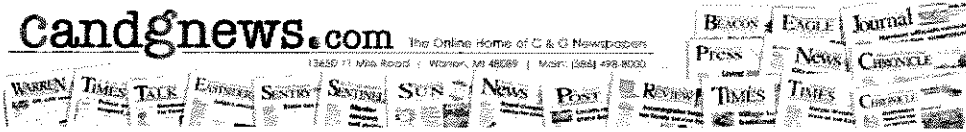


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Photo by Erin Sanchez

During the Michigan Fallen Heroes Memorial event Sept. 11 in Pontiac, hosted by Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard, Amy Bonneau, mother of Jackson police officer James Bonneau, who was killed in the line of duty earlier this year, shared touching words with the crowd.

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Fallen, but not forgotten

Community gathers on 9/11 to remember those killed in the line of duty

By Jennie Miller
 C & G Staff Writer

PONTIAC — The rain helped wash away the tears of those moved by the significance of the day — nine years after nearly 3,000 people perished at the hands of terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001 — as a crowd gathered for an annual ceremony at the Michigan Fallen Heroes Memorial in Pontiac.

The audience included grieving family members of those recently killed in the line of duty and members of police departments standing strong as they continue to face the dangers of the job.

Nearby stood the memorial — a wall with the names of local firefighters and police officers killed in the line of duty etched in stone, alongside a bronze statue portraying nameless heroes kneeling.

“Unfortunately, every year we have had to add to this wall,” said Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard as he read off the names of the seven individuals who joined the more than 800 other police officers and firefighters who’ve perished in the line of duty in Michigan since 1864. “We hope and pray we won’t add many more names in the future.”

Shannon Edwards cuddled her two children, Luke and Moriah, as the name of her husband, Cpl. Matthew Edwards of the Taylor Police Department, was read. Amy and Mark Bonneau looked on as the name of their son, James Bonneau of the Jackson Police Department, was mentioned. Melissa Huff is still struggling with the loss of her husband, Brian Huff of the Detroit Police Department.

Randy Gallegos, chief patrol officer for the U.S. Border Patrol, was among the speakers, and the names of three of his comrades were added to the wall.

“To say this is a place of honor and that it is special is an understatement,” Gallegos said of the memorial. “I am struck by the bronze statue of a kneeling police officer and firefighter side by side, symbolizing the brotherhood we share as public servants. ... This memorial, just like your hearts, is a place where your loved one’s memory will live forever.”

Gallegos praised the profession as heroic.

“There are some 900,000 active law enforcement officers in the U.S.,” he said. “Men and women who are willing to put their own lives at great risk for the safety and protection of others. ... Law enforcement officers and firefighters are never off duty — they are dedicated public servants who are sworn to protect the people in our communities at any time and any place that peace is threatened.

“This job is dangerous, and it always will be,” Gallegos continued. “We will not continue to be the land of the free without the dedication and service and sacrifice of all of our men and women in uniform.”

He reflected on that day nine years ago when members of his brotherhood demonstrated just how tough the job can be, and many paid the ultimate sacrifice.

“We should never forget the horror of that day, but at the same time, we should never forget the heroes of that day,” Gallegos said. “Men and women risking their own lives, running into burning buildings to save the lives of total strangers. I’m surrounded by heroes here today: the names on this wall, the men and women in uniform, and the faces of friends and family members who have loaned us their loved one in service to our communities.”

Mark Boneau said his son had always wanted to be a cop.

“He brought us great joy, and he was a great part of our family,” Boneau said. “(This memorial) is really nice to keep the memories of these fallen heroes alive, and also to always remember what’s going on out there (in the world).”

The families found strength in one another.

Bill Nagle, the father of Jessica Nagle-Wilson, a Hazel Park police officer who was killed in 2002, came to the ceremony to remember his daughter and offer his support to the families who are in the midst of the raw pain of losing their loved one in the last few months.

“When Jessica was killed, there were families of other fallen officers who came to us and supported us,” Nagle said. “Now we’re here to support them the way other people helped us. It helps to realize you’re not alone. (It helps) to know somebody has been through the same thing as you. We lost our first-born child. Parents should never have to outlive a child. People have asked me, if I could do it all over again, would I have not let her become a police officer. But people have also come up to me over the years, telling me what she did for them as a police officer and how she helped them. If I could change that night, I would. I’d give anything to have her back, but I also think I’d give anything for the people she helped.”

Bouchard, president of the Michigan Fallen Heroes Memorial, began to conceptualize the tribute 10 years ago.

“I always felt it was appropriate for people who gave their lives in the line of duty to be remembered — not just on the day of the funeral, but forever,” Bouchard said.

It wasn’t until after Sept. 11, 2001, and the experience of serving at Ground Zero in the aftermath, that Bouchard knew what really needed to be done — something that honored the sacrifices of both firefighters and law enforcement officers.

“I’ve spent 25 years in law enforcement, and we’re always around firefighters,” he explained. “It’s a brotherhood. And to see what they did together that day — it just seemed to make sense to make it one together. It’s the only one in the country like it. It’s a reminder to the public what police officers and firefighters face every day — they saw it live on their televisions on Sept. 11, but it’s every day. This is an opportunity to let more people know what they face.”

Bouchard and a convoy of 14 people left for Ground Zero the night of Sept. 11 and spent nine days as part of the rescue, recovery and cleanup effort.

“It was one of the most impactful and emotional experiences of my life,” Bouchard

said. "Seeing people in pain, at the (blockade), holding pictures of loved ones asking if we could save them --- it's something anybody who served there will never forget."

Like the names carved in stone, Bouchard wants to make sure the sacrifices made by his comrades in the line of duty are etched in the minds of those they serve to protect.

"As time goes by, people can forget, but this way, it's a permanent place to remind people (that many) are killed in the line of duty," said Cpl. Jerry Cole of the Taylor Police Department.

The name of Taylor Auxiliary Police Lt. Dan Kromer, who was killed Sept. 7 in a hit-and-run incident while assisting a motorist on the shoulder of I-94, will be added to the wall in 2011.

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