



'Field of Honor' ceremony touches city

By Stuart Deane
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Newburyport — Even as the first flags started to go up, curious passers-by began to stop in wonder. "What's going on here?"

The Exchange Club of Greater Newburyport was erecting a "Field of Honor" in recognition of those who perished in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, as well as those who have served as firefighters, police, emergency response personnel, or the military.

By the end of the day, Sept. 10, 400 flags covered the east end of the Bartlet Mall, waving smartly in a stiff breeze. Little children, in their innocence, raced up and down the rows in excitement, while adults paused to read the name tags on flag poles dedicated by those who chose to honor a loved one.

The next morning, on the ninth anniversary of the terrorist attack, Exchange Club President Ben Iacono welcomed guests to a 10 a.m. public ceremony, kicked off by an appearance of the Essex County Sheriff's Department Honor Guard, a prayer by event chair Kathleen Bailey, a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, and a rendition of the Star Spangled Banner by soloist Amy Maranville of the Newburyport Pentecostal Assembly Church.

U.S. Congressman John Tierney of Salem, commented, "Thank you Kathleen Bailey for making this event happen. Today is a day much like that day of nine years ago. Ever since, we've faced some real challenges. We remember all those who were impacted, including the workers who did all that they could under very trying circumstances. We remember all the people who died and their families. We remember the servicemen and women who are now defending our country. We mark this as a day of national service. Today we come together as a community. We make sure that this country stands strong. Thank you, Exchange Club, for giving us this opportunity."

Thank you for putting on such a wonderful event in Newburyport," agreed Essex County Sheriff Frank Cousins. "We all know someone who has perished or has served. Today we recognize those who have sacrificed. Let us not forget."

This took a big commitment of your time and your finances," said attending New England District Exchange Club President Cindy Harb of Plaistow, N.H. "The New England District could not be prouder of the Newburyport club."

In attendance from other Exchange Clubs were Past National President Bob Harb of Haverhill, Regional Vice President and Past District President Ferdi Baez of Lowell, Past District President Bob Wescott of Lawrence, Division Director Karen Newsham of Clinton, Division Director Corrine Corso of the Haverhill Breakfast club, plus District President-Elect Eric LaFleur and Immediate Past Club President Karen Currier of Haverhill.

"I was honored that the Exchange Club asked me to join," said Bailey. "I thank all the members for their support. When I first saw a proposal for this project, I thought, 'Oh, my gosh, this should be in Newburyport.' The project just grabbed me. Thank you, Exchange Club. Special thanks to Richie Eaton of the Newburyport Five Cents Savings Bank who gave us the financial support to get us started. And thank you to all of you who have purchased a flag. Your support has been awesome."

"Thank you Exchange Club for sharing this event," said Kevin Hunt, director of Veterans Affairs for the city. "We began our sharing nine years ago. We shared in our disbelief. 'What just happened here?' In the nine years since, we've come to see that we have enemies. Can we be inspired? Can we take something from those deaths? The message may be, 'Look forward – with hope and optimism.' It may be an old hippie adage, but, 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life.'"

"Just beautiful!" said an emotional Mayor Donna Holaday. "It's hard to find the words to thank those who have sacrificed. First responders often make the difference in who lives and who dies with their raw courage, duty, and sacrifice. These are ordinary heroes who live just down the street. I feel us coming together today to honor those who have sacrificed. John F. Kennedy said in 1960, 'Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.' As we leave here today, let us walk softly through this 'Field of Honor' and take home new dedication, patience, tolerance, and love."

Then, as a solo bagpiper played in the distance, a succession of readers created a "Verbal Wall" of names of each and every flag designee – from the Civil War to World War I and World War II to Korea to Vietnam to the specific attack on the World Trade Center to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Such as, "Jon Randall. Died in the Towers."

"Christine Olson, Flight 11, 9/11 Victim."

"Stephen N. Fortunato, killed in action, Afghanistan, 10/14/2008. U.S. Army. Land of the free because of the brave. Forever in our hearts."

"1st Lt. Derek Hines."

"Sgt. Jordan Shay."

And, "Thomas N. Pecorelli."

Throughout the day, people browsed through the field, most experimenting with different angles to take photographs. In the evening, as the sun set over the Mall, the sea of flags was illuminated into the night as the Newburyport Fire Department flipped the switch on a bank of floodlights. Even in the subdued light, people continued to come, as they did in ensuing days.

Said Bailey, "I am thrilled, overjoyed. This is much more than I ever expected. To get the overwhelming support from the community is all I could ever have asked for."

"Kathleen did an outstanding job in organizing the entire event," said Iacono. "I know she had just a few hours of sleep last night. The program was very well thought out, planned, and organized. Kathleen did a wonderful job getting the support structure put together – the Exchange Club members, the sponsors, the speakers... This was certainly an event never done before in the city. I know it was appreciated by those who stopped to talk with us. Newburyport can be proud of what we did."

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