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THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2001

Staten Island Mourns Its Heavy Losses

Home to 5% of the City's Population, but 20% of Missing Firefighters

By AMY WALDMAN
with JIM O'GRADY

Each Saturday after Labor Day, the Staten Island Athletic Club holds a race in memory of Marty Celic, a firefighter who died on the job, at age 23, in 1977. In recent years, Marty's younger brother, Tom, has popularized the race, shortening the distance from 10 miles to 4 and providing plenty of beer at the finish.

The event says much about this borough of 440,000 people, many of whom are the city's firefighters and police officers. It is a close-knit community linked by everything from running clubs to churches to civic associations.

Now the race will say even more. It will be run next year in memory not only of Marty, but also of Tom Celic, 43, senior vice president for liability at Marsh and McLennan. He is among those missing from the World Trade Center.

So are another Marsh and McLennan employee and three firefighters who were active in the borough's running groups. A total of 178 Staten Island residents, or former residents who recently moved, are dead or missing, according to a tally compiled by The Staten Island Advance.



Mary DiBiase Blalch for The New York Times

Some 300 people gathered in Clove Lakes Park to mourn those missing at the trade center.

Of those, 78 are firefighters who live on the island, which means that Staten Island, home to about 5 percent of the city's population, is home to more than 20 percent of the lost firefighters. Rescue Company 5 in Concord sent 13 men to the World Trade Center. Only one came back.

"I got a lot of friends who went down in those buildings," said John Palladino, a tree pruner from Port Richmond. "And I got a lot who are still trying to dig them out."

The tragedy has shaken a place that may have geographic proximity to Manhattan but that has kept its sociological distance. With shopping

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Staten Island Mourns Disproportionate Losses

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malls and housing developments (bearing names like Aspen Knolls), many parts of Staten Island feel far more suburb than city.

Residents regularly say "out here" to describe where they live. They view the harbor as a moat that keeps Manhattan at bay; many island residents who escaped the World Trade Center ran instinctively toward the ferry.

Firefighters who willingly work in some of the city's roughest neighborhoods see the borough as a haven they can return to (and as city residents, they receive extra points on the department's entrance exam). Residents who work in the aggressive financial universe of Lower Manhattan also gladly retreat to a place more about community than about competition.

Staten Island has defined itself in opposition to the rest of the city. It offers, from shore or ferry, a view of the Manhattan skyline, not immersion in it. As the only borough that reliably votes Republican, it helped bring Rudolph W. Giuliani into office. It long harbored a secession movement, which essentially ended with Mr. Giuliani's election.

But the trade center attack has drawn Staten Island closer to New York than ever. It has even restored a link that the borough's leaders thought was severed forever.

For decades, New York's garbage came to the Fresh Kills landfill. But last March, after a long political fight, Fresh Kills was closed and the borough rejoiced. The celebration was short-lived, however.

Just six months later, trucks laden with the trade center's grim debris creep along the Staten Island Expressway toward the landfill, where the rubble is sorted. Similarly laden barges move within view of commuters on the ferries. Some island residents have begun to express concern about the effect on everything from their physical and emotional health to property values.

Domenick Crisci had run a launch at Fresh Kills for 15 years. He was applying for a job on the Staten Island Ferry when the call came to go back to Fresh Kills.

At times in recent days Mr. Crisci has found himself crying as he works. "Sometimes you can't help it — you just break down," he said. "It's not garbage," he said over and over as trucks bearing the scent of smoke rumbled by. "It's the trade center."

The use of Fresh Kills disheartens Eric Ogren, too. He runs a gas station and deli less than a mile away. His younger brother, Joseph, half of a set of firefighting twins, has not been found. But his crushed truck, Mr. Ogren knows, is at the landfill.

He tries to block that out, to keep working. But almost everyone coming through the deli's doors has lost someone. His employees, most of whom are Sri Lankan, wear pins memorializing his brother, who was 30. The Ogrens' father was a firefighter, too; as in many Staten Island families, it was a tradition.

The borough's concentration of loss feels like a reproach to some survivors. Roni Petersen's husband, John, a lieutenant with Engine Company 151 in Tottenville, came back; the husband of the woman on the next block did not, nor did seven other firefighters from Tottenville. Mrs. Petersen wonders why she was lucky: "The fact that John's here and all these people are dead — I feel terrible."

Some cope with loss; others search for scapegoats. On Saturday, around 20 residents protested outside the National Wholesale Liquidators store in Westerleigh, citing rumors that its employees had celebrated as the World Trade Center burned.

Employees, some of whom come from Morocco, Guyana and Pakistan, said there had been no celebrations. The store's owner, Scott Rosen, and Guy Molinari, the borough president, said the same. Nonetheless, another protest is planned. "There's all Arabs in there," said Marie Tritta, a Westerleigh housewife and protester. "They shouldn't be in this country."

And some seek comfort, still, in the borough's insularity, its very ordinariness.

"Staten Island doesn't have any strategic importance to the rest of the world," said Vitaly Korobov, a West Brighton resident. "No one is going to attack it."



Photographs by Mary DiBiase Bloch for The New York Times

Cards, notes and letters adorn the walls of the Rescue 5 station on Clove Road in Staten Island. Lt. John Peters and his wife, Roni, feel some guilt because he came back safely after the attack.



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