

A traffic jam that no one minds

Clevelanders stop the stop-and-go to give for victims

PETE JEDICK
Special to The Plain Dealer

Do you want to experience America up close and personal?

Put on a firefighter's uniform, stand in the middle of Chester Ave. with a white plastic bucket and wait for this country to pass you by.

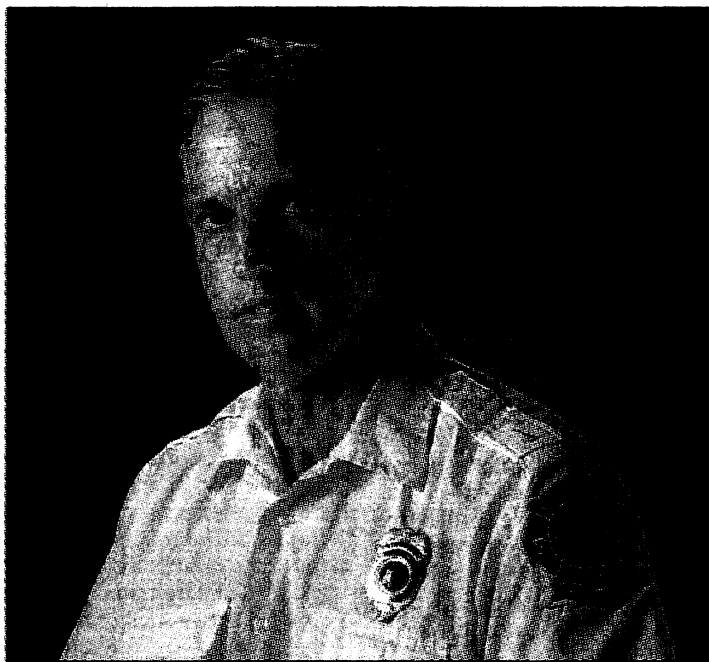
There is a shiny red fire engine parked in the left-turn lane. An 8-by-10-foot piece of plywood is leaning against the back of the pumper. The pumper's lights are flashing. On the plywood is a crude hand-painted sign: HELP NY FIRE FIGHTERS.

One firefighter mans each lane as the traffic comes roaring up, hurrying home on a somber Monday afternoon, almost one week after the World Trade Center disaster. The firefighters hold their buckets at eye level, waiting to bond with their fellow Americans. And they all stop.

One by one, they understand the sign, and the significance of the parked firetruck.

What a cross-section of our country there is in this city. The well-dressed suburbanite driving the flashy Mercedes-Benz peels off a couple of twenties and throws them in the bucket. The beat-up Sanford and Son junkyard truck adds a fiver.

The school bus driver drops a few singles, fluttering down like snowflakes, from her towering seat. A couple of kids, riding in the back of the bus, shove their arms out the windows and drop some change. It hits the plastic



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Lt. Pete Jedick of the Cleveland Fire Department Station 17 at E. 66th St. and Chester Ave.

bucket's bottom like buckshot.

A dump truck stops and the fireman has to climb the sides of the rig to raise the bucket to the window. The effort is worth a twenty. An ironworker stops, his backward hard hat sporting an American flag, his arms covered with dirt. He's good for a ten. A taxi stops. The driver drops in a couple singles from his tip money. The passenger in the back seat rolls down his window and adds a few more.

Four rappers slide up, their car radio blaring. The driver collects a couple of bucks from each of his passengers and adds it to a bucket already overflowing with greenbacks. An old Toyota sports an "I LOVE ALLAH" sign on its dashboard. He throws in five.

A mom in a rusty used car

filled with kids makes each of her young passengers cough up a donation. Then she empties her ashtray full of change.

The Cleveland Clinic employees are a big chunk of the traffic, one group going home, the second shift on its way to work. The doctors, nurses and support staff wear different uniforms, but they all sport the same ID cards. They save lives every day, but today they compliment the firefighters. One of them asks if she can write a check. The firefighter is not sure who to make it out to. So she pulls into the fire station and goes inside to ask. She takes 10 minutes out of her busy schedule to give away some of her hard-earned money.

After a few hours the cars become a blur. They are all the

same, but they are all different. They come driving up, one hand on the wheel, one hand on their cell phone and somehow still manage to dig into their pockets or purses as they attempt to slow down.

Many drivers are eating fast food. Others are smoking cigarettes. The traffic backs up, and we can talk with them for an instant. But the conversation is the same no matter what the driver's race, creed, color or nationality. No matter what type of car they are driving.

"Thank you, ma'am," the fireman says.

"No. Thank you," the lady answers.

"Thank you, sir," the fireman says.

"Keep up the good work," he answers.

Even drivers who had no money to give feel the need to stop. Their comments say everything.

"I gave three times already."

"I gave a hundred dollars yesterday."

"I get paid Friday."

"Will you still be here tomorrow?"

On Monday Cleveland Fire Station 17 collected more than \$20,000 for their New York brothers. The same scenario was repeated throughout the city and its suburbs. No amount of money will heal the wounds of New York's bravest. But what a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Jedick is a free-lance writer and member of the Cleveland Fire Department, Fire Station 17, E. 66th St. and Chester Ave.

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