



Saturday, September 10, 2011

VIDEO: Magnitude of 9/11 death toll felt at Healing Field opening ceremony

By Danielle Arndt

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Brittany Bussing, 17, a senior at Rockford High School, places a flag at the West Michigan Healing Field at Cannonsburg Ski Area in Cannon Township.

The West Michigan Healing Field commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks opened to the public Friday morning.

Many wept silently and others fought back tears as they watched hundreds of volunteers place the 3,200 American flags on a slope at the Cannonsburg Ski Area.

Among those to become emotional was Rep. Peter MacGregor, R-Cannon Township, who shared his reflections with those gathered at the start of the flag-raising ceremony.

He shared how, in the weeks prior to 9/11, his business had gone up in flames. He described how he felt watching firefighters battle the blaze and how grateful he was for their bravery.

He said when 9/11 occurred, he realized how truly lucky his family had been. What they lost were only possessions, MacGregor said - little compared to the thousands of innocent lives taken from loved ones that fateful day.

Local radio personalities read the names of the victims, each of whom was represented on a flag with a short biography.

The official death toll of 9/11 was 2,977, but there were hundreds of bodies that were never identified. The 223 flags without a name tag will represent those people, organizers said.

Nancy Martin, vice president of the Rockford United Bank and an organizer of the event, participated in the flag-raising ceremony by carrying her flag up the hill. She said the experience was "stirring."

Martin selected and sponsored the flag belonging to the late Todd Beamer, whose story she described as one of the most inspiring to come from the tragedy.

Beamer was onboard United Airlines flight 93 and was known for saying, "Let's roll," as the passengers made the ultimate sacrifice to try to stop the hijackers from committing another act of terrorism.

The flags are arranged on the hill, from top to bottom, starting with the victims of American Airlines flight 11, which flew into the first tower of the World Trade Center; followed by American Airlines flight 175, second tower; American Airlines flight 77, Pentagon; United Airlines flight 93, Pennsylvania; and the victims from the Twin Towers.

The flags of police officers who were killed have a blue ribbon, firefighters have a red ribbon, and the flags that have been sponsored are marked with a yellow ribbon.

Program coordinator Jeannie Gregory said the opening ceremony went off without a hitch.



The Healing Field at Cannonsburg Ski Area has about 3,200 American flags on display as a memorial for 9/11 victims.

"We timed it perfectly. The last names were being read as the last of the flags were place," she said.

There are still many flags for sale. People visiting the field throughout the weekend are encouraged to purchase one. The proceeds will be given to West Michigan first responder units.

People may walk through the flags, read the bios and select a victim whose story moves them. If they remember the name, they can return to the flag-purchasing table at the front of the ski area and let organizers know which victim's flag they would like, and receive a yellow ribbon to tie around that flag.

Flags cost \$75 to pick up when the healing field ends at 3 p.m. Tuesday or \$80 for the flag to be mailed to the sponsor's home.

Saturday, the healing field will honor first responders with a "Salute to Heroes" ceremony from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The Rockford American Legion will conduct a memorial for the victims at noon on Sunday. Children's days will be Monday and Tuesday.

At 1 p.m. Sunday, churches, fire stations, police stations and the general public, are encouraged to sound alarms, ring bells and participate in the National Day of Remembrance sponsored by the U.S. Senate.

The West Michigan Healing Field will be open 24 hours a day.

Correspondent Cory Smith contributed to this report.

