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## Remembering 9/11

The events of September 11, 2001 touched the lives of all Americans; even those not directly affected found themselves stricken with compassion, fear, outrage, and sadness over the thousands of lives lost that day. Americans also found themselves faced with a new enemy, propagated by the media: Islamic terrorists. For many this event brought a greater understanding of not just radical extremists but also the millions of Muslims living in America and throughout the world. For others, the events on September 11<sup>th</sup> put a face to an enemy perceived as attacking their very way of life. Ten years later, the painful memories associated with 9/11 culminated as anniversary remembrance events were planned all over the country. Not everyone feels the same about that fateful day and over the ten years since, many have developed different perspectives of the horrible action. While towns and cities all across America planned ceremonies to remember the fallen victims and glorify the heroes of 9/11, individuals also took the initiative to remember. Programs on diversity and acceptance were also held.

As early as July, cities like Marietta, GA began calling for volunteers.<sup>1</sup> On the morning of Saturday, September 10, 2011, volunteers, organized by the Kiwanis Club of Marietta, paraded 3,000 flags one mile to their resting place at Kennesaw Mountain Battlefield Park's week long Field of Flags commemoration.<sup>2</sup> CBS News Atlanta reporter John Shirek called this a "personal...ten year wound – still fresh," and indeed the solemn memorial service held on

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<sup>1</sup> "Volunteers needed for 9/11 memorial," July 22, 2011, *City of Marietta*, [www.marietta.gov](http://www.marietta.gov) (accessed August 27, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> "Field of Flags: 09.11 – Commemorating Ten Years," *The Kiwanis Club of Marietta*, <http://911fieldofflags.com/> (accessed October 30, 2011).

Sunday September 11, 2011, proved to be a poignant reminder of those lost ten years before.<sup>3</sup> Similar to the commemoration ceremony at Kennesaw Mountain were services all over the country. Nationally televised, the commemoration in New York City garnered criticism when it excluded religious leaders from the day's lineup of speakers. Pastors and city leaders spoke out against the exclusion stating that people depend on the clergy in times such as these for comfort and leadership.<sup>4</sup> Although several petitions were circulated, New York City's Mayor Bloomberg retained his decision to exclude religious leaders from the ceremony and keep the program "focused on the families of the victims."<sup>5</sup>

The decision to keep the ceremony in New York City secular put it in stark contrast to the City of Roswell's "Roswell Remembers 9/11" ceremony. The Roswell event, hosted by the Roswell American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Roswell Rotary Club, had invocations by Cdr. Jim Gray, Rev. Neville Billy, Chaplain Bryant, and Rev. Malone Dodson, as well as a closing benediction. In addition to being a particularly religious service, the Roswell Commemoration was also patriotic in nature. The events of 9/11 were recounted narratively by the emcee of the event and attendees were taken back to the fears and emotions felt that day. Several speakers used rhetoric reminiscent of the anti-Islamic sentiments that filled the media after the terrorist attacks. In spite of this the program was an emotional, poignant event that honored the victims and heroes of 9/11. A moment of silence and bell ringing was observed at

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<sup>3</sup> John Shirek "KENNESAW: 3,000 flags for 9/11 victims: it is all so personal," *11 Alive News*, Sept. 11, 2011, <http://www.11alive.com/news/article/204930/3/3000-flags-at-Kennesaw-Mountain-for-911-victims--it-is-all-so-personal> (accessed October 30, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Napp Nazworth, "Religious Leaders Excluded from NYC 9/11 Commemoration," *Christian Post*, August 25, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/religious-leaders-absent-at-nyc-9-11-commemoration-54525/> (accessed August 27, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Judson Berger, "Bloomberg Stands By Decision to Leave Out Clergy at 9/11 Ceremony," *Fox News*, August 26, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/08/26/bloomberg-stands-by-decision-to-leave-out-clergy-at-11-ceremony/#ixzz1WGH4jGoR> (accessed August, 27, 2011).

8:46am, 9:02am, 9:37am, and 10:30am: the moments of impact for all four planes involved in the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

Some commemorations were also branded for their artistic representations and attempts to create dialogue. In New York City, photographic exhibits were shown throughout the city in churches and galleries. Museums and paintings containing ash from ground zero, created by Ejay Weiss, were displayed at St. Peter's Church in New York through the month of September. A tribute quilt was displayed at the American Folk Art Museum while stage play narrative readings were held all over the city.<sup>7</sup> Even in Atlanta, commemorations took an artistic turn. Carapace, a non-profit storytelling group, participating in the Decatur Book Festival the first weekend of September, invited individuals to share their 9/11 stories during their "Persistence of Memory: Stores of Renewal from 9/11" at Eddie's Attic.<sup>8</sup>

Also found at the Decatur Book Festival, was the first of several blood drive locations in Georgia in conjunction with a national campaign called Muslims for Life National Blood Drive. Initiated by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Silver Spring, MD, Muslims nationwide hoped the campaign to save lives would not only be an active and positive commemoration of 9/11 but also a step towards separating the Muslim community from the radical Islamists responsible for creating such a "damaging introduction of Islam to most Americans."<sup>9</sup> Another event expanding the commemoration of 9/11 into a broader context for acceptance and diversity was Gwinnett County, Georgia's "An America for All of Us" program held on Thursday

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<sup>6</sup> Dara Vekasy, author's notes from "Roswell Remembers 9/11" commemoration in Roswell, GA, September 11, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Shattuck, "9/11 in the Arts: An Anniversary Guide," *The New York Times*, August 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/26/arts/911-in-the-arts-an-anniversary-guide.html> (accessed August 27, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> "Book Fest will Feature Stories of 9/11," *Decatur-Avondale Estates Patch*, August 14, 2011, <http://decatur.patch.com/articles/book-fest-will-feature-stories-of-911> (accessed August 27, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Rosalind Bentley, "Muslim group holds blood drive to honor 9/11 victims," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 8, 2011, <http://www.ajc.com/news/muslim-group-holds-blood-1162859.html?printArticle=y> (accessed September 10, 2011).

September 8, 2011 at the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center. The collection of business owners, community leaders, and general public was enhanced by representation from the U.S. Attorney's Office, the White House, and non-profit organizations like the ACLU of Georgia and Raksha. The evening began with a viewing of the 2009 documentary film "Vincent Who?" The film served as a jumping off point for the panel discussion to follow. Racial tensions, profiling, and hate crimes along with themes of diversity, understanding, and commitment to community were addressed. Although 9/11 and its remembrance was not as fixed in the forefront of this program, the personal, action-oriented approach of the evening was a unique and welcome variation.<sup>10</sup>

In August, prompted by the upcoming 9/11 anniversary, President Obama asked Americans to reach out and rediscover the feelings of community that were so prevalent directly after the September 11, 2001 attacks. During his weekly national address, Obama said "as we saw after 9/11, the strength of America has always been the character and compassion of our people."<sup>11</sup> This personal connection to 9/11 and need to reach out to the community was seen in the ways everyday people honored the victims and heroes of 9/11. 9/11 Memorial Stair Climbs were organized as early 2005, when five Denver firefighters climbed 110 stories, the same number climbed by the firefighters in the Twin Towers. The memorial has grown nationally and in 2011, forty-eight cities participated.<sup>12</sup> Fox 5 News Atlanta reported that north Georgia firefighters climbed the stairs at the Westin Peachtree Plaza on August 24, 2011, each holding a

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<sup>10</sup> Dara Vekasy, author's notes from "An America for All of Us" program in Gwinnett County, GA, September 8, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Kuhnhenh, "Obama to the nation: Rekindle post-Sept. 11 unity," *CBS Atlanta News*. August 27, 2011, <http://www.cbsatlanta.com/story/15343698/obama-recall-the-spirit-of-unity-from-911?clienttype=printable> (accessed August 27, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, "About 9/11 Stair Climbs," *9/11 Memorial Stair Climbs*, <http://9-11stairclimb.com/> (accessed October 30, 2011).

photograph of a firefighter that passed on 9/11.<sup>13</sup> Douglas Kerns, a member of the Dalton Fire Department and eleven others formed a team of cyclists, dubbed “the Freedom Riders,” that rode 1,150 miles from Atlanta to New York City in honor of the fallen firefighters of 9/11.<sup>14</sup> Even the social networking site meetup.com sent an email out to its members on Saturday September 10, 2011 reminding them that the site was created in response to 9/11 in an effort to “grow local communities” and counteract the prevailing distrust caused by the terrorist attacks.<sup>15</sup>

As Americans remembered the tragedy of September 11, 2001 ten years later, a general feeling of grief seemed to combine with a glimmer of hope in many towns across the United States. Unfortunately, the anger and fear that developed in response to the terrorist attacks of 2001 continue to plague the country. While messages of peace and remembrance are told through the story of Douglas Kerns, Chatworth cyclist, others reach peaceful catharsis through art like Ejay Weiss. Muslim Americans, too, attempted to make sense out of the tragedy of 9/11 but they have the additional burden of also attempting to reconcile the hate directed towards their religion while promoting a more true understanding of Islam. The most devastating experience for Americans since Pearl Harbor, 9/11 continues to haunt the collective American consciousness as individuals and communities attempt to come to grips with its legacy.

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<sup>13</sup> “North Ga. Firefighters Hold 9/11 Memorial,” *Fox 5 News*, August 24, 2011, [http://www.myfoxatlanta.com/dpp/news/local\\_news/North-Ga.-Firefighters-Hold-Memorial-20110824-pm-pk](http://www.myfoxatlanta.com/dpp/news/local_news/North-Ga.-Firefighters-Hold-Memorial-20110824-pm-pk) (accessed August 30, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> “Chatsworth man biking for 9/11 anniversary,” *CBS Atlanta News*, August 27, 2011, <http://www.cbsatlanta.com/story/15284466/chatsworth-man-biking-for-911-anniversary?clienttype=printable> (accessed August 27, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Scott Heiferman, email from info@meetup.com to author, September 10, 2011.