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Flag display to recall 9/11 anniversary

By Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

A history lesson like none other will begin the new year at St. Mary Our Mother School in Horseheads.

As many as 2,000 flags are expected to adorn St. Mary Our Mother's school/church campus in a stirring 10th-anniversary commemoration of the terrorist attacks on the United States. An opening ceremony is scheduled for Sept. 9 at 6 p.m., and the names of all 9/11 victims will be read on the anniversary two days later.

Flags standing 8 feet tall will be erected by volunteers and remain in rows all weekend. The flags can be purchased for \$35 each, with sponsorships available as well. Carol Gough, chair of the local project, said orders will be taken until all the flags are sold. A flag can commemorate a loved one or a victim of the attacks, and the purchaser may keep the flag after the weekend is over (flags can be mailed to those living out of town.) For details, visit www.healingfield.org/horseheads or call St. Mary Our Mother School at 607-739-9157 or Gough at 607-731-9570.

The flag display is part of a national project, The Healing Field, which recalls victims and heroes from 9/11. Gough said she first learned of the initiative when St. Joseph School in her native Auburn staged a Healing Field on Memorial Day weekend in 2010.

Marilyn Zinn, St. Mary Our Mother School's principal, noted that support has already come in from individual and corporate sponsors as well as such groups as Boy Scouts of America, Knights of Columbus, American Red Cross and several veterans' organizations. Funds raised will be given back to many of those organizations.

"It's very rapidly becoming a community event," Zinn said.

Proceeds also will aid a renovation project for the St. Mary Our Mother school playground. Zinn said the playground is an important site because it's used regularly by the public as well as St. Mary Our Mother youths -- but the 25-year-old facility is "an old wooden structure which has seen its better day," she acknowledged. Gough said the Healing Field will mark the last big push for a yearlong fundraising effort by parents and students toward the \$120,000 playground project, which is expected to be completed by this fall.

Although fundraising is a key component of the Healing Field, Zinn emphasized that "the biggest intent for our children to understand (9/11) a little better" while also gaining awareness about the many other people who have lost their lives in wars and conflicts.

"It's a sad part of our history, but it's a part of our history," Zinn said of 9/11, which resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths.

Healing Field proceedings will commence just two days after classes begin for the 2011-12 school year. Zinn recalled that on Sept. 11, 2001, she was just starting her first year as St. Mary Our Mother's principal when reports of the terrorist attacks reached the school. She said that because of the ages of the students, she decided to play down the news and make the day as normal as possible.

"You just sort of put this hat on, you do what you need to do," Zinn said.

Meanwhile, Gough recalled that she was feeding her 9-month-old son on that Tuesday morning when she saw the first television reports of the four airplane attacks on New York City, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania.

Zinn said that in the ensuing days, "it was eerie" not hearing any air traffic while airports were shut down for security reasons.

"I just remember the next couple of days going out to the grocery store, and no one was chatting or laughing," added Gough, the mother of three current St. Mary Our Mother students. "It was the fear of what was going to happen next."

Gough said things have never really been the same since, especially since the destroyed World Trade Center buildings were only four hours from Horseheads and many area residents are linked to New York City through work, family or friends.

"Will it happen again? It certainly can," she said. "I think people still step with trepidation. With international travel you kind of look behind your back, you're never sure."

However, Gough wishes to dwell on the positive aspects that came out of 9/11 while the Healing Field event is going on.

"I think it's going to be bittersweet. It will be a sense of great accomplishment to get the community together again," she said, observing that people have largely settled back into their routines and could stand a reminder of how they bonded together in tragedy.

"There were no rivalries, no racism. We were all one, we were all united. A lot of people came back to church during that time, too," she observed. "I'm going to be thinking about what we felt, how we all banded together for the greater good."

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