

St. Michael's Memorial Service Honoring Victims Of 9/11 & COVID-19

St. Michael's Cemetery held a ceremony in memory of all those lost because of the attacks on our country on September 11, 2001 on that date, 20 years later. The event also memorialized all those lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The gathering took place outdoors on their premises at 72-02 Astoria Boulevard, East Elmhurst. St. Michael's Cemetery's FDNY Wall of Remembrance honors the 343 firefighters who died on September 11, with each name listed, and includes an etching of Christopher Santora, the youngest FDNY firefighter who perished that day at the age of 23.

On a beautiful, sunny day, very similar to September 11, 2001, many noted, the community came to St. Michael's to remember, and never forget what happened 20 years ago on that exact day. For the past 20 years, St. Michael's has been honoring those we lost in the September 11 attacks, and this year, they also honored the memory of those we lost as a result of the COVID pandemic.

Community Relations Director Ed Horn said of the event, "When the sun shines, the skies are blue and music fills the air one could expect a beautiful day. So it was on September 11th, 2021 as it was on that Tuesday, September 11th, 2001.

"America awoke to bright skies and a promising future. It did not seem that evil was in the air. Yet on that day in 2001 evil was seizing aircraft to use as missiles intent on bringing death and destruction to American cities and citizens. Their hope of destroying America and our way of life would take thousands of lives and open the door to two decades of war.

"On Saturday, the 20th anniversary of the attacks were remembered by recalling the names of the innocent taken by senseless evil. The attacks changed the world that will never be the same."

The National Anthem was performed to perfection by Sid Cherry, who also performed Let There Be Love, and Halfway to Heaven, composed by Hank Fellows. Halfway to Heaven has been performed at all of the St. Michael's September 11 memorials for the past 20 years.

Attendees were comforted by outstanding musical interludes by Brass 22, a quintet based at The Juilliard School. They gave a concert of the music of Scott Joplin, George Gershwin, John Philip Sousa, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein.

Tony Barsamian, Publisher of the Queens Gazette started the service by introducing The Rev. Julie Hoplemazian, who delivered the opening prayer. She noted the contrast between the unity of our nation after 9/11 to the political division that occurred during COVID-19. COVID-19 has not only separated us, it has divided us," the reverend said, "at a time when we have needed each other the most," adding that she hoped that no one would forget the lessons of 9/11, namely that "The antidote to tragedy is community. The most natural response to pain is kindness so that we can face life's greatest challenges when we do it together," Rev. Hoplemazian said.

Queens Borough President Donovan Richards made a patriotic and unifying speech about the horrible attacks 20 years ago, the terrible losses of the pandemic, as well as the destruction and sad losses of Hurricane Ida. He said, "We have to overcome hate with love. We have to get back to that," as in the days after 9/11, he said. "We have to get back to being humane. That's the way we honor those who've gone on to glory."

"We had no idea if we were going to be attacked every minute for the rest of our lives or if we would even live past that day," Barsamian said. "And the same thing with COVID. When it first hit us, we were totally afraid. But as you said, Donovan, we are the United States of America. We overcome everything, and we're united together."

Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani recalled where he was on September 11, 2001, which was in his middle school. He offered his respect and admiration for his kind and thoughtful teacher, and eloquently addressed the attendees and paid his respects to those lost. "It is a cruel fact that on these two moments that truly changed our worlds forever, that New York was at the heart," Mamdani said. "But we suffered the greatest loss in those moments. And I mourn the more than 3,000 that we lost on that day of September, the more than 50,000 over this pandemic, and also the hundreds of thousands we've lost in the wars that have happened since."

Former Councilman Costa Constantinides spoke of the perseverance of the people and his recollections of the day. He noted that first responders are the greatest heroes of our country, over and above many others such as athletes who are constantly feted. Constantinides has been at virtually every St. Michael's commemoration, as well as other sponsored programs there, as St. Michael's is an integral part of the community as noted by Tony Barsamian, who cited Constantinides' loyalty and devotion to the St. Michael's community and mentioned many events historically held at St. Michael's, including Holiday Tree Lightings, Tours of the World, Scott Joplin and Beatles Tribute Concerts, Fun Runs, Toy Drives, and many other events.

Port Authority Police Dept. Commanding Officer (ret.) Kenneth Honig who was the commanding officer at JFK and LaGuardia Airports on 9/11, spoke about the day and those that have suffered as a result of the attacks and the lingering health repercussions long afterwards. He said the attacks were personal – the Port Authority lost 84 employees, 37 of them Port Authority police officers. Honig honored the hundreds of firefighters and police officers who took part in the largest rescue mission in the nation's history, rescuing over 25,000 people from the Twin Towers before they collapsed. He said, "Without regard for their own safety, they did what they do every single day. They put their lives on the line to save others."

Fire Department Chief (ret.) Al Santora and his wife, Maureen who spoke touch-



Photos Walter Karling

The Rev. Julie Hoplemazian delivered the opening prayer.

Fire Department Chief (ret.) Al Santora and his wife, Maureen who lost their son, Christopher, who at 23 was the youngest of the firefighters who died that morning.

Port Authority Police Dept. Commanding Officer (ret.) Kenneth Honig who was the commanding officer at JFK and LaGuardia Airports on 9/11.

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Queens Borough President Donovan Richards. Former Councilman Costa Constantinides. Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani. Tony Barsamian, Publisher of the Queens Gazette. Sid Cherry performs. Brass 22, a quintet based at The Juilliard School.

ingly of the loss of their son, Christopher, who at 23 was the youngest of the firefighters who died that morning. Stationed in Midtown, he was only two months on the job when he met his fate.

Maureen Santora said all the people who died have people who love them dearly, and no matter how long ago they died their love will never end. She also noted that her son Christopher would be disturbed by the current climate of political division. She said we need to be kinder to each other and more tolerant.

Al Santora asked everyone never to forget the sacrifices made by those whose names are on the memorial walls and that they “were actual human beings just like you and me. And they died, either trying to save someone and died on that day or died as a result of the injuries they sustained.” He added, “What the terrorists did was try to bring us down. But they didn’t bring us down, they raised us up. Let’s keep climbing. Let’s keep rising up.”

Barsamian said we remember our loved ones always as he hugged Al and Maureen saying that our loved ones are always with us, and all called out “Christopher Santora” in tribute.

Barsamian profusely thanked the Santoras for their sacrifice and for being there, as well as St. Michael’s staff, including General Manager Dennis Werner, The Rev. Hoplamazian, Director of Finances and Human Resources Jeff Miller, and Community Relations Director Ed Horn for all they do for the community.

