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Middletown Remembers the Victims of September 11th

U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Excerpts of Remarks
Middletown Township, NJ
Sept. 11, 2016

Everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing—I was in Washington chairing a Veteran’s Affairs Committee hearing—when a group of cowards hijacked airliners in order to perpetrate the worst act of terrorism in American history.

No-one remembers the shock, horror and numbing sorrow more, however, than the families and close friends of the victims.

Because it was a surprise attack, there was no chance to fight back that day although when Todd Beamer and other passengers learned what happened to the Twin Towers, Todd famously said “let’s roll” and attacked the terrorists on board the flight that crashed in a Pennsylvania field.

Who can forget the courageous first responders running up the stairs of the burning buildings—with total disregard for their own safety—saving some at the expense of their own lives.

On the morning of 9/11, I got a mere glimpse—I say again, a mere glimpse—into the sense of horror suffered by the victim’s families when I couldn’t reach my brother Tom—an American Airlines 757 Captain who often piloted Flight 11 from Logan to LA, the flight that crashed into the North Tower.

Stuck in traffic within sight of the burning Pentagon, cell phones were all but gridlocked. About noon I got through. He and his flight attendant wife Sandy were safe but were in anguish because they knew the pilots and crew on board Flight 11.

For the families of the 37 Middletown victims—for all the victim’s loved ones—the news that day and since was absolutely devastating.

Both then—and now fifteen years later—words are inadequate to convey our empathy for those who died and for the victims’ families.

For 15 years, the families have had to endure their loss and a broken heart.

For many, their faith in God has helped them survive and overcome.

Yet the grief persists.

On Friday, several 9/11 families again gathered in Congress—as they did so frequently over the years to demand accountability and justice. They were there on Friday for passage of the *Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act*, a bill designed to empower victim’s families access to the courts to determine whether Saudi Arabia was complicit in the 9/11 terror attacks. The legislation now goes to the White House.

Meeting old friends of 15 years after the House debate on Friday afternoon, each was eager to share updates and smart phone videos of their kids, now mostly grown up.

But there were tears also. And obvious pain.

Which reminded me of that haunting song in *Les Miserables* after one of the main characters loses many of his friends in a battle:

“There’s a grief that can’t be spoken

There’s a pain goes on and on;

Empty chairs and empty tables...

Where my friends will meet no more.”

Yes, empty chairs and empty tables here in Middletown and elsewhere but those chairs and tables are not empty in heaven.

Thank you Mayor Scharfenberger, Deputy Mayor Fiore and the Township Committee for always being there for the families and for the opportunity to remember—and honor—the victims.