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NOTABLES TO HONOR CHIEF RESCUE HERO

By MARSHA KRANES

The life of Chief Ray Downey, the most decorated firefighter in the land, will be celebrated today at a memorial service attended by top dignitaries and thousands of firefighters from all parts of the United States.

Downey, deputy chief of Special Operations for the FDNY and a nationally recognized expert in rescue and recovery efforts, was lost in the rubble of the World Trade Center.

Among the dignitaries traveling to Deer Park, L.I., to pay tribute to the 39-year FDNY veteran are Gov. Pataki, Mayor Giuliani and Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen.

Pataki, in the eulogy he's prepared for the memorial, praises Downey as a hero among heroes:

"Many New Yorkers were surprised to learn Chief Downey was actually in the towers and not coordinating the rescue efforts from a secure location.

"To those who knew him best, this was no surprise. Truly great leaders display the same courage they ask of those they lead."

Downey's five children also will speak, sharing special memories of their courageous father. They are Joe, an FDNY captain; Chuck, an FDNY lieutenant; Kathy Ugalde and Ray Jr., both schoolteachers; and Marie Tortorici, a housewife.

And with their mother, Downey's widow Rosalie, they will offer a special prayer — a poem that was etched on a plaque sent to them by members of a Colorado fire department after the trade center collapse.

Called "The Broken Chain," the poem's author is unknown. It ends with "Our family chain is broken, and nothing seems the same; but as God calls us one by one, the chain will link again."

One of those unable to attend the service is Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating, who befriended Downey in 1995 when the FDNY chief flew to Oklahoma City after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building. Downey helped shore up the collapsed structure so rescue and recovery operations could get under way.

Keating, who is recovering from back surgery, sent a top aide, the Oklahoma City fire chief and a contingent of firefighters to the memorial to represent him.

The memorial service will begin at 11 a.m. at Sts. Cyril and Methodius Catholic Church in Deer Park.

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