

Brevard embraces remnants of World Trade Center towers

Pieces part of 9/11 memorials

12:16 AM, Sep. 1, 2011

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FLORIDA TODAY



Freelance welder Chad McAninch of Port St. John attaches a 102-pound piece of steel from the World Trade Center to the base of a monument for an Indian Harbour Beach Volunteer Fire Station. / Tim Shortt, FLORIDA TODAY

Art Greci looks at a piece of steel from the World Trade Center and a stone from the Pentagon with reverence and respect.

As the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, approaches, Greci is working with Honor America, an organization that seeks to celebrate the history and heritage of the United States, to build a fitting memorial at Liberty Bell Memorial Museum in Melbourne. It

will incorporate the 25-inch piece of steel and softball-size stone he came to possess after working at Ground Zero.

The display at the museum is one of at least six finished or in the works in Brevard County, where steel from the towers serves as a permanent reminder of the worst terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

"It feels like yesterday," said Greci, who was a Los Angeles police officer 10 years ago.

Greci was sent by his police union to join the brotherhood of police officers, firefighters and others in New York to help in the recovery just days after the terrorist attacks. After working in logistics there for about a month and a half, he obtained pieces of the steel that went to various departments in and around Los Angeles.

His department wanted to build a memorial, so he was sent back to New York to get a piece of steel. It was to be given to the Los Angeles Police Academy, which later decided to support a fire department's monument project instead of building its own, so he was able to bring it to Brevard.

When Greci retired and moved to Viera in August 2009, he planned to safeguard the 25-inch-by-20-inch piece of steel until he felt he had a connection with the proper organization that could display it for the public. At the suggestion of friends, he brought the steel and the stone last year to the Valor Awards, a ceremony to honor the county's top law enforcement officers and fire-rescue first responders.

"Everybody treated it so sacredly," he said. "They were all moved by it. They were in awe. They treated it with such respect."

'Don't forget'

Greci said he believes the planned permanent memorial at the museum will stand as an appropriate monument. He also wants it to help attract donors and visitors to the museum.

"My main job with this is that people don't forget," he said.

The Liberty Bell Memorial Museum and www.weremember.org will host a fundraiser "We Remember 09-11-01, We'll Never Forget" on Sept. 9 at the Crowne Plaza Melbourne Oceanfront

to benefit the monument display and the museum. It includes special appearances by comedian Mike Marino and actor Vincent Pastore of "The Sopranos" fame.

The display will be two 6-foot columns representing the two towers with the piece of steel and stone mounted on a pentagon-shaped base. It is expected to be completed and on display at the museum before the 10th anniversary.

Vincent Varvaro, a retired New York police officer who is loaning the Liberty Bell Memorial Museum items such as goggles, a hard hat and uniform shirt he used at Ground Zero, said he believes children should learn more about 9/11 and history. They are not getting enough of it in the classroom, he said.

"There are a lot of things being taken out of school books," Varvaro said. "Here they can see it, see how people came together."

Varvaro, 41, of Viera, said the aftermath of the attacks are etched into his mind: "It was like nothing I've ever seen in my life. As we approached, it was like snow on the ground. You felt for the people that were in those buildings."

Way to remember

Several other organizations in Brevard have obtained pieces of steel from the World Trade Center towers. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey filled 1,200 requests from more than 2,000 inquiries. Most of the steel stayed in the U.S. but also went to seven other countries: Canada, China, England, Germany, Italy, the U.S. Embassy in India and a U.S. air base in Afghanistan.

"Obviously, we only had enough to fill those 1,200 requests. There is no more," said Steve Coleman, spokesman for the Port Authority.

Requests were filled on a first-come-first-serve basis, with the requirement that the steel be on display in a public memorial.

Maurice Meisner, past president of the Brevard Veterans Memorial Center on Merritt Island, said that as soon as he learned organizations could request pieces of WTC steel, he wrote to the Port Authority. Soon, he had two 12-inch by 36-inch I-beams, each weighing 145 pounds.

Meisner said the center paid the \$145 shipping for each piece.

He said the center already had a spot for the steel in its memorial plaza, which has monuments to the different wars in which the United States was involved. The steel pieces will be mounted on a granite pedestal and dedicated in a ceremony at 4 p.m. Sept. 11.

"It has such a major impact on our history," Meisner said. "When we had the opportunity, we said we have to do this. This is part of our history."

Rockledge Fire and Emergency services also obtained a piece of the steel that will be on display at its station.

Indian Harbour Beach Fire Department will dedicate the piece it received through the same program at the Veterans Memorial Center on Sept. 10 in a ceremony starting at 10 a.m. Its piece will be in front of the fire station at 1116 Pinetree Drive and will be mounted on a base to look like it is lying in rubble.

"We got a piece," Fire Chief Todd Scaldo said. "I was kind of surprised. We're a small city."

Brevard County Fire Rescue Station 48 in Viera will dedicate its monument with a 1-ton steel piece at 11 a.m. Sept. 11. It will feature the Brevard Police and Fire Pipes and Drums Band, Brevard County Fire-Rescue Honor Guard, bagpipers and speeches by Brevard County District 4 Commissioner Mary Bolin and county fire Chief Larry Collins.

The highlight of the event will be the unveiling of the memorial, which features an 1,821-pound steel beam from the World Trade Center towers granted to the department from the Port Authority.

"We are proud to be able to offer the citizens and visitors of Brevard County with a place to reflect and remember the sacrifice of those who lost their lives on 9/11," said project coordinator Tyler Cox. "No one will ever forget where they were that day; it changed all of our lives forever."

The event is open to the public, who then are invited to walk to Space Coast Stadium for the Brevard Remembers 9/11 event at 1 p.m.

April Gentile, a former New York resident who was there during the attacks and who is helping organize the benefit dinner for the museum, said she wants as many people to see the displays and participate in the commemoration as possible.

"This is a day of remembrance," she said.