



(From left to right) Fire Chief Jim Jobusch, Volunteer Coordinator Kim Yonda-Lead, Community Services Coordinator Jean Machnicki and Town Manager Collin DeWitt pose next to Gilbert's new special 9/11 artifact, a beam from the World Trade Center. The beam will be part of the town's own memorial tribute to those who lost their lives in the historic tragedy.

NEVER FORGET

Gilbert pays homage to 9/11 by building a hometown memorial

BY MICHELLE TALSMA EVERSON
PHOTO BY CARL SCHULTZ

When you think about it geographically, New York City seems a long way away from Gilbert, Ariz. But, when you think about it in terms of the tragedy that happened on Sept. 11, 2001, distance doesn't matter, because it touches you right at the heart. No matter your geographic location, everyone was somehow affected by the 9/11 event—even right here in Gilbert, some 2,500 miles from the place where the Twin Towers fell.

This September marks the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy. In honor of the nearly 3,000 men, women and children that died during the attacks, the Town of Gilbert is currently raising funds for a one-of-a-kind memorial that will feature a 1,500 pound beam from the World Trade Center—an artifact given to the town by the New York City Port Authority.

"About three years ago, the New York City Port Authority said that when the case [regarding the 9/11 attacks] concluded that they would distribute artifacts to cities and towns across the country," explains Gilbert Town Manager Collin DeWitt. "I put in for one that was about 8 feet wide and 1,000 pounds because that's what I could carry in my pick-up truck. During the last week of February they called me and gave me a choice of dates to pick it up; we had to provide our own transportation for it. There's a tradition among officers that you stay with the body of a fallen comrade until they're laid to rest—we

treated that artifact the same way. So, I drove to New York City and picked it up on March 24.”

After bringing the treasured artifact back to Gilbert, plans began for a poignant memorial. “We’re still in the designing phase, but I picture a simple pedestal, with the beam suspended, but still low enough for a child to touch; I want to wear it out from touch,” DeWitt says.

The goal is to have the memorial built by September 11 of this year to honor the 10-year anniversary of the tragic event. The memorial will be built on Gilbert’s Civic Center Campus and the town is currently raising money to fund the cost through community events and fundraisers.

“This is going to be a community memorial; we want people to get involved and be a part of it,” says Jean Machnicki, the community services coordinator for the Gilbert Fire Department. “Gilbert was one of only two Arizona municipalities to receive a 9/11 artifact and, by building this memorial, we can make history here, too.”

To help raise money to build the Gilbert 9/11 Memorial, the Town of Gilbert will be hosting several events over the next few months to let community members see the beam while learning about the memorial and potentially donating to the cause. Those who are interested in contributing can also donate online or get involved in other ways, like hosting an event or joining the 9/11 Memorial Committee, Machnicki adds.

“I’m from New York originally, so, to me, it’s nice to have a place of remembrance locally,” Machnicki says. “It was a historic event that affected all of us, so this memorial will be a place to pay our respects. Everybody was touched by 9/11.”

To DeWitt, the memorial and the process to build it is all about uniting the community and honoring those who passed on that fateful day.

“I think this memorial is important because we need to remember the lives that were given up in a nanosecond—the people who just went to work that day and had no idea that it would be their last,” he says. “We need to honor the loss of life and remember how fragile our freedoms are. With this memorial, we are reminded, across all party lines, to cherish and honor our freedoms. Three thousands folks died that day; this memorial helps to personalize the loss of life.”

To learn more about the Gilbert 9/11 Memorial, visit gilbertaz.gov/911memorial. ■

“Follow the Steel” Events

Want to assist the cause or see the beam yourself? To help involve the community in the creation of the future Gilbert 9/11 Memorial, the Town of Gilbert has an exclusive “Follow the Steel” calendar available online that lists upcoming fundraising events and chances to see the beam in-person. To learn more, go to gilbertaz.gov/911memorial and click “Follow the Steel.”

This month, be sure not to miss a community pancake breakfast from 7-11 a.m., Sat., June 25 at Fire Station 1, located at 2730 E. Williams Field Road. Call 480.503.6353 for more details.