

The Faces of Sorrow

Thousands gather for memorial at Ground Zero

By Margaret Ramirez and Bobby Cuza
STAFF WRITER

Amid the charred, smoldering remains of the World Trade Center, more than 9,000 gathered yesterday to weep and mourn on the ground where their loved ones took their last breaths.

They came from across the city and all parts of the country for a somber service to remember those killed in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Some arrived in buses from New Jersey, others flew in from California, friends and families hurting and searching for a path to closure.

For some, like Sutnarine Thackurdeen, 42, of South Ozone Park, the memorial service helped his family make a connection with the sister they lost, 35-year-old Goumatie. He said his mother, Rambascia, felt spiritually comforted by the gathering.

"She became emotional by the sight," Thackurdeen said. "She can't see her daughter here, but her daughter can probably see her."

Others, like Alfia Morello of Norwalk, Calif., who lost her father, said rather than bringing the reality of the tragedy into sharper focus, visiting the site only left her more dazed than before.

"It's horrible. It's horrible. A lot of people said it'll bring closure, it'll bring more realism to it, and it's not," Morello said. "I worked here for four years with my dad . . . and I don't know even know where I am. I don't know what I'm looking at. It's not really helping at all."

As Officer Daniel Rodriguez opened the service with the national anthem, thousands held up framed photos of those who died on the two hijacked planes and the thousands of others who perished in the Twin Towers.

Cardinal Edward Egan, the archbishop of New York, delivered the invocation, recalling the victims as "strong and dedicated citizens" who were "executives and office workers, managers and laborers."

"We are in mourning, Lord. We have hardly any tears left to shed," Egan said.

Famed Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli then raised his voice in a heartbreaking rendition of "Ave Maria."

The service took place on a stage erected in the shadow of the blackened remains of 5 World Trade Center. In back, the remaining facade of Tower One could be seen.

The chilled autumn breeze was laced with the acrid smell of smoke, a growing concern for the residents who have returned to their homes in lower Manhattan. Some mourners at the service strapped surgical masks over their faces. Shards of glass from blown-out windows crunched on the ground under their feet.

For only the second time since the attack, recovery work at the site was interrupted yesterday. On Oct. 11 at 8:48 a.m., a moment of silence was observed to mark the one-month anniversary of the attacks.

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In contrast to a service held last month at Yankee Stadium, the event in lower Manhattan was brief, with only four speakers, one each from the Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and Protestant faiths. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Gov. George Pataki attended the service, sitting alongside the religious leaders, but did not speak.

While the event was solemn, at times, the sense of being at the site unleashed inconsolable episodes of grief.

Donna Marsh O'Connor of Liverpool, N.Y., who lost her daughter, Vanessa Langer, 29, of Yonkers,

in Tower Two, began pleading, "My daughter's in there! My daughter's in there!" upon being turned away from one of the entrance gates by police officers.

"When they said, 'No, you can't go that way,' she got upset," said her sister-in-law, Claire O'Connor.

The turnout was triple what city officials had expected. Many family members who were forced to stand for the service were dismayed by the lack of seating for the overflow crowd.

"It's an unfortunate thing that we're trying to relate each other's stories and you have people shoving into you," said Morello, who lost her father, Steven.

Still, Deena Ryan of Queens, who lost her son, Jonathan S. Ryan, in Tower Two, said she appreciated being able to connect with other victims' family members.

Ryan said a disagreement with an older couple standing in the aisle turned into a moment of bonding. Ryan said she eventually offered the woman her own seat.

"And we started talking," Ryan said, "and her daughter was on the United Airlines flight that hit Tower Two, where my son worked . . . And we sort of connected."

After the service, many family members approached the stage hoping to drop flowers for their loved ones. Unable to face the site where his father died, Joseph Maclovio of Norwalk, Calif., gave a firefighter a red rose and asked if he could lay it on the rubble for him.

The firefighter took the flower and said softly, "No problem."

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