



Omahans post flags at Memorial Park to remember 9/11 victims

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Jim Sullivan of Omaha learned that America was under attack as he pulled on his shoes that blue September morning 22 years ago.

Like millions around the world, he watched in horror as the World Trade Center's twin towers burned, then collapsed in a massive pile of rubble after hijacked airliners piloted by Islamist terrorists slammed into them.

"I can still be nauseated watching the second plane hit the tower," Sullivan said. "It was a life-changing event."

Saturday morning, Sullivan and his 10-year-old grandson, A.J., joined about 100 volunteers at Memorial Park as they placed 2,977 flags in the green lawn below the colonnade, each flag bearing the name of one person who died in the terror attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania.



The event, a local tradition since 2004, is organized by the Rotary Club of Omaha.

A.J. Sullivan, 10, and his grandfather, Jim, place a 9/11 memorial flag at Memorial Park Saturday. The Rotary Club of Omaha organized the placement of the flags — an annual event since 2004 — to individually honor the victims of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

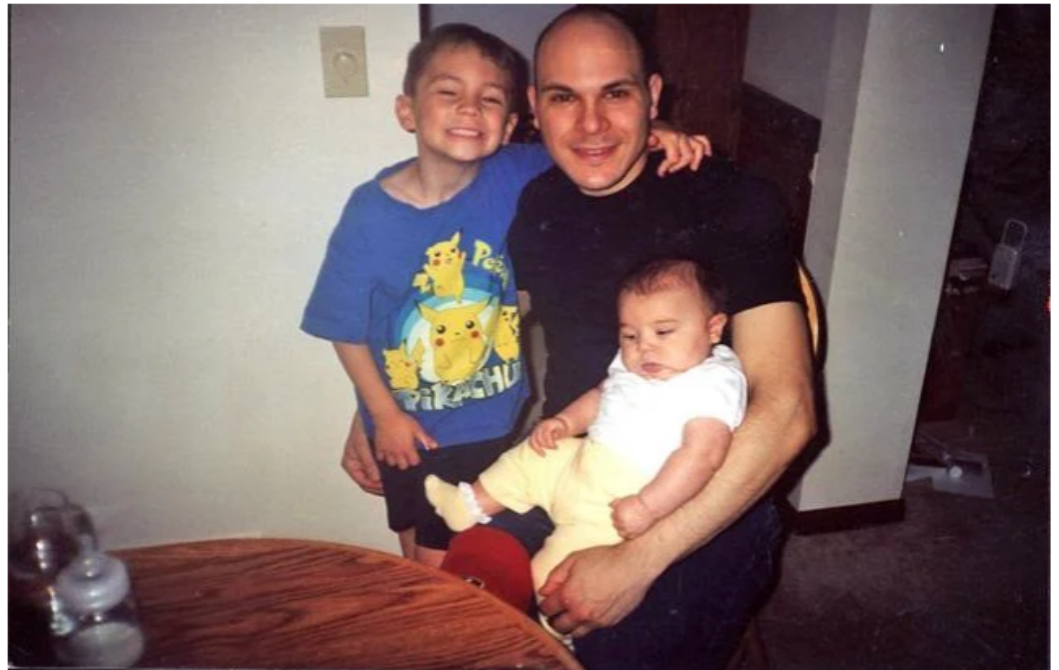
“I think it’s fun, to put all the flags down,” said A.J., who attends Standing Bear Elementary School. “We kind of learned a little bit.”

The horror of 9/11 hit Lynn Castrianno harder than almost anyone in Omaha. She was at work when a colleague told her a plane had hit the World Trade Center.

“I said: ‘What the hell? My brother works there,’” Castrianno recalled.

Leonard Castrianno, 30, was a broker at the financial services firm Cantor Fitzgerald, on the 105th floor of the North Tower. American Airlines Flight 11 had struck the building between the 93rd and 99th floors, cutting off all emergency exits for those above — including 658 employees working at Cantor Fitzgerald.

Lynn Castrianno tried frantically to call her brother. She never got through.



Leonard Castrianno with niece Antonia Galante and nephew Rosano Leonard Galante. Castrianno was 30 when he died Sept. 11, 2001, in the terror attack on the World Trade Center.

COURTESY LYNN CASTRIANNO

With her co-workers, she watched the live TV coverage with mounting fear — right up until the North Tower crumbled to the ground.

“I remember witnessing that and saying, ‘Oh my God, I just watched my brother get murdered,’” Castrianno said. “I was devastated.”

She channeled her grief into finding a way to memorialize her brother and the others who died with him. After participating in a memorial event at Ground Zero on the first anniversary, and memorial vigil on the second, Castrianno came up with the idea for the Omaha flag memorial just before the third anniversary, in 2004.

With the help of friends, she wrote the names, ages and location of all of the 9/11 victims on tags and attached them to flags that had been donated by Oriental Trading.

“The outpouring of support after 9/11 was just incredible,” she said. “This was a way I could give something back.”

Her sister, Leigh Macadlo — Leonard’s twin — has organized a similar flag memorial in Buffalo, New York, the Castriannos’ hometown.



Lynn Castrianno reads the name on a flag at Memorial Park in 2021. Castrianno lost her brother Leonard on 9/11 and started putting up flags in the park in 2004 years ago to represent the victims.

CHRIS MACHIAN, THE WORLD-HERALD

Several years ago, Lynn Castrianno sought help from the Rotary Club of Omaha. She wanted to ensure the tradition continues, even after she is gone.

“I’ve been slowly handing over the reins,” she said. “I’m thrilled that it still goes on, 19 years later.”

Rotary’s Dan Esch has been the coordinator since 2019, making sure the flags are lined up properly and divided into groups honoring those who died in the North Tower, South Tower, Pentagon and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Broken flags are replaced with newer ones, donated by WoodmenLife.

Esch said this year’s crowd of volunteers was larger than usual and included many more young people, probably because the flag-placing was moved from a weekday evening to Saturday.

“I’m super pleased,” he said. “This is going a lot quicker than most years.”

The flags will remain in place until Sept. 13.

Michelle Trawick, the dean of the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, is a Rotary member who participated for the first time since she moved here in 2020.

On 9/11, she was seven months pregnant with her son, who is now 21.

“It was a scary time. I still cry when I think about it,” Trawick said. “I called to tell him we were doing this, because it is so important to remember.”

Many of the young people who turned out Saturday were Scouts — including Edwin Davis, 6, accompanied by his father, John.

“We need to remember all the people that died in the 9/11 attacks,” John Davis said. “We’re just trying to help as much as possible.”

Jim Sullivan said he brought his grandson because he wanted A.J. to learn about what happened after 9/11, too.

“If I remember anything, it’s looking back on how our country was united. Everybody was all-in,” Sullivan said. “We seem to have forgotten 9/11 today.”

Castrianno, more than anything, wants to make sure that future generations don’t forget 9/11.



Edwin Davis, 6, receives help from Hal Daub, a former Omaha mayor and congressman, in placing a 9/11 memorial flag at Memorial Park on Saturday.

Steve Liewer

“I love seeing the kids here,” she said. “They don’t really have a clue what’s going on. But years from now, they’ll put the pieces together, and they’ll understand. This is history.”



Omaha volunteers gathered at Memorial Park on Saturday morning to place 2,977 flags in the lawn below the colonnade: one for each person who died in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Lynn Castrianno of Omaha started the memorial in 2004 in honor of her brother, Leonard, who died in the attack on the World Trade Center. Now it is coordinated each year by the Rotary Club of Omaha.

STEVE LIEWER, THE WORLD-HERALD