

THE OTHER HEROES OF SEPTEMBER 11

Ten years later, K of C Insurance agents recall delivering aid to the families of those who sacrificed their lives on 9/11

by Patrick Scalisi





Two steel girders from the World Trade Center, set in concrete blocks, adorn one hallway of the Knights of Columbus Museum in New Haven, Conn. Distorted from the intense heat and retrieved from the Fresh Kills Landfill in New York, the brown girders look like a piece of modernist sculpture, the metal waving as if caught in an upward gust of wind. Nearby, a golden plaque lists the names of the 45 Knights who were killed in the attacks: 11 firefighters, six policemen and 28 civilians, including one member who was a passenger on American Airlines Flight 11, the first plane that hit the Twin Towers.

To be sure, Sept. 11, 2001, was not a K of C tragedy or even a New York tragedy — it was an American tragedy, one that brought out some of the best that U.S. citizens had to offer. Knights were among those who did their part, actively embodying the Order's principles of charity and patriotism. Across the country, K of C units sponsored prayer vigils, fundraisers and blood drives. One council in Sequim, Wash., even sought out and offered financial assistance to the family of a member who died at the World Trade Center.

On a national level, the Order's Board of Directors voted within one day of the attacks to create the Knights of Columbus Heroes Fund, a program wherein the families of any first responder who died in the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center or the Pentagon were given an emergency payment from the Order, regardless of the family's membership in the Knights or even of their religious tradition. The men responsible for delivering those stipend checks were the Knights' very own professionally trained insurance force.

A New York City firefighter calls for more rescue workers to make their way into the rubble of the World Trade Center Sept. 15, 2001.

“Some of [the families] were wondering how they were going to meet their mortgage because the city stopped their payroll,” said Vincent P. Valerio, an agent at the time with the Bambace Agency in New York. “Some people didn’t know where the next rent check was coming from, and the Knights of Columbus was there for that, was there to help them with their groceries. However much it was, it was enough to show them that somebody out there cared.”

Between September 2001 and July 2002, the Order’s field force delivered 419 checks to the families of firefighters, law enforcement officers and emergency medical personnel who perished in the attacks. For many agents, this was a natural part of the job — as natural, at least, as the first responders who ran fearlessly into a pair of burning skyscrapers to save the lives of others.

A FUND FOR HEROES

American Airlines Flight 11 hit the World Trade Center’s North Tower at 8:46 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001. Within 26 hours, the Executive and Finance Committee of the Knights of Columbus Board of Directors had convened for a special meeting to approve a \$1 million fund to assist the families of emergency service personnel who had died in the attacks. Dubbed the “Heroes Fund,” it was the first time in the Order’s history that such an account had been created in response to a national tragedy.

At a news conference on Sept. 13, 2001, Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson formally announced the formation of the Heroes Fund and revealed that the first three checks had been processed and paid to the families of New York Fire Department personnel.

Valerio had been a field agent for only five months when the attacks occurred, yet he was suddenly on the front lines of the 9/11 disaster. A former captain in New York City’s Department of Corrections, Valerio delivered approximately 70 checks to the families of deceased emergency service personnel — more than any other K of C representative.

“It was part of the calling for some reason,” said Valerio. “Knowing many of the men that were killed, it hit home. It hit home big time.”

Although the Heroes Fund started with \$1 million, donations started to pour in from throughout North America, the Caribbean and the Philippines. The largest contribution — \$20,770 — came from the Michigan State Council, while the smallest — \$1 — came from a 92-year-old woman who heard about the fund and wanted to help. In total, nearly 5,000 individuals and organizations donated an additional \$491,661 to the fund — enough so that each of the 419 Heroes Fund recipients received approxi-

mately \$3,500 in total. For many families, this was the first support of any kind that they received.

In eastern Nassau County, Edward Dioguardi’s agency delivered between 40 and 50 Heroes Fund checks. For his part, Dioguardi delivered about 20 checks personally.

“It was an honor,” recalled Dioguardi, “because I just wanted to do something to help out. And the people, once they heard that I was calling on behalf of the Knights of Columbus and that we had a Heroes Fund check to deliver to them, there was instant trust on their part.”

In most cases, the recipients were not members or the widows of members. Many, though, were familiar with the Order or knew someone who was a Knight. When contacting recipients, Dioguardi emphasized that he was not promoting insurance or membership in the Order, but instead that he just “wanted to give them something to help them out financially and just show our concern

as representatives of the Knights of Columbus.”

‘A VERY GIVING ORGANIZATION’

Among the early Heroes Fund recipients was Kathleen Ganci, the widow of Chief of Department Peter J. Ganci. A 33-year veteran of the fire force, Chief Ganci, 54, was the highest-ranking uniformed officer to die in the attacks. In addition to his wife, he also left behind a daughter and two sons.

To this day, Kathleen Ganci is extremely humble about her husband’s sacrifice, even though the anniversary inevitably dredges up painful emotions.

“He was very well respected, very well liked,” she said. “He’s still remembered, and that’s what’s very important to me.”

While Chief Ganci was not a member of the Knights of Columbus, Kathleen’s father was — and she has fond memories of the Order from throughout her life.

“The Knights of Columbus was always very important to me because my dad was a Knight,” she said. “I remember going to the council where he was a member and, in fact, I had my wedding reception at the Knights of Columbus hall in [Amityville].”

The money Kathleen Ganci received from the Heroes Fund, delivered by Dioguardi, was more than just a check to help pay the bills, she said. Instead, it was symbolic of the charity that she knew was a hallmark of the Knights.

“It was nice to get the check, and I understand that that’s important to a lot of people, but it was the emotional connection that I needed, that I felt at that time,” Ganci explained. “Anybody who’s familiar with the Knights of Columbus knows that it’s a very giving organization.”

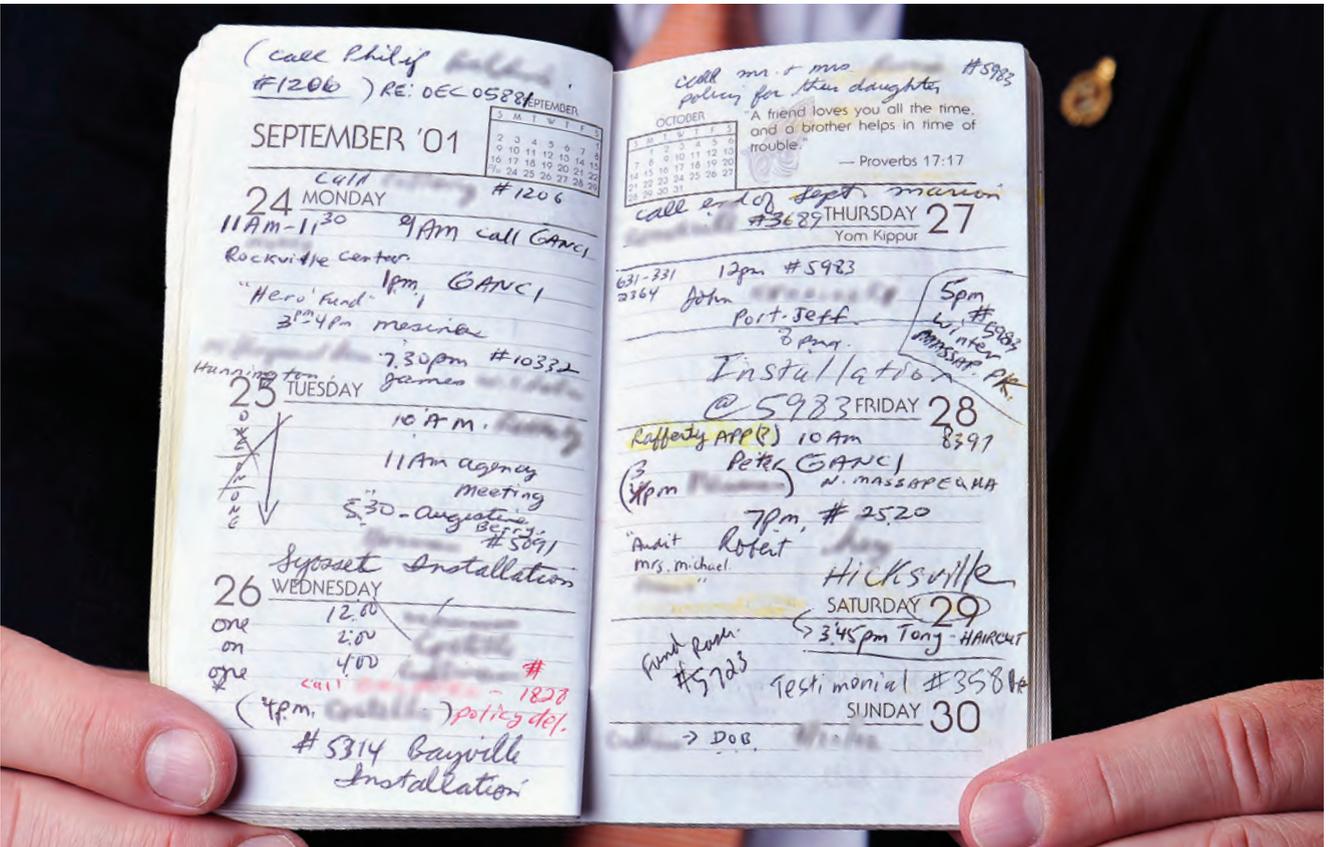
These days, Ganci cherishes the memory of her late husband while spending time surrounded by her family. Her children have



New York Fire Department Chief Peter J. Ganci’s helmet is carried into his funeral at St. Kilian Catholic Church in Farmingdale, N.Y.



Edward Dioguardi (above), a Knights of Columbus field agent in North Bellmore, N.Y., distributed about 20 Heroes Fund checks. His schedule for the week of Sept. 24, 2001, (below) shows when he delivered a check to Peter Ganci's widow, Kathleen. (Personal information has been removed.)



all married, and she now has seven grandchildren that range from six months to 6 years old. The anniversary of 9/11 brings its share of sorrow, but Kathleen is determined to remain above the emotional abyss that she experienced in the years immediately following the attack.

“As anybody would in any great tragedy, you can’t go on if you always live in those sad times,” she said. “There’s a lot of happy times in 10 years, and that’s what I try to focus on now.”

As for the Knights, she remains thankful for the support that the Order provided in the days following Sept. 11, 2001.

“I hope we never have another tragedy like we did, but if we do, it’s nice to know that there’s an organization such as the Knights of Columbus to remember people. They don’t discriminate on religion or on age or on gender — they just give where there’s a need.”

REMEMBERED ALWAYS

When the Heroes Fund was officially closed in July 2002, it marked the end of one of the Order’s most noteworthy programs in recent memory. Ten years later, agents like Valerio and Dioguardi look back on the weeks following Sept. 11, 2001, with a mixture of solemnity and pride.

“There’s so many things that the Knights did for everybody ... who died on 9/11 that it touched a lot of these people in a lot of

good ways,” said Valerio. “There were barriers broken down, I believe. The heart of our organization is charity.”

Dioguardi agreed: “Normally we go to see the 80-year-old widow whose husband had lived many, many years and passed away and it was kind of the natural events of life. To go on these [visits] and see so many young people and young families and young children ... it was a good feeling to know that I was doing something to help them.”

For the recipients, too, healing continues with each and every day.

“I know it sounds strange because it’s been 10 years, but it’s still a big wound in my heart,” said Kathleen Ganci. “As time goes on you learn how to stay away from things that are painful and evoke memories that make you really sad or depressed because that’s not where you are now and you don’t want to go back there.”

Though Father Michael J. McGivney witnessed plenty of misfortune in 19th-century New Haven when he founded the Knights of Columbus, he likely could have never imagined an event like the Sept. 11 attacks. Nonetheless, there’s little doubt that he would have been proud of what his Knights accomplished on that clear September day and in the months — and years — that followed. ♦

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KNIGHTS ANNOUNCE NEW DISASTER RESPONSE PROGRAM

ONE MONTH BEFORE the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Supreme Council introduced a new initiative called the Knights of Columbus Disaster Response Program that will provide support to the victims of natural or manmade disasters.

Announced Aug. 2 by Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson at the 129th Supreme Convention in Denver, the Disaster Response Program will help local councils prepare to serve as “second responders” by providing food, clothing and shelter to those affected by disasters. Retired New York Fire Department Capt. Alfredo Fuentes, a Knight who survived the 9/11 attacks in New York City, will serve as the program’s director.

“With Capt. Fuentes’ leadership, it is my hope that every state will develop a strong disaster response team, made up of current and retired first responders and other volunteers who will be able to deliver hope when it is needed most,” said Anderson in remarks about the program’s inception.

At present, program organizers are working to establish a framework for the initiative as Fuentes and other members of the Supreme Council staff identify individuals and K of C units that would be willing to assist if and when a disaster occurs.

“It has always been my belief that we have an unbelievable untapped resource, and that untapped resource is the retired firemen, policemen, EMS people and skilled people such as nurses, doctors, etc. And I just felt that if we used this resource to assist during a disaster, it would just be invaluable to the federal government and to the citizens themselves,” said Fuentes.

Some councils, based on their geographic locations, already have some experience dealing with disasters, Fuentes added. For instance, councils in Florida are often adept at hurricane preparedness, while those in the Midwest may have experience with tornadoes.

Though still in its early stages, response to the program so far has been overwhelmingly positive, according to

Fuentes. For now, organizers are limiting the initiative to the United States, though Fuentes would like to see it expanded in the future to all the countries where the Order is present. In addition, there is virtually no limit to the amount of aid that the Knights can offer, from providing food and water to rescue workers, to granting use of council halls as forward operating bases, to keeping tool depots in each state that are accessible to first responders and volunteers.

“I like to say that we’re building the bridges we walk on,” said Fuentes.

More information about the program will be made public as it becomes available. In the meantime, Fuentes is thrilled to be combining two of his great passions: disaster response and the Knights of Columbus.

“Coming on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, it’s just wonderful to know that we don’t forget,” he said. “It’s wonderful to know that we’re prepared and that we’re getting even more prepared, that we’ve learned some lessons. That’s a wonderful thing.” ♦