

EXCLUSIVE: FDNY paramedic suffering trauma after Ground Zero cleanup, but city won't grant disability benefits

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Michael Markowski, a former paramedic, next to a piece of the World Trade Center at the 9/11 Memorial in Queens on Tuesday. He became ill with depression and PTSD after working in the removal and cataloguing of body parts after 9/11. (Debbie Egan-Chin/New York Daily News)

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After the 9/11 terror attacks, FDNY paramedic Michael Markowski spent a year at Ground Zero recovering body parts from the site and carefully cataloguing them at the city morgue.

The experience, he says, was so emotionally crippling that he fell into depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. He had suicidal thoughts. He could no longer work, lost his marriage, his medical certification, and spent time in psychiatric hospitals.

One of the people whose remains he indexed at the morgue was David Marc Sullins, a Cabrini Medical Center paramedic who died in the collapse of the south tower.

"I carried body parts out," said Markowski, of Queens. "In the morgue, I catalogued body parts, the remnants, the bone fragments. It's the totality of doing it for months on end. You can't keep exposing yourself to human tragedy at that level every single day without having it affect you."

Markowski, 45, of Rockaway Park, Queens, says he still suffers from intense nightmares after witnessing people jump from the burning towers that day. Just talking about his experiences gives him anxiety.

"It gives me chills to think about it," he told the Daily News. "That's completely seared in my mind like an endless loop."

Of the six paramedics he rode to Ground Zero with on the day of the attacks, five are dead — four succumbed to cancer, Markowski said. One hanged himself.

He was hospitalized for depression, PTSD and suicidal thoughts three times at Long Island Jewish Medical Center twice in 2013 and once in 2014 — each time for about a month. And he was treated at the FDNY's Counseling Services Unit from 2013 through 2014.

In November, because he had exhausted his sick leave but still couldn't work, the FDNY had no choice but to fire him, he said.

Markowski applied for disability benefits with the city but was denied because officials refused to credit his 9/11 experiences as the cause of his depression, he said.

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Michael Markowski was fired from the FDNY and denied a disability pension. (Debbie Egan-Chin/New York Daily News)

Because the regular pension for paramedics only kicks in after 25 years, he got nothing. He now lives on workers' compensation and help from friends.

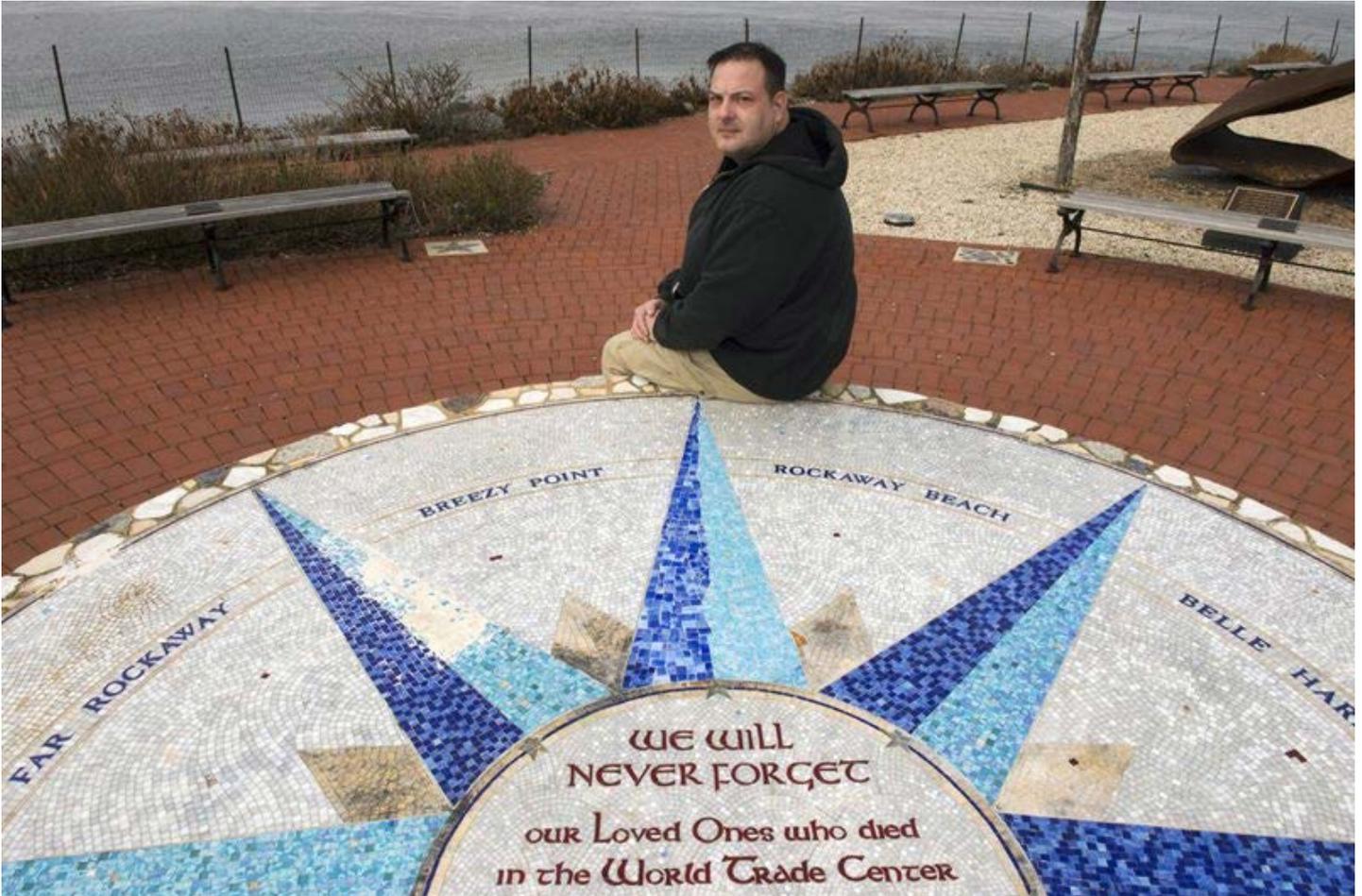
"The medical board is arbitrary and capricious and is destroying people's lives," says his lawyer Jeffrey Goldberg.

Goldberg said a doctor with the New York City Employee Retirement System actually approved the disability, then made an about-face and labeled him a "malingerer," a person who feigns illness to avoid work. His request was then denied.

"They had an independent medical examiner who saw me and said I was 100% disabled," Markowski said. "And then two months later he said I was a malingerer. How do you do that?"

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After Markowski sued the retirement board, Brooklyn Judge Lisa Otley ruled that the board's finding was "not based on facts."



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"The opinions and findings of the two independent doctors are not supported by credible evidence, nor rational," she wrote.

Otley's ruling means the agency has to reconsider the case. But judges don't have the power to overturn those decisions.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Martin Golden is expected to introduce a bill this month that would allow the courts to overrule medical boards in these cases, Goldberg said.

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"The bill gives the judge the ability to grant the disability pension," said Israel Miranda, president of Local 2507, the paramedics union. "It also sends a message to (the retirement system) that if they don't treat our members well, they will see their decisions overturned."

Markowski refuses to criticize the Fire Department, despite coming close to becoming homeless if not for the help of friends.

"When you have no stable income and you can't go to school, it's not easy, but luckily I had help from friends and family," he said. "Most people are in the position where they can't fight."

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Graham Rayman covers criminal justice and policing for the New York Daily News. He has won multiple journalism prizes over his 30-year career. He has previously worked at New York Newsday, Newsday, and the Village Voice. He authored a book on a police officer who became a whistleblower in Brooklyn called "The NYPD Tapes."