

Healing Field to help teach about 9/11

Opening ceremony Fri.; students to visit next week

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- By Tony Tagliavia

CALEDONIA, Mich. (WOOD) - Few if any of Jeremy Geerdes' students can remember a day filled with images so many find hard to forget.

But mention September 11 and the students can tell you something about it.

One 11-year-old girl says she thinks about the twin towers crashing. Ten-year-old Andrew Shepard says he thinks of it as "kind of the worst day ever, besides World War II."

Students' knowledge can come from family -- but it can come from educators as well.

Geerdes, who teaches fifth grade at Caledonia Community Schools' Emmons Lake Elementary, used to talk with students about their own memories.

Now, it will be different.

Asked how to teach September 11 attacks to students who did not live through them, the fifth-grade teacher said "it's really tough because you try to find a thin line between letting them know what happened but at the same time making sure it's not something where they're scared to step on a plane or scared to go inside a tall building."

Geerdes said he talks with his students about freedoms often taken for granted, patriotism and about the brave rescuers.

This year, his students are set to visit the West Michigan Healing Field, a transformed Cannonsburg Ski Area where thousands of flags will represent the lives lost. Biographies will be attached to each flag.

Organizers with the Healing Field, hosted by the Rockford Area Community Endowment, also discovered a lesson plan put together in part by victims' families and offered to West Michigan schools.

"It's a wide range of things for them to learn about -- even stereotyping and the security at the airport, which everybody notices," said Jeannie Gregory, who sits on the organizing committee and leads the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.

"Our world changed on that day -- there's no doubt," she said. "So we want to be able to teach them the knowledge about why it changed and how to keep safe now."

Maria Ward's North Rockford Middle School eighth-graders are also scheduled to be at the Healing Field next week. Parents there are set to receive information later this week.

The history educator said most of what she teaches her students happened well before their lifetimes, so "you try to tie to their lives on ... a daily basis about why this is meaningful to them," she said.

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As an example, Ward cited the flight procedure changes Gregory mentioned.

Like her Caledonia colleague, Ward said she expects her students will be struck by the sacrifice of first responders and by the loss of life.

"You get chills even thinking about 3,200 flags," she said. "It's a very visual generation, so I think this will be very powerful for them."

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The West Michigan Healing Field's opening ceremony is set for 8 a.m. Friday. It's expected to last four hours and then the field will be open 24 hours a day until Tuesday afternoon, organizers said.

If you want to volunteer during school group visits next week, organizers ask you to call 616-293-9194.

Online:

Healing Field

Healing Field on Facebook

Healing Fields Across the Country

If you would like to volunteer:

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