



Daughter remembers mother's connection to Sept. 11 victims at Healing Field

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By



Enlarge

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Tom, Beverly, and Alan Combs bow their heads during the Pledge of Allegiance Saturday afternoon at the Healing Field program at Cannonsburg. 'A Salute to Heroes' program was to honor rescue personnel and first responders. The community came out and supported local West Michigan first responders as well as fire and police safety units for their service to our communities. (Katy Batdorff | The Grand Rapids Press)

A Salute to Heroes gallery (15 photos)

BELMONT -- The **West Michigan Healing Field** is dedicated to first responders and Sept. 11 victims, as are Karen and Ken Aldrich.

But the Grand Rapids couple on Saturday looked out over the 3,200 flags mapped across the Cannonsburg Ski Area and thought about one person who reached out to help after the attacks.

Karen, 63, sponsored a flag in honor of her mother, Mary Jane Czerwinski, who passed away earlier this summer at the age of 94.

In the swell of patriotism and love that followed the attacks, Karen and her mother had a special experience on a National Relief Network trip they took to New York just months after the attacks.

They heard about the trip in a Press article and Mary Jane, who was 84 years old at the time, insisted she help distribute relief items.

"My mom was the oldest volunteer on the trip," Karen said. "People couldn't believe she wanted to go on an 18-hour bus ride - we were sleeping on floors - but she was re-taping labels and keeping up with the rest of us. She never complained so people would say 'If Mary Jane can do it, you can too.' I was so impressed."

The trip left a profound impact on Karen and Mary Jane. They asked firefighters they met to autograph a T-shirt. Karen recalls one firefighter emerging from Ground Zero after working the entire night cleaning up

debris. They asked him to sign the shirt but he was so exhausted he needed help as he scribbled "God Bless" on the cloth. He brought them to tears.

Mary Jane made a scrap book and kept a journal of the trip.

"It was such an honor to have my Mom with us," Karen said, as her eyes teared up. "It's an honor to sponsor a flag in her name."

The Grand Rapids couple read more than 20 biographies of Sept. 11 victims - which dangled from the flags - on Saturday before they found a match in Edward Day.

The 45-year-old New York firefighter died 10 years ago. His placard describes a man who not only put out fires, but "extinguished grouchiness" by slapping on smiley face stickers on his fellow fighter's helmets.

He was someone Karen's mom would have loved, she said.

The Healing Field

The Healing Field represents lives lost on September 11.

"I said a small prayer that the Lord would lead me to the right flag and it didn't take long," Karen said. "Every one of these flags let us connect with a victim, whether it be by age or job."

Art Johnson, the honorary program chair and United Bank CEO spoke about a victim named Robert Curatolo in his opening remarks for "A Salute to Heroes Program" which honored more than 100 local first responders in uniform.

His speech was followed by words from Former state Rep. Tom Pearce, Grand Rapids Police Chief Kevin Belk, Wyoming Fire Chief Robert Austin, a bell ceremony and gun fire salute.

"These guys, every one of them is a Superman," Rockford firefighter Ken Phillips said. "Their legacy lives on and you feel connected reading these stories."

In a pressed uniform and dress cap, the 33-year-old read a biography of a fallen firefighter on Saturday morning. The Sept. 11 attacks prompted him to become a firefighter eight years ago.

"I just wonder what went through their minds during their last minutes... A spouse? Children? There had to be a second they realized that second building was coming down."

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