

Workers go to Gulf

■ Calverton company gives oil cleanup training

■ Recruits learn about toxic materials, alligators

BY JENNIFER SMITH

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Rob Zickmund is a deckhand from Rocky Point with a lobsterman's sunbeaten skin.

Dana Rauch of West Islip is a petite third mate fresh out of SUNY Maritime College.

Rob Walsh is a carpenter and young father from Shirley looking for some extra cash.

None know much about catastrophic oil spills. But they're eager for work, and this week they will arrive in Pascagoula, Miss., fresh recruits of a Calverton cleanup company sent to join thousands now responding to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"It's going to be hard, dirty work. But you can make a lot of money," said Tony Pepitone, a safety instructor with their employer, Miller Environmental Group. "You may be on the beach raking up tar balls. You may be on a boat pulling boom. It all depends on what they need for that day."

By tomorrow, the Calverton company will have sent 425 workers to the Gulf, said president Mark Miller. About 65 of them are from Long Island; more are likely to follow.

"This spill is not going to be over in weeks and months," Miller said. "This here is the spill that keeps on spilling."

Last week workers prepping for deployment sat through a two-day hazardous-materials training course at the firm's Calverton offices. Some, employees of Miller Environmental or its sister company, Miller Marine Services, needed a course to update their safety credentials. Others were temps, recruited through shipyard contacts and online postings that promised \$12 an hour, training

and overtime for two-week cleanup stints. The company will put them up, provide some meals and a per diem.

"I've got a 16-month-old son," said Walsh, 28, who heard about the position from a boss on a carpentry job. "They said I'd be working seven days a week, with overtime on Sundays."

The students arrived at 7 a.m. to go over basic safety measures for hazardous materials, and also some perils unique to the job in the Gulf.

Among them: trench foot, sunstroke, drowning, chiggers and mosquitoes. Long-term exposure to crude oil can cause respiratory and skin problems. Most common, Pepitone said, are the falls and muscle strains that come with heavy lifting and operating big machinery.

Then there are dangers specific to the Gulf's steamy bayous — black widows, rattlesnakes and, of course, alligators. "Watch yourself in small creeks," Pepitone warned. "They can do about 30 miles per hour for a short distance."

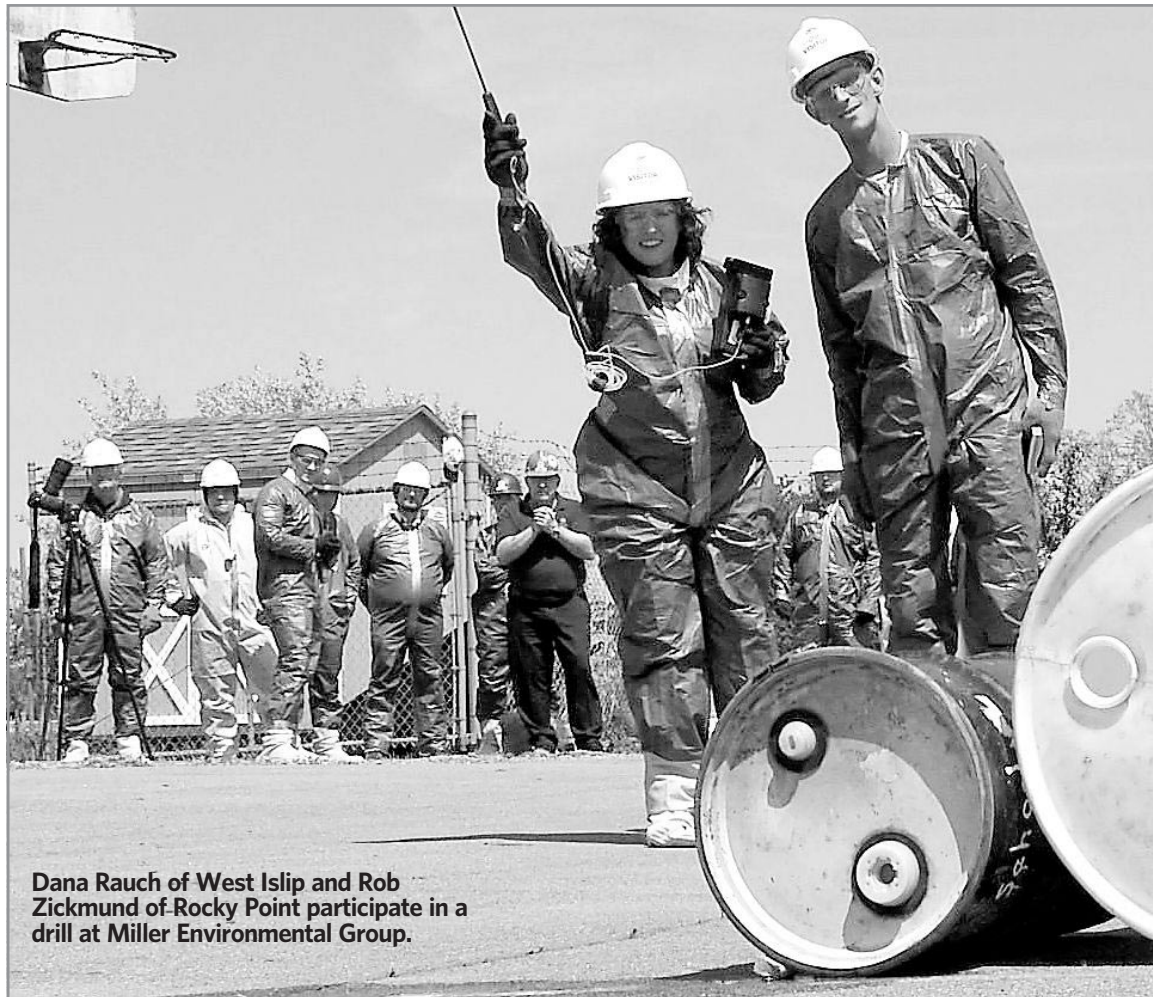
Most students seemed unfazed. Work was work, they said, and for some there hadn't been enough of it lately. Many were fine with heading to the Gulf for weeks or even months. "I've been traveling most of my life," said Dan Lehman, 64, a former ironworker and merchant marine from East Quogue.

Rauch, 26, who had been looking for shipping jobs, was already packed. "For this, I'll do whatever they need me to do," she said.

Others, such as Doug Klein, seemed less than enthusiastic about leaving their families for weeks to work the humid, oily shores. "It could be like Vietnam down there," joked Klein, a deckhand from Medford.

Workers with marine experience might end up on boats in the midst of the slick. Others could hose off oily bulkheads with scalding water from pressure washers called "hotsies."

Some will probably be in the



Dana Rauch of West Islip and Rob Zickmund of Rocky Point participate in a drill at Miller Environmental Group.

CLEANING UP THE SPILL



Miller Environmental safety instructor Tony Pepitone teaches a hazardous-materials class last week.

AT SEA: From boats offshore as long as 220 feet, workers lay down lengths of flexible containment material called boom to corral patches of the spill. The oil is skimmed off the water and stored onboard. Closer to shore, workers in smaller boats place sections of boom to protect barrier beaches and marshland. Long rolls of absorbent material may also be placed on the water to soak up more oil.

ON LAND: Cleanup workers rake tar balls out of the water and onto land for disposal. Others rake the sand, turning up older fragments from past spills. Birds and other wildlife contaminated by the oil are gently washed with liquid detergent to remove the crude.

UPRIVER: Moving upriver, workers look for signs of oil and lay down more protective boom. They may hose off contaminated bulkheads or boat hulls.

kitchen, cooking for the workers who have descended on the Gulf. Others could unload pallets laden with thousands of feet of boom, the floating barrier used to cordon off oil.

Miller and Pepitone urged workers to be careful. "People have been killed on oil spills," Miller said. "There's a lot of risk out there."

The company has blanket insurance coverage for teams deployed to the Gulf in case they

get hurt, Pepitone said.

Hard hats, safety glasses and steel-toed shoes would be required. The class members also donned jumpsuits made of Tyvek, a water-resistant material that protects from contact with oil and chemicals. Pepitone showed them how to seal gaps with duct tape.

"Don't ride on a barge taped up," Pepitone said. "You'll sink like an anchor when the suit fills with water."

Pepitone also dispensed salty but fatherly advice on dangers not covered by worker safety regulations. Don't bring a knife, and stay out of fights. Booze it up, and the hangovers will be hell — especially if on a beach for 12 hours in a Tyvek suit.

"Stay out of the gin mills. Stay out of the strip clubs," Pepitone said. "Environmental companies are always hiring. They'll give you money — if you work."