NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

DAILY NEWS, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2001

Patriotism & tears mix at NYSE's tree lighting

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As the Christmas tree lights and an American flag made of tiny bulbs wrapped around the pillars of the Stock Exchange glowed last night, Sally Suarez began to cry for her dead firefighter husband and the holiday season she must now get through without him.

"This is hard; it was very emotional," said Suarez, 32, who lost her husband, Benjamin Suarez, 36, a member of Ladder Co. 21 in midtown, in the World Trade Center attack. "But I felt I had to come for my children.

"They don't have their dad anymore to make the holiday special," she said as she nestled more tightly into a jacket of her husband's adorned with firefighter patches.

Nearby, the Suarezes' sons, Joey, 12, and Christian, 6, joined her in a family hug as country singer Lee Greenwood sang "Proud to Be an American."

Later, on a podium in front of a large Christmas tree, "All My Children" star Susan Lucci read "Visit From St. Nicholas" (" 'Twas the night before Christmas . . .") and Mayor Giuliani spoke.

The 78th annual New York Stock Exchange tree lighting was a far more emotional event than ever before, with the families of deceased firefighters and police officers filling Broad St.

The songs were the usual holiday fare, but the event was, as Suarez described, emotional. Also in the large crowd were some of the Sept. 11 survivors.

"This is a very special holiday season because of what happened just a few blocks from here," Giuliani said. "We know we are going to miss people who meant a great deal to us."

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