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Connecting With Lost Loved Ones, if Only by the Tips of Fingers

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS SEPT. 11, 2011

They clutched slips of paper bearing letters and numbers, trying to navigate a strange new map created by computer algorithm that was designed to place people next to other people whom, in life, they had cared about. The visitors looked hopeful, dazed, afraid.

One family made a beeline for Mark Louis Rosenberg, Tablet 7 of the north pool, or N-7 for short. The three teenage Berry brothers searched for their father, David Shelby Berry, at S-36. They touched the sharp edges of his name, carved into the cool metal in austere capital letters. They left their fingerprints and became connected to the families of 2,982 others in a way that they had not felt before.

“You go your whole life thinking you’re always the one in the classroom who’s affected by 9/11,” said Nile Berry, 19, a student at Hamilton College. “And then you come here and you’re just another face in the crowd. You get a lot of perspective.”

Ten years later, it had come down to this: a quick caress of hands on bronze, an electric sense of connection to the past, a hope that this anniversary would become a turning point toward a better future.

For at least a few moments, the newly built Sept. 11 memorial, which opened to victims’ families on Sunday and opens to the public, via reservation, on Monday, triumphed after a decade of battles over cost, designs, fund-raising, how to order the names and whether to include ranks, places of business and other identifying details.

“This is now a place, not a construction site, not a design,” Alice M. Greenwald, the director of the memorial museum, said. “It’s now a place in New York, and I think that’s transformational.”

Most of the families pronounced the memorial beautiful, and they were moved, they said, just to have the names of their loved ones permanently displayed. For the more than 1,100 families who have never received a trace of remains, not even a fragment of bone, the memorial is a kind of graveyard.

After the first moment of silence, at 8:46 a.m., they began filtering into the plaza. They wore blue ribbons on their lapels as their entry credentials and as a symbol of the clear blue sky that preceded the moment everything changed.

In twos, in threes and even in 10s, they followed the hard stone sidewalks to the memorial’s salient feature, two giant pools in the footprints of the twin towers; arrayed around them were the names of 2,983 victims of the attacks in the twin towers, at the Pentagon, aboard United Airlines Flight 93 as well as those killed in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

The pools were black and a little intimidating, and the cascading water was as deafening as Niagara Falls.

But as the families grew more comfortable, they began to relax.

“They did a fantastic job,” said Bernard Monaghan, known as Brian, whose son Brian Patrick Monaghan, 21, a carpenter, died at the World Trade Center. “To me it’s very peaceful.”

Children tumbled in the grass. “I guess it’s not as maybe morbid or morose as it normally is,” said Stacy Cooke, watching her daughter, Caitlin, 4, turning somersaults with her cousins on the strips of lawn.

Ms. Cooke lost her father, Capt. David T. Wooley of Ladder Company 4 in Midtown Manhattan. “They never found him,” she said. “This is kind of where we think is his resting place.”

Families began to personalize the site, leaving their own memorials on top of the official one. Ingeniously, they used the cut-out names as holders for a raft of mementoes: Small American flags, roses, hydrangeas and sunflowers sprouted from the letters.

A rolled-up note was stuck in the final 'o' of Nobuhiro Hayatsu's first name, as if at the wailing wall.

A small, ordinary-looking gray stone had been placed over the middle name of Jane Eileen Josiah.

Blue entrance ribbons had been stuck by their safety pins into name after name.

Over the name of Gary Jay Frank, someone had taped his photograph and these handwritten details: "11-5-65 to 9-11-01. AON Corp — WTC #2-92nd FL We will never forget you!!!"

Some people made ink rubbings of their loved ones' names, often on the official event program. Staff members of the memorial distributed crayons, pencils and spare programs.

One flag stuck out of the name Charles F. Burlingame III. Mr. Burlingame, known as Chic, was a pilot on American Airlines Flight 77, which hit the Pentagon.

"These are all his crew," his sister, Debra Burlingame, said, pointing to the surrounding names. "These people are real people to me. It's very touching to see all these people here together."

She pointed to the legend, "Renee A. May and her unborn child." Ms. May was a flight attendant. Nearby were the names Jennifer Lewis and Kenneth Lewis, flight attendants who always flew together. "The D.C. base called them Kennifer," Ms. Burlingame said. "This was before the Brad Pitt stuff."

Ms. Burlingame had American Airlines pilot's wings pinned to her chest. Other families wore T-shirts printed with photographs of their loved ones, or medallions showing their pictures. "All these tokens and totems, it's part of what we do," Ms. Burlingame said. "We do it to have some tangible thing we can touch, given we can't touch them."

But now, she touched her brother's name and burst into tears.

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