

First-responders use Sept. 11 as call to action

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By Chris Parker/ThisWeek

Ann Riggs reaches up to touch the steel girder from the North Tower of the World Trade Center during the Sept. 11 memorial service in Westerville on Friday, Sept. 11.

Eight years after planes tore through the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon and crashed into a Pennsylvania field, Westerville's first-responders called on residents to remember the victims of Sept. 11, 2001, through their acts.

Representatives of the city's divisions of fire, police and communications spoke to a crowd of more than 100 people in front of Fire Station 111 on Sept. 11, outlining what the day meant for them and why it's important that the legacy of the day lives on through memorial services and monuments like the soon-to-be-constructed First Responders' Park.

Police officer Corey Baker traveled to New York City after the attacks to help counsel police officers coping with the tragedy.

"Walking around 'the pile,' which was all that was left of the towers, I could feel the presence of evil," Baker said.

Referring to the recently acquired piece of World Trade Center steel that traveled on a truck bed through Uptown before the ceremony, Baker said he was reminded that the Sept. 11 terrorist attack was one more tragedy that proved Americans could overcome evil.

First Responders' Park, which will be anchored by the steel and a firefighters' memorial, should stand as a reminder to people to emulate the first-responders who ran toward danger to save others on Sept. 11, Baker said.

"We need to stay strong. We need to stay vigilant against evil everywhere," he said. "Let this not be a static reminder."

Communications supervisor Alan Fish said he sympathizes with the 911 operators who stayed on the phone to comfort people they feared may never be reached by firefighters or police and understood the hopelessness they must have felt as the day wore on.

Regardless, Fish said, many people banded together on Sept. 11 and formed lasting bonds as they helped complete strangers.

Through First Responders' Park and the annual Sept. 11 memorial service, Fish said he hopes people are reminded of the lessons they learned about compassion and working together.

"It's my prayer that, as a country, we will never forget that day," Fish said. "And that we take the lessons we learned and apply them."

Westerville firefighter and medic Tom Ullom already was working on the concept of First Responders' Park and a firefighters' memorial to honor the death of fellow Westerville firefighter Dave Theisen, who was killed in a fire, before Sept. 11, 2001.

The attacks strengthened his determination to establish a memorial, Ullom said, because too often, people choose inaction when they don't know how to help in a certain situation.

"If we choose to do nothing, then nothing will happen," Ullom said. "We must remember."

Ullom said he hopes the park will be a solemn place of remembrance that will encourage people to act as the first-responders did on Sept. 11, or as Theisen did, rushing into danger rather than away from it to help others.

"This park will be an inspiration to all of us to reach out to others in their time of need," he said. "We need memorials, holidays -- so we will not forget."

For more information on First Responders' Park, or to donate to the firefighters' memorial, visit www.wffmemorial.org.