*, and he brings up the old Irish saying about good intentions paving the road to hell.

Other researchers have also grown suspicious about the effectiveness of treating post-traumatic stress with a technique that has come to be known as "debriefing": forcing the victims or witnesses of a traumatic situation to talk about it with counselors.

Over the last 20 years, grief counseling has become a big business. Almost anyone can say he or she is a grief counselor — it doesn't take a medical degree or a background in psychology. Pop culture has exploded with daytime-talk-show psychology and what Gist calls "touchy-feely" books. So the idea of bringing in an expert — even if the expert was only a self-proclaimed one — to help workers who have seen horrific things seemed reasonable. Most fire departments around the country eventually adopted some system of mandatory group debriefings.

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