



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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We can never forget those who toiled at ground zero

SEN. JAMES GAUGHRAN September 13, 2019

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As you read this, you may be reflecting on the 18th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001. This is the most somber of days, on which we recall how our world was shattered that warm September morning. We lost friends and family members. Many of us watched the towers fall in real time, some from our office windows, others on television. Our sense of safety was threatened, and our nation was united in its unequivocal response to that horror. The day left an indelible mark on our collective memory.

Now Sept. 11 is a day to reflect on tragedy and those who we lost. It is also a day to think back on the heroism and sacrifice by so many fearless men and women in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks — those who spent days, weeks and months performing search-and-rescue, and then recovery, operations, battling toxic air to help those whom they had never met, in search of hope amid despair.

Eighteen years after that tragic day, we are still left picking up the pieces from this dark moment in our nation's recent past. Many of those who responded are suffering from life-threatening ailments. They are facing respiratory issues and other chronic medical conditions as a result of breathing toxic air day in and day out. Just as it is our duty to honor the memory of those we lost, it is our obligation to provide care and support to those struggling now. They rushed to ground zero to undertake life-saving efforts, and then worked around the clock to help New Yorkers piece life back together.

The sicknesses that have occurred as a result of 9/11 have permanently affected many surviving first responders. We see the manifestation of the cost for their heroic actions in the illnesses that plague them. After tremendous public urging, Congress finally acted this year to pass the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, which provides essential support for those who are suffering. It is our moral duty to honor, recognize and support these brave responders who now need our help.

In the waning hours of this year's legislative session, the State Legislature passed my bill to provide parity in disability pension benefits to everyone who responded to ground zero — uniformed and non-uniformed. This would ensure that the heroes who rushed to the World Trade Center, who contained and cleaned up Lower Manhattan and became chronically ill because of it, receive our support.

Every anniversary of Sept. 11, I've spent the day thinking back on that great tragedy, but I've also taken the time to honor and thank the men and women in uniform as well as civilian workers — all of the men and women who showed up for us when we needed them the most. Our gratitude will never fade, and our duty to them will never diminish.

On 9/11, America was tested, and though the challenge seemed insurmountable, we proved, no matter the circumstance, that we will persevere. We will stand united. The monuments and memorials throughout our state serve as an important reminder of one of the darkest moments in our nation's history. They are also an important remembrance of our country's best: our heroes, our strength when united and our unwavering commitment to the principles on which the nation was founded.

It didn't matter who those first responders were or what they were doing. It didn't matter whether they were based in Manhattan or Glen Cove. They responded to where they were needed, without question or hesitation. We lost too many heroes that fateful day, and now those who survived have been left to suffer those lingering illnesses.

We must remember them. We must honor them. We must support them. Let each anniversary of Sept. 11 be a day when we honor the best among us, those who stepped forward to help complete strangers, and helped give our nation hope. We can all recall where we were when those towers fell, and we must never forget those who helped save us. United, we cannot be broken.

I remember where I was on Sept. 11, 2001, and I know what I'll be doing every Sept. 11 moving forward. Reflecting. Thanking. Remembering. And honoring the heroes who now need our help.