

NATION NOW

17 years after 9/11 attacks, families still grieve at ground zero

Svetlana Shkolnikova NorthJersey

Published 11:39 a.m. ET Sep. 11, 2018 | Updated 2:33 p.m. ET Sep. 11, 2018

NEW YORK – For 15 years, Tom and JoAnn Meehan never missed a reading of their daughter Colleen Barkow’s name at ground zero.

Every year they would make the trek from Toms River, New Jersey, where Barkow is buried, to the site where she took her last breath to hear her name during the annual Sept. 11 commemoration ceremony at the 9/11 Memorial plaza in lower Manhattan.

Sometimes JoAnn Meehan said it: “Colleen Ann Barkow.”

Sometimes Daryl Meehan, the Meehans’ son, said it: “Colleen Ann Barkow.”

Tom Meehan wants it said forever.

“A veterans’ organization once said, ‘A person dies twice: once when they physically leave the world and another when their name is said for the last time,’ ” he said. “That’s why it’s so important that this goes on.”

Shanksville: Trump honors 9/11 victims in Pennsylvania in rare role as consoler-in-chief

Celebrities: Ice-T, Jimmy Fallon, Barbara Corcoran and more celebrities remember 9/11 on Twitter

On Tuesday at 8:57 a.m., Barkow’s name was said for the 17th time since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attack on the World Trade Center.

It was one of 2,983 names read to honor those who died in the attacks on New York City, the Pentagon, aboard Flight 93 and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

The Meehans did not hear their daughter’s name in person this year. They stopped going to the ceremony last year because they are getting older and have health problems. They now watch the nearly four-hour event on television.

“We’re grateful that they continue the practice of reading the names each year,” Tom Meehan said. “Prior to our daughter’s death, we had buried our parents, we lost an infant early in our marriage but none of those deaths prepared us for the manner in which Colleen died. This loss is unlike any other loss.”

The moments of loss were observed with six moments of silence Tuesday.

The first, at 8:46 a.m., marked the time when American Airlines Flight 11 struck the north tower.

The second, at 9:03 a.m., observed the time when United Airlines Flight 175 struck the south tower.

At 9:37 a.m., the reading of names paused to remember the time when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon.

Then, starting at 9:59 a.m., three moments of stillness within 30 minutes: the fall of the south tower, the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and, finally, the fall of the north tower.

Anthony Gardner, senior vice president of government and community affairs for the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, said the reading of names and punctuations of quiet are a powerful bonding experience for victims’ families. He lost his brother, Harvey Gardner, in 9/11 and has not missed a ceremony since.

“It’s very fulfilling and meaningful to be here among the other family members to pay respects,” said Gardner. “What’s happened over these 17 years is we’ve sort of become an extended family. You get to know the people we lost that day through their surviving family members and the stories they tell.”

Gardner relays their stories to the thousands of visitors ground zero draws each year. He likes to tell people that his oldest brother calmly comforted his colleagues at the 83rd-floor office of the General Telecom company after the plane hit the north tower.

Photos: These iconic images from 9/11 are truly unforgettable

IDs: 9/11 victim identification: 17 years later, largest forensic investigation in US history continues

The Gardners were able to reach Harvey Gardner by phone around 9 a.m. and could hear him reassuring his co-workers, telling them, “We’ll be OK.” Harvey Gardner said the office’s

entrance was filled with smoke and they were trying to find another way out.

The tower collapsed an hour and a half later.

“The bravery that he showed, the compassion he showed, has really been this incredible source of inspiration for us,” Gardner said. “We couldn’t be here for him that day, and this is our way of being here with him.”

Walter Matuza, of Staten Island, New York, also has never missed an anniversary at ground zero.

He was just 10 when his father, also named Walter, died trying to escape the 92nd floor of the north tower.

Five months later, Matuza started losing his eyesight.

Vision loss caused by hereditary optic neuropathy usually begins in a person's teens or 20s. Doctors blamed the early onset in Matuza on the trauma caused by his father's death.

The pain of the loss has lessened, Matuza said, but not gone away. He feels his dad's absence in the happy moments he wants to share with him. He wishes his dad could meet his new girlfriend, who also is legally blind. He wishes he could tell him about his new job.

“Seventeen years later, it’s still tough,” said Matuza. “I feel like I'm in a good place in my life and it makes me miss my dad even more.”

After hearing Walter Matuza’s name, the Matuza family headed over to O’Hara’s Restaurant and Pub, a traditional Irish watering hole where he often went for drinks after work.

The destruction of the World Trade Center blew out the windows at O’Hara’s. It now stands as a memorial to the 343 New York City firefighters who died, its walls plastered with embroidered patches representing fire, police, paramedic and military outfits from around the world.

Paul Remenschneider, of Wood-Ridge, New Jersey, also planned to stop by. It’s become a yearly tradition.

This year, for the first time since 2014, Remenschneider was one of 141 readers announcing the names of the dead.

He was more nervous this time. He kept thinking about the impending birth of what would have been his uncle Christopher Wodenshek’s first grandchild. Wodenshek’s oldest daughter,

Sarah, is expecting a son in November.

“They say time heals all wounds, but there are wounds that leave the deepest scars that you just can’t get over,” said Remenschneider. “It’s the way he was killed that did it. If he died naturally, of illness, and if he wasn’t the person that he was, this would be easier.”

Wodenshek’s remains were never recovered. His family had a “mock burial” with a casket full of mementos in order to give his children and family closure, Remenschneider said.

Ground zero is where Remenschneider comes to mourn on quiet mornings every two to three weeks before heading to work.

“This is his cemetery,” he said. “This is where I come to remember.”

Follow Svetlana Shkolnikova on Twitter: @svetashko