

# City remembers 9/11

## Looking back a decade later

By Dave Schafer

**F**or 60 seconds, Houston fell silent. It was noon Sunday, Sept. 11 – 10 years after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon – and the city joined a national moment of silence.

Then, residents returned to building a better future through volunteering with programs set up to commemorate the victims of the attacks.

“Many of us will take this opportunity to quietly reflect and offer our own prayers. But collectively, we will focus on positive actions so we can show the world that we are strong and united,” Mayor Annise Parker said.

The city teamed with nonprofit Compassionate Houston, which had a network of more than 120 local organizations with volunteer and activities, and honored the nearly 3,000 victims with a sedate 60-minute ceremony around the

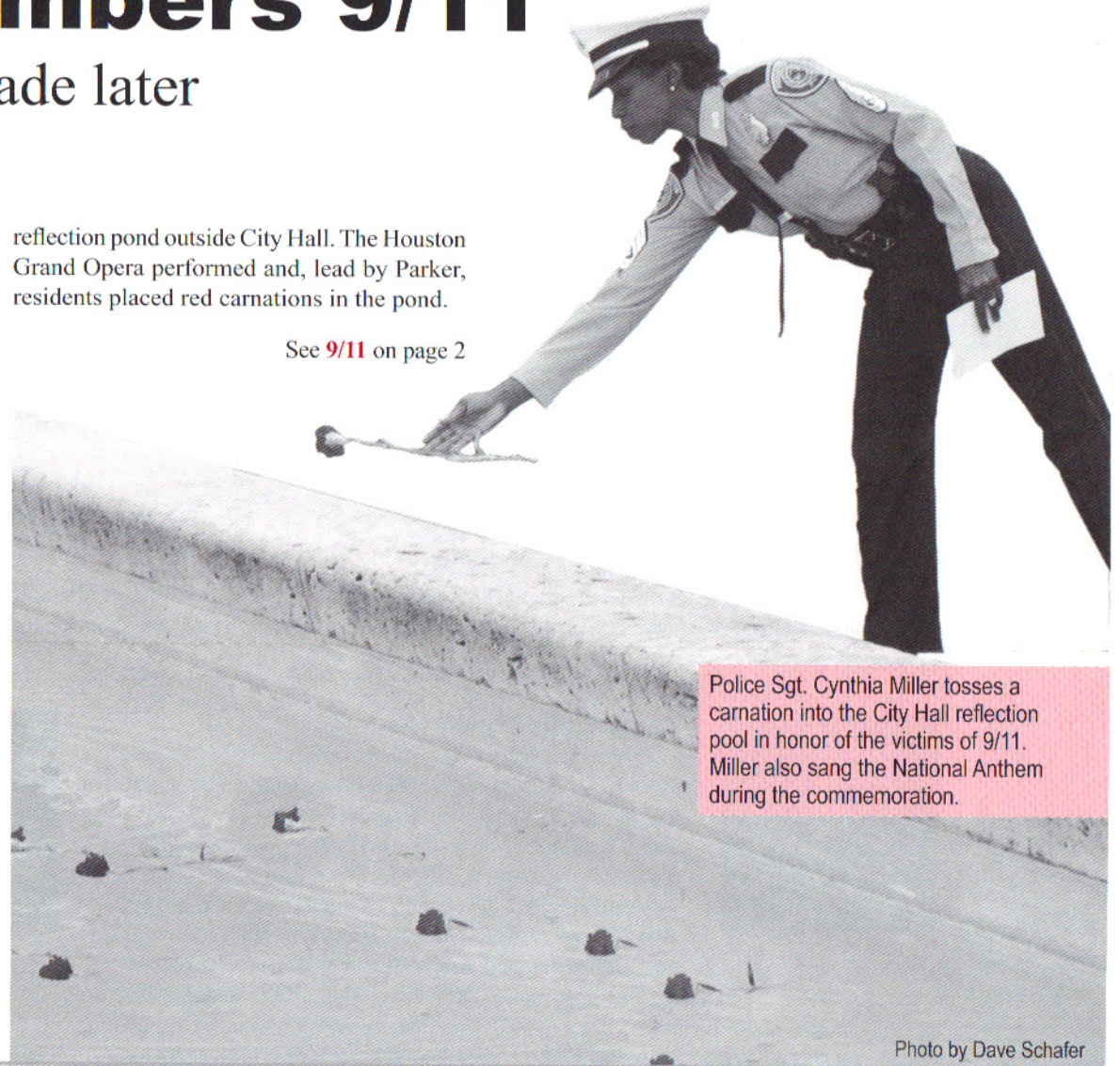
reflection pond outside City Hall. The Houston Grand Opera performed and, lead by Parker, residents placed red carnations in the pond.

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### Ten years ago...

‘Some days we weren’t able to use dogs, but we learned to watch the flies. If you were patient enough, they would show you where the body parts were.’ Firefighters recall their time at Ground Zero.

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Police Sgt. Cynthia Miller tosses a carnation into the City Hall reflection pool in honor of the victims of 9/11. Miller also sang the National Anthem during the commemoration.

Photo by Dave Schafer

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### At the scene again

Some city employees left town for the remembrances. Seventeen members of Fire's honor guard participated in New York's ceremonies. They visited fire stations, the fire and 9/11 museums, and lined up as part of the "wall of honor" on either side of the street when the families of 9/11 victims went in St. Patrick's Cathedral for a special service.

"Being there really draws you into the moment of when it happened," said Warren Hooker, a firefighter with Station 99 and honor guard coordinator.

Members of Texas Task Force 1, who conducted eight days of search and recovery at Ground Zero 10 years ago, also returned to the site.

"I don't know if you can ever have closure for a situation like that, but it was really good for all of us to be there together," said Todd Kahney, a firefighter assigned to Station 42.

Going to "10 House," the fire station across from Ground Zero, brought back a lot of memories, Kahney said. When they left the station, night had fallen, and Kahney got his first glimpse of the twin

beams of light and Tower 1 lit up red, white and blue.

"I was doing OK with it until then," he said. "It was good, and it was bad. It's where we needed to be, but it was kind of a struggle to get through it."

### Missing a part of himself

Kevin Maynard and other members of Station 82 also visited the site. Maynard's twin, Keith, was a New York firefighter who died when the towers fell.

"It's so public, but it's personal for me," Maynard said. "I still feel like a part of

me is missing."

During the ceremony, he scratched out his brother's name from the memorial onto a piece of paper that he plans to frame.

"It helps to know that people still remember and appreciate what they gave their lives for," Maynard said.

And, he said, the memorial has been "done right" so far.

"I hate that he's a part of it, but I'm glad they gave us a place to go where we can always honor him," Maynard said. **S**

## Reflections from Ground Zero

**O**n Sept. 11, 2001, after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, FEMA's Texas Task Force 1 Urban Search and Rescue unit was called to New York City to help with search and recovery. Travel restrictions delayed their arrival at Ground Zero for eight days. All were members of the Houston Fire Department. Here are comments from some of those men:



**Capt. Eddie Mathison:**

“I was in charge of a squad on the day shift and would be out (for the first time) the next morning. That night I could hardly sleep. We heard all kinds of stories from teams that had worked ‘the pile,’ some good, some bad. The next morning, I still was not prepared for what I saw and smelled. The smell – something you don’t get watching television – hit you about five blocks out and got stronger as you neared the site. It was a war zone.

There was dust inches deep everywhere, fires with funny-colored flames shooting out of cracks and voids, heavy equipment shaking an already unstable environment. Some of the searches took us four and five stories below ground into the subway system. Giant steel beams pierced through the tunnels, collapsing and demolishing everything. Papers, body parts, jet fuel, plane parts, firefighting equipment, toxic smoke and a ton of dust. At times we knew we were in an unsearched area because ours were the first footprints in the dust. This kind of work went on for two days. On the third day, we were informed that the mayor had decided to move to the recovery stage. Now we were there to provide closure to as many families as possible.

“A request was made by FDNY for an urban search and rescue team to dismantle a large pile of steel beams that was hampering the search effort. The request went all the way around the pile, and every US&R team working, including ours, declined the mission due to the unpredictable movement of the steel as it was being cut. When we heard no other team had accepted the mission, TXTF-1 said we were up to the challenge. The effort took the remaining day shift and all of the night shift, but when the sun rose the next morning, we got a standing ovation on the pile.

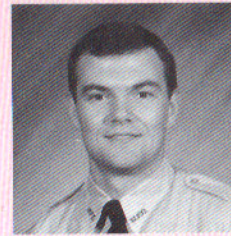
“Canines played a big role in a lot of searches, but just like humans, fatigue plays havoc on their senses. Some days we weren’t able to use dogs, but we learned to watch the flies. If you were patient enough, they would show you where the body parts were.”



**Todd Kahney**

“We obviously were watching the news previous to our arrival. But none of that prepared me for the massive amount of destruction. It was just amazing to be standing in the middle of Ground Zero. The first thing I did when I got there was I just stood there in awe and rotated 360 degrees, and just looked at all the destruction.

“It’s etched in my brain forever. It’s something I think about all the time. Every single day.”



**David Swanson**

“It was like a bad dream. That’s exactly how it felt walking up to it the first time. I was assigned to the day shift, but the day shift started early in the morning. That first morning, and as we walked up, you could see the generators running with the lights and the drizzling rain and the smoke coming off the debris pile. There was an acrid, metallic, smoky odor in the air. It was just like something you’d find in a dream. There was so much devastation that

it didn’t seem real.

“It was like Pearl Harbor. You had thousands of people who were killed and then you have all these Americans coming together to help one another. I’d never seen that kind of turnout of people where we didn’t want for anything. Everywhere you turned, there was support. There were people there with signs cheering us on. It was unbelievable, really. It gave me chills.”



**Steven Sparks**

“The size was overwhelming. It was just such a huge pile of twisted metal and debris. It almost looked like a huge ant pile with ants all over it. The metal was twisted, so you had to cut it and then pull it away piece by piece, and then dig a little bit, and then cut some more, and then dig a little bit. Then you’d come across a void and you’d crawl down into the void and check everything out, and come back out and do some more delayering, and you’re

looking at pictures that were obviously on somebody’s desk, you’re looking at business cards, all of the different personal items that you’re sorting through, and you’re cutting and pulling away so that you can get to the next void or the next spot.

“It was overwhelming the first time you saw it, and then you just, like we do, you break it down into smaller pieces and take care of your piece, and know that everybody else is taking care of their piece, and eventually it will all get done. And it did. It took a long time.”



**Ken Wright**

“We were at the Javits Center, and we drove down and up the West Side highway going down to Ground Zero and back, and every morning, every night, 24 hours a day, there were people standing for blocks and blocks just handing out gloves, dust masks, water – whatever you needed. And it was just phenomenal to see. Twenty square blocks out of ground zero, the city was still functional. And the members of FDNY doing their job. It goes back to the resiliency of

the U.S. people, and especially the citizens of New York, going back to work and doing what they needed and helping out any way they could.”