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Post-9/11 work still affects R.J. Lee Group

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Tim Schooley
Reporter - *Pittsburgh Business Times*
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The dust has never truly settled.

Dr. **Richard Lee**, chairman and founder of **R.J. Lee Group**, remembers September 11, 2001, as a sunny morning when he was supposed to fly to New York City for an assignment, only to have it fortuitously canceled before two hijacked planes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

Since then, Lee and his firm's role in tracing the ever-present clouds of dust that sifted out of the wreckage and into the damaged lives, community and country remains immediate in his memory as he recalls the task the company faced.

"When you looked at that cloud that morning, you didn't really think of that as anything more than dust and smoke," Lee said. "You really didn't comprehend that it was asbestos and lead and dioxins, PCBs and arsenic and mercury ..."

A little more than six months after the attacks, R.J. Lee Group, a Monroeville company that employs scientific methods and lab resources to pursue a broad variety of business pursuits, was hired by **Deutsche Bank** to come in and assess the damage caused to its 42-story office tower by the falling debris of the World Trade Center located across the street.

It would become the largest catastrophic event R.J. Lee has ever worked on, said **Casey Bunker**, now a director of marketing with the firm and then a project manager for the World Trade Center project.

Stemming from its initial assignment, R.J. Lee worked to evaluate dust in a number of buildings throughout lower Manhattan, eventually hiring more than 100 technicians in Manhattan while 250 additional staff worked in labs in Pennsylvania and Washington state to take on a research project to collect more than 100,000 samples of dust from the falling towers.

In a project that took more than three years, R.J. Lee and its team of scientists, architects, engineers, toxicologists and other specialized professionals were able to identify a chemical signature of the dust from the World Trade Center collapse. R.J. Lee's research was used in civil litigation and in the remediation programs of the Environmental Protection Agency, and helped building owners and local and federal government to understand how to move forward in clearing the damage and repair a wounded city.

Keith Rickabaw, director of analytic and materials services for R.J. Lee, remembers being among the first people in the Deutsche Bank building in April 2002, after the federal government returned it to its owner to begin the process of learning how to deal with the building.

That meant entering a building whose structural safety was yet unknown, with major damage to the building's face, and sifting through haunting personal effects such as newspapers and family photos in order to focus on the scientific task at hand.

"Like any American, we were anxious to help and assist with the evaluation of the disaster," Rickabaw said. "Once we got there, it was a lot more humbling."

Lee said the firm's work in the aftermath of the attacks has had a major impact, both good and bad. He sees traces of exhaustion from the project in his staff today.

"I think there are people that have still not recovered from a three-year, day-and-night effort," he said.

Yet, R.J. Lee's post-attacks work also led to major improvements in the process the company uses to pursue such assignments and the technology it employs, particularly in database technology and the use of personal data assistants in collecting samples.

Today, Lee estimated such a massive undertaking could be done more quickly with half to two-thirds of the staff used then.

He is quick to also recall a recent pro bono assignment of evaluating the uniform of a New York City policeman that had been kept in a plastic bag for the past 10 years to see if there's a connection between that lingering dust and the respiratory problems he's facing now.

"It brings back a lot of memories," Lee said. "The World Trade Center event isn't over."

Tim Schooley covers retail, real estate, small business, hospitality and media.
Contact him at tschooley@bizjournals.com or (412) 208-3826.