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TEARFUL MEETING AT GROUND ZERO

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Victims' kin join in grief to hail the lost of WTC

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Clutching photographs of lost loved ones and leaning on one another for support, relatives of the thousands still buried under the World Trade Center rubble converged on Ground Zero yesterday for a somber memorial service.

For 55 minutes, more than 9,000 people wept together and prayed together and held up the photographs for all to see. Many wore face masks as smoldering rubble sent up a stubborn stench of burning metal.

Members of the clergy struggled to find the right words to comfort them while opera singers like Andrea Bocelli and Renee Fleming gave voice to the mourners' pain.

"Their lives were snuffed out by villains filled with violence and hate," Edward Cardinal Egan said. "There are hardly any tears left to shed."

When it was over, some of the relatives walked to the edge of the ruins, where they handed firefighters flowers. The firefighters carried the bouquets deeper into the wreckage and returned with small pieces of concrete and twisted metal — sad mementos for the mourners.

Some like Andre Gomez, whose life-long friends Felix and Ivan Vale died on Sept. 11, found solace in the service.

"It make me feel a little more relaxed, it made me feel free," said Gomez, 31, of Brooklyn. "Everybody getting together regardless of whether they knew each other. . . . It was a relief."

But Carole Miszkowicz left the ceremony feeling only slightly less bitter about the loss of her daughter Susan, 37, who worked for the Port Authority.

"It does help, but it doesn't change anything," said Miszkowicz, 63, of Brooklyn. "It's a horrible thing to have your daughter buried in the rubble."

There had been other services at Ground Zero, but yesterday's was specifically for the victims' families. While Mayor Giuliani, Gov. Pataki and Sens. Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton attended, they did not speak.

Before the ceremony, city workers set up 5,000 folding chairs. But it quickly became clear officials had badly underestimated how many would come.

Mourners filled the seats in front of the stage erected on Church St. and spilled down the length of Dey St.

The hundreds who arrived arrived on special city buses from Shea Stadium in Queens and Orchard Beach in the Bronx were met by Red Cross workers handing out bags filled with tissues, face masks and snacks.

Drawn to scene

Many eyes were quickly drawn to a banner affixed to 2 World Financial Center that read, "We will never forget."

While Bocelli sang "Ave Maria," the loved ones of David Graifman, of Arnold Lim, of Fire-

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fighter Tom Hannafin and hundreds of others, held their photographs aloft.

Maribel Parker, 38, stared in the direction of 2 World Trade Center, where a piece of the facade has resisted attempts to tear it down. She wondered if her brother, 37-year-old Ivan Perez of Ozone Park, Queens, was buried there.

"This is tough but I felt I need to be here," said Parker, 38, who brought her brother's children, Darlene, 12, and Ivan Jr., 11. "This is the closest I feel I could get to him."

Ismael Vasquez, 40, of Sunset Park, Brooklyn, said he came so he could feel closer to his son, Azael, 21, who is among the missing. He said his son worked as a cook for Cantor Fitzgerald and had a 3-year-old daughter. "I had to come," he said. "We never heard from him that day."

The missing man's aunt, Carmen Vasquez, 32, said Azael lived in pain most of his life. "He was a diabetic since the age of 1," she said. "He suffered a lot in his life and we loved him so much. Being here today hopefully will give us some answers and some peace."

Jeffrey Ruhalter, 46, came to mourn his brother, Adam, 40, of Plainview, L.I., who was a vice president at Cantor Fitzgerald. He came alone, fearing it would be too much for Adam's wife, 13-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son to bear.

As the Orchestra of St. Luke's played Samuel Barber's mournful "Adaggio for Strings," Ruhalter recalled how he searched for his brother after the attack.

"He was log No. 1066," he said. "I spent that day running around to the hospitals, to the Red Cross, to the police trying to find him."

But Adam Ruhalter was nowhere to be found. So while his parents went to the Family Assistance Center on Pier 94 to collect the urn the city had prepared for the victims' families yesterday, Ruhalter bought another in Chinatown.

"I'm hoping that they'll let me fill it up," he said.

With Candace Rondeaux and Jennifer Weil

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