

THE BUFFALO NEWS

CITY & REGION

Visitors find 9/11 memories amid a forest of flags



Gavin Bird walks with his grandmother Suzy Bird through 3,000 American flags placed this weekend as a memorial to victims and first responders of 9/11 at Gratwick Riverside Park in North Tonawanda. The memorial will be dismantled Sunday afternoon. Photos by Mark Muville/Buffalo News

Together, the rows upon rows of rippling flags are called a “Healing Field,” although, once inside the impressive display, the effect is more like being in a forest. Visitors become immersed in the tragedy’s magnitude and in the startling effect of 3,000 individual star-spangled banners, each 3 feet by 5 feet, waving virtually nonstop in honor of those lost on Sept. 11, 2001.

Hundreds of people were coming and going throughout the morning Saturday at Gratwick Riverside Park in North Tonawanda to pay their respects, to pray and in some cases to educate. Many reflected on where they were when terrorists hijacked four passenger jets. Two were flown into the World Trade Center in New York and another, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. One crashed in a field in Pennsylvania – a mission thwarted by brave passengers who rushed the cockpit.

The free memorial and its companion programs are presented by the Erie Niagara Sunrise Exchange Club and the Exchange Club of the Tonawandas as part of their commitment to America.

With each flag carrying the name and story of one of the victims, the resoundingly patriotic memorial is also intensely personal.

“This is somebody who went to work that Tuesday and expected to come home Tuesday night,” is how organizer Ronald Sciandra put it.

Jan and Jerry Ambrose of LaSalle knew one of those people.

“My wife’s cousin’s husband died in Tower 2,” Jerry Ambrose said.

Jan Ambrose said she heard about the Healing Field by chance a week ago at a craft show, “so I decided we had to come.

“It’s an unbelievable memorial to them,” she continued. “There are so many, when you get in here you can’t see anything else. It’s amazing.”

Jan Ambrose said her cousin’s son also worked in the Trade Center, but he was transferred to Boston just before the attacks.

“It’s such a waste,” she said. “I see people who were 35. They would be 50 now – they could be running for president, or doing so many things. Instead, my cousin’s grandchildren will never know their grandfather.”

Linda Smyth’s grandsons Dominic and Nathan Ferolo also were born after 2001. They have heard about 9/11 only in class and on TV, so Smyth, who lives in Tonawanda, took them to the memorial to help them get a better sense of the scope of what happened.

“It’s something very emotional for me, and it’s something we don’t want anyone to forget,” Smyth said. Walking among the flagpoles – the banners so high that the bottoms were over Nathan’s head – they tried to imagine a person standing in the place of each flag, she said.

Dominic said stories on the tags helped him see the markers as people.

“There was one where she was only 20 years old,” he said quietly.

At the other end of the long field, Ruby Falcone and Ruth Toarmino of Niagara Falls were not planning on having such an emotional morning. They were heading to the North Tonawanda Farmers Market when they saw the flags and stopped for a closer look.

Before they left, each was wearing a new commemorative T-shirt and recalling where they were 15 years ago.

Falcone, who lived in Las Vegas then, had the TV on in the background that day when she noticed that the image had changed.

“I thought what an odd movie for the morning,” she said. And then, like everyone else, she couldn’t stop watching.

Toarmino felt many old emotions coming back as they went among the flags. “It’s so sad,” she said. “There is a lot of heartache out there.”

“When it happened,” Falcone said, “I said thank Jesus I didn’t lose anyone, but really, it feels like we did.”

That sense of common loss helped inspire the army of volunteers who worked to make the memorial come together.

Sciandra got the ball rolling in March 2015 as an Exchange Club project.

“It’s the first time it has been done in Western New York,” he said.

Companies and individuals sponsored flags for \$25 – and people still can do that, right up until the field is taken down Sunday afternoon. For the donation, you get to keep the flag, the flagpole and the tags, with a personal tag sent to you if it isn’t made already.

Joseph Bernas of North Tonawanda said his wife, Angeline, made all the memorial tags on their home computer before volunteers assembled the flags.

Robert Ward of Tonawanda did his part by sponsoring two banners. A Korean War veteran, he served in the Navy from 1951 to 1955, then switched to the Air Force, based with the 107th in Niagara Falls until 1965, and he appreciated that the field also honored vets.

A bad back kept him from helping with the set-up, but his son and daughter-in-law were among the volunteers who pounded in 3,000 plastic-coated rebar stakes to anchor the hollow white flagpoles set out on a well-calibrated grid.

Ward reflected on how national tragedies have the power to inspire people.

“I was 7 years old at the time of Pearl Harbor,” he said. “I will never forget it. So then I joined the Navy – later on.”

National Guard and Air Defense veteran Roy Pohlman, who recalls the Cold War days when he worked with Nike Ajax missiles, said the project was beyond his expectations.

“It’s great to get in the middle of them and hear all that fluttering,” Pohlman said. “What they did is incredible.”

He smiled and shook his head as he looked at the tribute.

“I wish everyone could care about this the way I do,” he said. “But that’s what makes (our country) special – they’re free not to.”

The program continues Sunday at 8 a.m. with a reading of the names of those who died in the Sept. 11 attacks. Music begins at 1 p.m. before the closing ceremonies at 2. The field will be dismantled when the ceremony concludes.



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(accessed 9/14/16)