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Hundreds pay their respects

Events around San Diego mark Sept. 11 anniversary

By Sharon A. Heilbrunn STAFF WRITER

September 12, 2008

SAN DIEGO – On Sept. 11, 2001, Ocean Beach resident Paul Ingrassia was nowhere near the twin towers of the World Trade Center. He was driving to work on Interstate 15, as he did every morning.

But his older brother Christopher, a partner with Cantor Fitzgerald, was on the 104th floor of the North Tower.

“We tried to call him but couldn’t get through,” Ingrassia, 33, said. “After a couple of hours of not getting a call, I knew.”

Ingrassia and his twin sister, Elisa, were among hundreds of San Diego-area residents who paid their respects yesterday at Sept. 11 anniversary events around the county.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune Tina Sanchez of Spring Valley hugged San Diego fire Capt. Lou Willis at a Sept. 11 memorial at the Civic Center. First responders are “in my heart always.”

At the San Diego Civic Center downtown, displays commemorating the attack lined the concourse. A framed photo of a New York firefighter rested against a piece of World Trade Center steel, bordered by an American flag and a wreath of roses.

“On Sept. 11, we did not run,” Mitch Mendler, a San Diego firefighter and the event’s organizer, told a crowd of about 70 people. “We answered the call.”

As bagpipers played “Amazing Grace,” the sun peeked out of an overcast sky. Elisa Ingrassia clutched a small laminated photo of her blue-eyed brother, dimples framing his smile.

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"He was a generous, honorable, caring guy," she said.

Nearby, aboard the USS Midway Museum, Del

Mar resident Melissa Kress, 40, listened as the names of emergency personnel killed in the attacks were read aloud. Kress took the afternoon off to attend the ceremony, organized by FDNY Retirees of California.

"I felt moved to come," she said as tears slipped down her cheeks.

Representatives from United Airlines and American Airlines read the names of the flight crews on the four planes that crashed that day.

"Being on the West Coast, we don't have memorials or ceremonies like they do in New York, but we weren't affected any less," said San Diego resident Vicki Jurgens, a United Airlines flight attendant.

Debbie Stevenson of Tierrasanta choked up at the podium as she read Brian Terrenzi's name. She never knew Terrenzi but was assigned his name at a Qualcomm Stadium reading in 2002. She later contacted his family through Terrenzi's hometown newspaper.

They keep in touch regularly, a connection made in the aftermath of tragedy.

"His dad said that he didn't realize that people outside New York thought about 9/11," said Stevenson, 53. "I wanted him to know that we do."

Craig Gagliardi, 36, still thinks about it.

For the fourth year in a row, he stood on the Interstate 5 pedestrian bridge near Sassafras Street during the morning and evening commutes and waved the Stars and Stripes.

"I love my country," the Mission Hills real estate broker said. "It's not a Republican thing or a Democrat thing. It's just about being an American."

The public commemorations were capped last night when hundreds of people gathered outside the Veterans Museum and Memorial Center at Balboa Park for speeches, a flag-waving march and candlelight vigil.

Retired New York City Fire Department Lt. Joseph Torrillo, who survived being buried beneath the rubble of the South Tower, told a crowd holding candles that he tours the world to say "thank you" for the support New York received.

"I'm 100 percent sure we never would have come out from under that great tragedy if it hadn't been for people like you," Torrillo said.

Staff writers Debbi Baker and Pauline Repard contributed to this report.

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