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Hero was 'mayor' to his pals

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A devoted father and husband, Lt. Joseph Leavey was known as a family man who loved people, so convivial he was called "the mayor" by friends.

Yesterday, nine pallbearers, members of lower Manhattan's Ladder 15 where he served until Sept. 11, gently carried their brother's coffin, draped in a Fire Department flag, into St. Catherine's Church in Pelham, Westchester County.

The avid photographer, who would have celebrated his 46th birthday yesterday, died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

A crowd of more than 600, including Mayor Giuliani, gathered to honor Leavey, who left behind his wife, three children, three sisters and his parents.

Hundreds of firefighters stood in formation as a fire truck carrying Leavey's coffin slowly drove by the church.

"We never thought — most of us anyway — that anything like this could ever happen to us," said the Rev. Peter Bannan. "We knew that Joe and his brothers had chosen a very dangerous profession. We never dreamed that they would be taken from us quite like this."

Leavey was remembered by Capt. Tim McKinney as "the definition of a family man."

"We would hear all about his family, soccer practice, basketball, PTA and even church picnics," he said.

A licensed civil engineer, Leavey loved fixing things around the firehouse.

"Sometimes, I swear, he would purposely break things just so he could fix them," Lt. John Viola said.

'Quality conversation'

Leavey also loved people and was concerned about their well-being.

One winter, Viola said, he and Leavey were on duty when Leavey noticed a homeless man across the street.

"He said to him with his big smile, 'Hey dude, how's it going?' " Viola said. "Upon hearing this, I replied in my most sarcastic voice, 'Hey Joe, it's 20 degrees outside, the guy's living in a cardboard box under the FDR, how good do you think it's going?'

"Without missing a beat, Joe turned to me and said, 'Even he needs quality conversation.' "

At home, Leavey was a loving husband and father to his wife, Carole, and his children, Kerri, Brian and Caitlin.

"I always thought our marriage was a blessing from heaven," Carole Leavey said.

Caitlin, 10, whom Leavey called "little Pooh bear," said she would miss having her father help her with her homework and his taking her to the park.

"I will always love you, Daddy, and happy birthday to my hero."

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