In a Tragedy, a Mission to Remember

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE


“I GREW up with this story, and I’ve always wanted to do something about it,” Ruth Sergel said. “It’s like a black hole in your heart.”

In 2004, Ms. Sergel started doing something about the story she grew up with: the Triangle Waist Company fire, which killed 146 garment workers in 1911, almost all of them Jewish and Italian immigrants. She had just read a book about the fire, to distract herself from worrying about the premiere of a short film she had directed at the Tribeca Film Festival.

At the end of the book, “Triangle: The Fire That Changed America,” was a list of names and addresses of the victims, and Ms. Sergel was moved to discover that many had lived within blocks of her apartment on East Third Street. Eager to do something about the story that had created a black hole in her heart, she hit upon what she called “the schmaltziest idea.”

On March 25, the anniversary of the fire, she and a few dozen friends put her idea into action: they divided up the names and addresses, and fanned out across the Lower East Side, the East Village and Little Italy, armed with sidewalk chalk. In front of each building where a victim had lived, they chalked a name, age and cause of death — in white, green, pink and purple, often with drawings of flowers, tombstones or a triangle. They chalked, “Pauline Horowitz, Age 19, Lived at 58 St. Marks Pl., Died March 25, 1911, Triangle Factory Fire.” And “Albina Caruso, Age 20, Lived at 21
Bowery, Died March 25, 1911, Triangle Factory Fire.”

That first year, they chalked 140 names, plus the word “unidentified” six times, in front of the old factory building, just east of Washington Square.

“After you chalk one or two names, something starts to happen,” said Ms. Sergel, 48, an artist who cobbles a living from grant to grant. “Chalking helps reveal a hidden geography of the city. If there are two victims across the street from each other, you wonder, ‘Did they walk to work together? Did their families console each other?’ The whole rest of the year you associate those buildings with that person.”

Year by year, the chalking project has multiplied, attracting mothers and daughters, teachers and schoolchildren, and, increasingly, the descendants of Triangle victims. This year, it is one of more than 100 events scheduled to commemorate the centennial of the fire. Ms. Sergel has helped organize many of the events as head of the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, which she founded in 2008.

Marjorie Ingall CHALKING Josie Ingall paid tribute in 2009 to a Triangle victim. Workers United, the union that descended from the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, is the chief sponsor of the main ceremony, which is expected to draw around 10,000 people to the former factory site on Friday. Ms. Sergel’s coalition is coordinating concerts, plays, readings, exhibitions and processions. It is urging firehouses and churches to ring their bells at 4:45 p.m. Friday, the minute the first alarm was sounded for the Triangle fire. On the coalition’s Web site, there is an interactive map of the victims’ addresses and an “open archive” where people can post photographs related to the fire.

“What’s important to us isn’t just abstract histories, but things that are grounded in the personal and the tangible,” Ms. Sergel said. “Our role is to shift from just collecting stories and broadcasting them to creating opportunities for conversation.”

The daughter of Judith Treesberg, a poet and artist, and Christopher Sergel, a playwright whose adaptations of “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “Winesburg, Ohio” were Broadway hits, Ms. Sergel grew up in Lower Manhattan. After majoring in political science at Swarthmore College, she worked as a camera assistant on several films and
then directed some shorts, including “Bruce,” about a dancer with cerebral palsy, and “Belle,” about an 86-year-old retiree. In 2008, she earned a master’s degree in interactive media from New York University. Last fall, she married a Swiss dramaturge she met at a dance technology center.

As a teenager, Ms. Sergel read a book about the Triangle fire, but she says she still does not quite understand her fascination with the fire or with what she calls “communal memory.” Perhaps it was that her stepfather, Nathan Farb, was a photographer, forever capturing images of the past. Or maybe it stems from growing up a block away from Washington Market, the city’s main produce market until it was demolished in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center. Now, of course, both the market and the towers that replaced it are left to communal memory.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Ms. Sergel helped the photographer Gilles Peress and others compile a collection of images for an exhibition and a book. Then came “Voices of 9/11,” in which she recorded 550 family members and survivors telling their memories of that day.

James Estrin/The New York Times The view from the ninth floor of the former Triangle building.

“It’s not meant for theater,” she said. “It’s not a film. It’s a people’s archive.”

Ms. Sergel has dwelled deeply on the parallels between the Triangle fire and 9/11. “The truth is that so much of it is absolutely arbitrary about who survived and who didn’t,” she said. “So much depended on which floor you were on. Especially in Tower One, if you were above a certain floor, you were not going to get out. If you were below, you were going to get out.

“In the Triangle fire, if you were on the eighth floor or 10th floor, most were able to get out. If you were on the ninth floor, you were often stuck.”

The factory fire, started by a cigarette, began on the eighth floor. Most workers there escaped by the stairs, and those on the 10th ran to the roof after being alerted by someone on the eighth. But the workers on the ninth floor did not receive an alert, and when the fire roared onto their floor, many were trapped by a locked exit door, a fire escape that collapsed and an elevator that broke down after several people jumped
down the shaft. Desperate to escape the flames, many on the ninth floor leaped to their
deaths. The Fire Department’s tallest ladders reached only the sixth floor, and the
factory did not have automatic sprinklers, even though they were available at the time.

Ms. Sergel’s coalition has grown from half a dozen historians, artists and
preservationists to more than 200 individuals and organizations. It has a budget of
$60,000, including a $30,000 grant from a foundation connected to the garment
workers’ union. “When I told her she had won it, she was in a grocery store,” recalled
May Chen, a retired garment workers’ official who nominated Ms. Sergel’s group for
the grant. “She told me, ‘I can finally afford to buy the food I need.’”

Ms. Sergel is intense, earnest and culturally enterprising. In her current role, in
addition to connecting artists, educators, union workers and city officials on Triangle-
related matters, she is forever updating the coalition’s Web site and posting items on
Facebook and Twitter, like this tidbit last month, “Please check out this beautiful piece
by Eileen Nevitt, granddaughter of Annie Sprinsock, who survived the fire.”

“Ruth sometimes describes herself as the Facebook of the Triangle centennial,” said
Sherry Kane, a Workers United official who is helping to plan the commemoration.
“She thought she’d do a few little Facebook things, but it became a 24-hour-a-day job.”

Eric Michael Johnson for The New York Times

Ruth Sergel with a map of the victims’ addresses.

While Workers United sponsors ceremony every year on the anniversary, Ms. Sergel
“has broadened it to the art world and to young people,” Ms. Chen said. “I was moved
by her asking, ‘Why did this particular incident of workers dying spark the
imagination?’”

Annie Lanzillotto, a self-described rock poet who has participated in the chalking
commemoration for the past four years, recalled once encountering several immigrant
workers on a break outside a Chinese restaurant.

“They were sitting on the stoop out front, and I asked them to move their feet,” said
Ms. Lanzillotto, 47, of Yonkers. “They asked me what I was doing, and I told them
what happened here 100 years ago. A 16-year-old girl, Rosie Grasso, who used to live
here, had died in a fire. It really registered with them.
“You’re making the history and the dead of New York visible for the living.”

Historians generally see the fire as a watershed event because it led to far-reaching changes in factory regulations on safety. The victims’ cause has been embraced by many groups, including Jews, Italians, unions, feminists and immigrant advocates. One of Ms. Sergel’s favorite quotations comes from Gabriel García Márquez: “Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.” Certainly, she said, the Triangle fire was colossally sad. But the huge protests and push for change that followed it were, she said, “invigorating.”

“In the wake of tragedies like Triangle or 9/11, my sense is there are actually quite wonderful things that come out and radiate from that,” she said. “There’s an immediate dropping of day-to-day falseness. You become much more compassionate and humane toward each other in those moments.

“It’s incumbent upon us if we’re going to commemorate the fire,” she added, “to commemorate the spirit of action that grew out of the fire.”

This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

**Correction: March 20, 2011**

*An earlier version of this blog post contained a misspelled photo credit. The photographer is Marjorie Ingall, not Marjori.*