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757-mi. show of support

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An exhilarated group of 36 Indiana firefighters and police officers ran into Manhattan yesterday to honor the lives lost in the World Trade Center attack, while nearly 200 people participated in a solemn Mass to honor the 12 firefighters who died in a 1996 fire — until Sept. 11 the Fire Department's deadliest blaze.

At the quarters of Ladder 15 and Engine 4 on South St., and at St. Stephen's Church on E. 29th St., people hugged and prayed and continued the public grieving that has gripped the city since terror struck the Trade Center.

"It's a way for a lot of us to show solidarity," said David Carlson, 42, a firefighter with the City of Lawrence — population 40,000. "We haven't experienced what they did but we're behind them 100%."

Completing a 757-mile trek that began on Monday in Indianapolis, the Indiana crew ran across the Brooklyn Bridge yesterday morning to the firehouse.

The men and one woman jogged in shifts through Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. They have raised nearly $180,000 — half of which will go to funds supporting the families of the city's Fire and Police departments.

The rest will go to support the families of civilians who lost their lives, said the marathon's organizer, Lawrence Fire Department Lt. Dino Batalis.

"Doing this was a good closure for me and my family," said Ivan Wilson, deputy chief of Lawrence Township Fire Department. "Everybody across the United States felt pain for these guys."

On Sept. 17, 1966, 12 firefighters died in a horrific blaze in the Wonder Drug Store on E. 23rd St.

Msgr. John O'Keefe, who led the 90-minute Mass at St. Stephen's, prayed for both those who lost their lives 35 years ago and the ones who perished last month.

"You need to keep their legacy alive," said O'Keefe, who lost his father in the drugstore fire. "You have a legacy of service to the city that can never be tarnished."

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