

THE INTERVIEW

WITH CHARLES J. MAIKISH

A Career That Revolves Around the Trade Center

By TERI KARUSH ROGERS

LESS than a year after Charles J. Maikish helped to guide J.P. Morgan Chase through the aftermath of Sept. 11, the firm held its annual disaster recovery drill.

The practice situation involved a hurricane striking New York City and submerging Lower Manhattan in 20 feet of water. Knowing the strength of Mr. Maikish's personality, the consultants running the drill killed off the executive vice president for real estate business services — Mr. Maikish's job — within the first five minutes (he was struck by a car on Park Avenue) just to see how his staff could function without him.

"I was sitting there biting my tongue," recalled Mr. Maikish, who was picked earlier this year to oversee rebuilding throughout Lower Manhattan. In the crisis simulation, the strain of keeping his mouth shut became more than he could bear.

When Mr. Maikish blurted out a suggestion to a team member, he recalled, "the moderator said: 'You're not supposed to be talking. You're dead.' I said, 'This is a séance.'"

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a minor inconvenience like his own demise derailing the Bronx-raised Mr. Maikish, 59, whose official title these days is executive director of the brand new Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center, a position created late last year by Gov. George E. Pataki and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg.

Mr. Maikish's mission is to coordinate the approximately \$20 billion transformation of a square mile of real estate below Canal Street over the next three to five years.

He and his staff of eight occupy a worn-looking suite of offices in a high-rise opposite the World Trade Center construction site. The number of workers will soon swell to 30, including representatives from government agencies involved in the construction, as they prepare to coordinate more than 20 projects starting in the next six months.

For Mr. Maikish, this new position completes a loop of jobs that began in 1968, when he was a young engineer working for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey on the construction of the original World

Trade Center. He remained with the agency for the next 27 years, first as an engineer; then, after earning his law degree at night, as a lawyer; and later as the director of ferry transportation.

Eventually, he was put in charge of the World Trade Center itself — a year before the 1993 bombing that virtually destroyed the towers' underground infrastructure.

It was a seminal moment for Mr. Maikish personally — he lost four colleagues — and professionally.

"It was an incredible task that we had at that time; he was everywhere," said William H. Goldstein, the former deputy executive director for capital programs at the Port Authority. "He had the same suit on four days later. We declared him an environmental hazard."

Mr. Maikish managed the recovery and acted as the public face of the trade center. Afterward, he overhauled evacuation procedures, paying special attention, for instance, to stairwell lighting and safety drills. (He noted that in 1993, it took four to five hours to evacuate the buildings using the stairwells; on Sept. 11, he said, it took 40 minutes to evacuate the portions of the buildings below the strike lines, even though the exodus was not easy.)

Mr. Maikish also continued to manage a \$750 million capital reinvestment program to modernize the trade center and to increase its sagging occupancy rates. By the time he left the Port Authority in 1996 for a job in the private sector, occupancy rates had climbed to 96 percent from 79 percent.

At J.P. Morgan Chase, he consolidated the firm's physical operations as they expanded as a result of several major acquisitions.

"What I enjoy most is transforming something," Mr. Maikish said. "All those acquisitions required that those businesses be absorbed and integrated within the firm both physically and programmatically, and that was exciting."

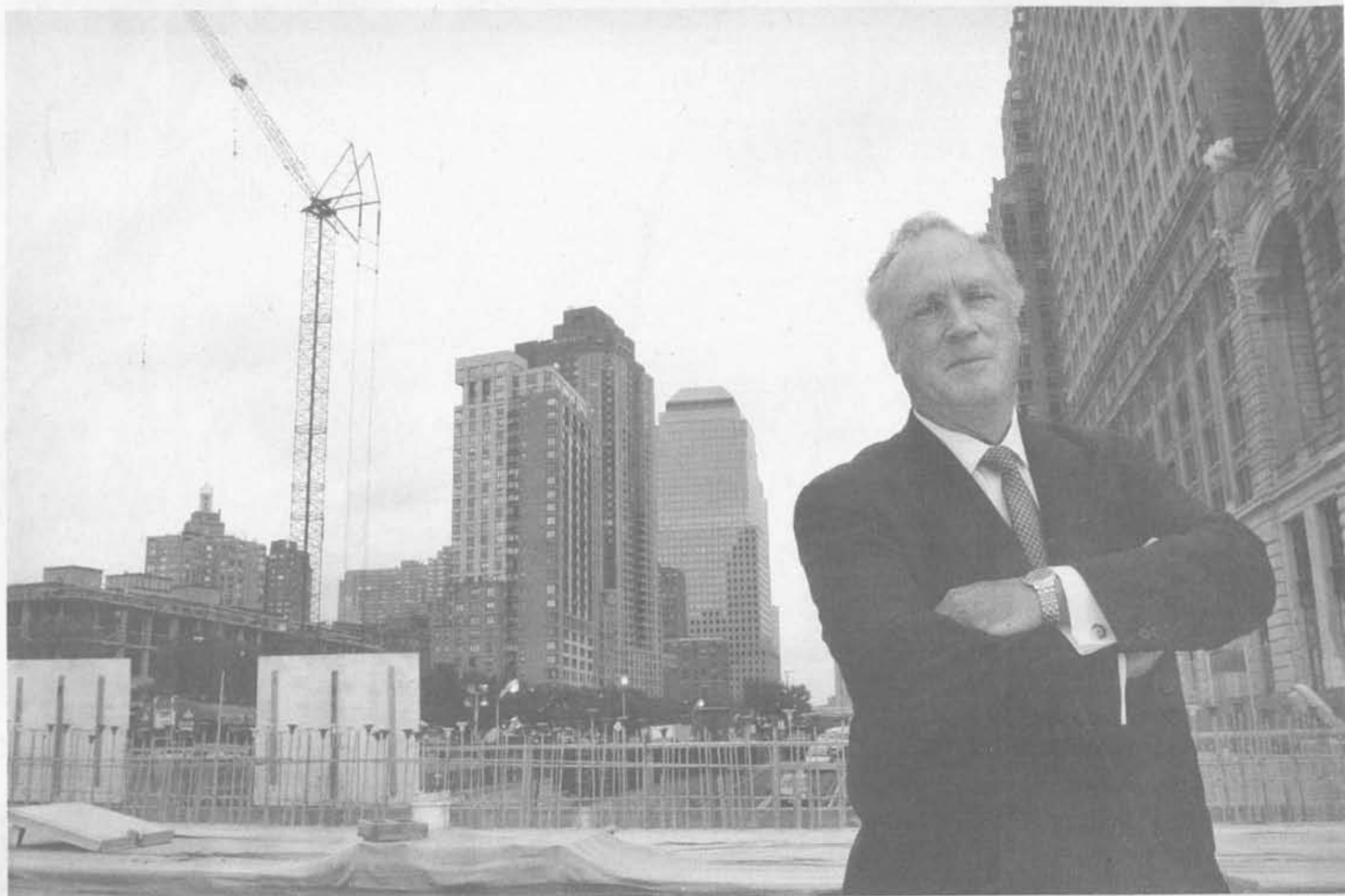
He would eventually manage 1,400 full-time employees and 3,000 contract workers in 60 countries and oversee a \$2.2 billion budget. His compensation was far more than the \$200,000 salary he now earns in the Lower Manhattan construction post.

Then came Sept. 11.

From Chase's offices on Park Avenue at

More than 20 projects are expected to start in Lower Manhattan in the next six months.

SQUARE FEET



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Charles J. Maikish, executive director of the Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center, will coordinate the transformation of a square mile of real estate below Canal Street over the next few years. The projects will have a total cost of about \$20 billion.

47th Street in Midtown, he watched the second plane strike. He grieved along with the rest of city, while attending to the needs of Chase's 14,000 employees in 12 downtown sites. But it was difficult to stay away from the trade center.

"It's sort of that feeling — your baby's hurt, you've got to get down there. It was hard. It really was," he recalled. "I knew the staff. It was essentially the same staff that was there in '93."

Many didn't survive. "There were over 100 people I knew who were killed in the trade center," he said evenly, his back to the window that gives glimpses onto the northeast corner of the site. Forty-eight of them were Port Authority employees. "There were a host of memorial services and funerals to go to," he said. "I went to four or five a week from October to January, and January first, I said I can't do this anymore, so I just stopped."

Through his volunteer work — he is a founding member of the Alliance for Downtown New York and has been pushing a turnaround effort since before the 1993 bombing — he remained involved with the future of downtown and familiar with its players. People started noticing how qualified Mr. Maikish appeared to be to coordi-

nate the reconstruction effort.

"We knew we had to find somebody who could establish credibility immediately," said Deputy Mayor Daniel L. Doctoroff. "Charlie brings it to the table right away, particularly given his history with the Port Authority and Lower Manhattan's business community. He was really the obvious choice."

THE governor's office agreed. "He's obviously bright; he knows the construction business, but he listens very, very well, and when he makes a recommendation, people know he's not coming from a particular agenda," said John K. Cahill, chief of staff for Governor Pataki.

The governor appointed Mr. Cahill in May to lead the overall planning of the downtown rebuilding effort while Mr. Maikish is coordinating the day-to-day construction.

Mr. Maikish describes his style as "collaborative decisiveness." But in addition to having an ability to cut through chaos, he is also said to have a reflective streak.

Nearly four decades ago, after earning an associate's degree in civil engineering at Manhattan College in the Bronx, he enrolled in a seminary and studied for the priesthood but switched to philosophy. Being a priest,

he realized, "is about being able to tolerate solitude, and that's difficult and not something I had anticipated."

(Still, this man who spends all day talking to people acknowledged being an introvert: "It means that basically people drain the energy out of you," he said, whereas "extroverts actually take energy from people." As an introvert, he said, "you really have to work at having a public face.")

Mr. Maikish keeps his office nearly as barren as ground zero: aside from standard-issue office furniture, it contains a collection of three hard hats — one from his original tour of duty helping to construct the World Trade Center — a map of Lower Manhattan annotated with construction projects, and a black and white photograph of his 22-year-old mustachioed self among a group of trade center construction workers in 1968.

Mr. Maikish, who is married and has three adult children, owns homes in Battery Park City and in the Rockland County town of New City. He acknowledged that "absent this opportunity I probably would have stayed at Chase, in the corporate world." Nonetheless, he relishes the chance to assist in the birth of "a whole new community from whole cloth." □