Alumni

Trial and Error

Julie Menin's battle to keep a 9/11 prosecution out of Lower Manhattan.

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Julie Menin (Jenica Miller)

On a cold and drizzly night in February, tempers flare at a meeting of the New York City Community Board representing Lower Manhattan. More than 60 people have jammed into the drab gray commons room of a Beekman Street apartment building:

Some sit on folding chairs, others stand, and all lash out at plans to hold the 9/11 terrorism trial of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in their neighborhood. Although the group voted unanimously at an earlier meeting for a resolution opposing Attorney General Eric Holder's decision, new divisions are emerging: "I want that trial held in federal court!" says one member, drawing fi re from another sitting behind him, who snaps, "It belongs in a military tribunal!" The room fi lls with shouts until a trim, dark-haired woman raises her voice.

"We're losing our focus," says Julie Menin '89CC, the chairperson, standing up from her seat at a long table in front of the group. "We want this trial moved, *period*." The crowd quiets down. "We don't want to get sidetracked with what kind of trial it should be. We didn't get this far by being divisive." Community Board 1 moves on to another issue and Menin takes her seat, scribbling notes on a legal pad and whispering to several colleagues sitting next to her.

In the coming weeks the dispute between New York City and the Justice Department over the site of the terrorism case continues without resolution, and the dustup at the community board, a citizens advisory group, is quickly forgotten. But Menin's name would keep coming up in discussions of the 9/11 trial.

As she sits at a desk in her business office, in a sleek high-rise on Wall Street, Julie Menin gazes out of a 25th-story window at a commanding view of Lower Manhattan. She's making the case for moving the venue out of New York, and points several times to the busy, congested streets below, less than four blocks from Ground Zero. Holding the trial here would be "absolutely crazy," she says. "I can't believe federal officials would do this when there were estimates we'd need more than 2000 police checkpoints in the area for security. The trial could take years and cost a billion dollars. It's an absurd idea."

New Yorkers have come to share her anger over the decision, which Holder '73CC, '76LAW announced last November, to have those "responsible for the attacks of September the 11th . . . answer for their alleged crimes in a courthouse just blocks from where the twin towers once stood." Menin, who is 42 and has lived and worked in the area for 12 years, was the first to oppose it publicly. "I decided I would speak out because no one else was," she says, sorting through a stack of papers and ignoring a ringing telephone. "I feel a deep sense of connection to this community because it has already been attacked by terrorists twice. And now, once again, we're being threatened." She flashes a broad, engaging smile, and offers her own opinion

on the controversy, talking in the smooth cadences and elaborate paragraphs of a trial attorney.

“The trial absolutely should be in a federal civilian court,” Menin says. “Let’s go back and look at the history of this. Hundreds of terrorists have been successfully prosecuted in federal courts as opposed to a military tribunal. The problem with military tribunals is that the Supreme Court knocked down the first iteration of these panels that the Bush administration created shortly after the 9/11 attacks. They have not been challenged in their new, reconstituted form. My concern, as someone who represents the Lower Manhattan area, is that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed be brought to justice. That’s something everybody wants, whether they’re Democrats or Republicans. If we reached a point where the Supreme Court once again knocked down the decision of a military tribunal, it would be disastrous. Nobody wants that to happen.”

On January 16, she wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, suggesting that the case be moved to Governors Island, in the East River off of Lower Manhattan. The disruption to the city would be far less, she argued, and the trial still could be held in a civilian setting. Her article offered a solution instead of a complaint. “All of a sudden I got calls from friends at the Justice Department, the Senate Judiciary Committee, from civic groups and real estategroups,” she says. “We were rolling.” Then she hit a roadblock. When Menin met with New York mayor Michael Bloomberg several days later, he said he was planning to build a school and recreation facilities on Governors Island. It was not available.

She countered with three more sites where a trial might be held in New York’s Southern District: West Point, Otisville Prison, and Stewart Air National Guard Base. Bloomberg said they were all reasonable ideas, and when he announced his opposition to the Manhattan site several days later, other local politicians began lining up against it. Menin’s already busy life became even more hectic. She met with elected officials in Washington and New York, with real estate, business, and community groups; she discussed the case with newspaper editorial boards, spoke out on TV talk shows, and wrote articles for the Huffington Post and other online sites. Less than two weeks after Menin’s op-ed appeared, a high-level Obama aide indicated that the administration was looking at other options. Although an alternate site has not been announced, and Holder has not eliminated New York as a possibility, many political observers now believe that option has been taken off the table.

“Julie has shown great loyalty to the people of Lower Manhattan,” says Jane Rosenthal, cofounder of the Tribeca Film Festival and another influential neighborhood leader. “She has roots here, and she’s been fighting for us all along.”



At an April 2010 press conference convened by New York City Council speaker Christine Quinn, Julie Menin calls for the creation of a public food market in the South Street Seaport. (Jenica Miller)

Born in Washington, D.C., Menin has been interested in politics since she was 10. She grew up in the Watergate apartment complex and remembers long discussions with her parents about the Sunday-morning political talk shows. When she enrolled at Columbia in 1985, she was carrying on a family tradition: her father is Robert Jacobs ’57CC, a radiologist, and her mother is Agnes Jacobs ’65BC, a painter. After graduating magna cum laude in political science, she went to law school at Northwestern and returned east to work as a regulatory lawyer in Washington. She later took a post as senior regulatory attorney with Colgate-Palmolive in New York. By 1999, she had met her future husband, Bruce, who runs a real-estate development company, and was eager to start her own business.

“I loved to cook and I loved food, so I decided to open a restaurant in the financial district,” she says. Vine, a brightly decorated bistro with continental fare, was

chiseled out of an old bank vault and offered an alternative to the dark, woodpaneled steakhouses dotting the Wall Street area. “It was hard work,” she recalls. “But it was my baby. It was great.” Shortly after its opening in 2000, Vine was given the highest rating for a new restaurant in New York City by the Zagat guide. Menin was in her apartment above Vine on the morning of September 11, 2001. Minutes after the planes hit the World Trade Center, she ran out into the street with neighbors. “The air was filled with paper, thousands of pieces of paper, fluttering down from the sky,” she recalls. “And there was a gray, noxious-smelling smoke. You couldn’t even see inches in front of you. We ran back into the lobby, because we were having trouble breathing. We all wondered: Should we stay? Should we go somewhere else? Thank God my kids hadn’t been born yet.”

Beyond the tragic loss of life, much of Lower Manhattan was also physically and economically devastated. Vine’s windows were blown out, and the interior of the 12,000-square-foot restaurant was coated with dust. Outside, the neighborhood was paralyzed: Cars couldn’t get past checkpoints, pedestrians had all but vanished, and the air had a choking, acrid smell. Vine reopened six days after the attacks because Menin, joining with other local merchants, wanted to get the community back on its feet. “We had no deliveries, no food,” she says. “We cooked pasta in the pantry and we went from having 150 people for lunch to having 3 people. Everyone in the area was facing huge problems.”

Foremost was the question of insurance. Even though insurance companies took out large ads in newspapers pledging support for New Yorkers who suffered financial losses in the attacks, Menin and other business owners had a diffi cult time getting their claims filed. When she sought help from her carrier, she was told that since the restaurant had reopened on September 17, 2001, she would be paid only for a six-day service interruption. “What they did to me and others was despicable,” Menin says. “I represented myself, sitting across a table from five insurance company lawyers, and negotiated my own settlement. But how many other people could do that?” As Lower Manhattan struggled to get off its knees, she hit on the idea of forming a coalition of business leaders, politicians, and advertising agencies to economically revitalize the area. Wall Street Rising, which she founded in 2001, grew to include more than 30,000 members. The group raised $12 million toward revitalization of the business community in Lower Manhattan after the attacks, using the funds to stage and promote numerous Lower Manhattan events, including arts performances, museum gatherings, and neighborhood festivals. The group also

sponsored “Do It Downtown” campaigns that attracted generous media coverage and brought thousands of tourists and residents back to the area.

“When you see the neighborhood you live in completely decimated, you have a sense of duty to give back whatever you can,” Menin says, brushing a shock of dark brown hair out of her eyes. She swivels in an office chair and once again looks out the window toward Ground Zero. “I had never done anything like this before, but I’m an organizer, and I like to work hard. I didn’t find it daunting to tackle new issues. This was something that took over my life.”

The turning point came in 2004, when Menin was appointed to Community Board 1 by former Manhattan Borough president C. Virginia Fields. (Vine closed that same year, when the building in which it was located was sold.) Menin was elected chairwoman in 2005 and has been reelected twice to lead the advisory group. Although its 50 members are volunteers, the board has a small staff of city employees. Most community boards deal with zoning and traffic issues, and they usually don’t generate front-page news. But Menin’s panel has wrestled with problems generated by terrorism, and her visibility grew as she spoke out. She appeared on cable TV talk shows and was asked last year to host her own. *Julie Menin’s Give and Take*, a weekly halfhour show, has featured interviews with former U.S. Homeland Security secretary Tom Ridge, conservative author Ann Coulter, Manhattan Borough president Scott Stringer, New York City comptroller John Liu, and former New York governor George Pataki. The program airs on NBC’s 24-hour cable channel, New York Non-Stop.

As her star rises, the question is inevitable: Will she seek public office? Menin answers cautiously on an afternoon when she’s racing to a downtown meeting in Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver’s offi ce about school overcrowding. It all depends on the job, the timing, and the obligations to her family, she says (Menin has three young boys). “Julie took a very sophisticated and courageous position on the trials and showed a talent for seizing the right moment in a public debate,” says New York representative Jerrold Nadler ’69CC, who represents Lower Manhattan. He predicts that Menin has “an extremely bright future” in electoral politics if she wants it.

After the meeting, Menin brings up the subject again. “It’s important to have serious people in public offi ce,” she says, ticking off a list of local problems. “Ever since 9/11 we all realize how fl eeting life can be. And I greatly enjoy public service,” she adds, making her way home on crowded sidewalks as twilight falls on City Hall

across the street. “What the future holds remains to be seen.”

She expands her sights in the weeks ahead. The pace of rebuilding at Ground Zero is too slow, Menin tells her board, and “we need one party in charge, the city or the state. Right now we have too many players and we’re living with the consequences of what they’re not doing.”

In an op-ed piece for the *Daily News*, she argues that millions in unused transit funds should go toward construction of a performing arts center in Lower Manhattan. Congress hasn’t implemented all of the antiterror recommendations made by the U.S. Commission on 9/11, and New York politicians must pressure them to do so. “Here we are in the prime terror target in the country,” she says. “It’s ridiculous.”

But the trial of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed dominates all other concerns. Holder continues to send mixed signals, and until he categorically rules out New York City as a site, Menin remains on the case. “This backtracking is unacceptable,” she tells her board. “I feel right now as if we’re on the one-yard line, so it’s no time to relax. I’m going to be fi ghting against this until we win. Trust me, I’ll be working night and day.”

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