

Tragedy turned into memory

Siblings remember father lost in devastation of 9/11 attacks

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"The hardest part is not having a father figure to look up to." For freshman Morgan Rodriguez, she said there will always be that hole, that missing part.

For her brother, Derek, a senior, there will be memory.

Their father Anthony was one of the first responders at the World Trade Centers on Sept. 11, 2001.

It was between 8:46 and 9:03 a.m. --after the first plane crashed into the North Tower and before the second plane slammed into the South Tower. Anthony was 36, about to be a father for sixth time. He was a firefighter at the Red Hook station in Brooklyn, and he spoke to his wife Evelyn before rushing back to the Towers.

"My father had called my mom right as he was getting off of a shift and was asking her if he needed to pick up anything before coming home," he said. "When the first plane hit, he thought someone made a serious mistake. As the second plane hit, he decided to go back in."

The Twin Towers collapsed. Out of a team of five firefighters, nothing was found. Not a helmet, uniform, wallet... nothing. The only thing the Rodriguez family got of Anthony's was his secondary uniform -- just the backup uniform.

The fire department displayed empty casket funerals for the families as the EMS and First Responders lined up along the road of Bradley Avenue in Brooklyn.

"It was a long main stretch and my grandmother's house was on one side and there was a church, St. Rita's, that all was on the other side [of the street]," Derek said. "They marched the caskets straight down the middle of the road. But for the people that were affected by the attack never received closure on the whole event."

Being three years old, Derek remembers small details on the day of 9/11 at his grandmother's house where his entire family was having breakfast together.

"I remember I was watching cartoons and my entire family had suddenly left to go next door. I was really confused, but then I was brought next door and I could remember just seeing something wrong on the television," Derek said.

The full weight of what happened didn't really sink in until he was 11. Derek said he remembers asking his mother if his dad was ever going to come home as he sat on the stairwell.

"My mom had kept it a secret from me about what had

happened, probably because she herself didn't have closure. Even to this day she hopes that he was at some hospital somewhere," Derek said. "My mom did end up remarrying two years ago to my now step-dad. They had been talking since around 2008. It was hard for all of us to grasp."

For Morgan, there are no memories. She was the positive light in a time of darkness for the Rodriguez family, three days after the attack. "She was predicted for Sept. 11 but my mom held off because she wanted my dad to be there," Derek said about his sister's birth on Sept. 14. "My sister was the one that got all the attention once she was born, being a 9/11 baby."

In 2002, a year after the attack, then

five years later in 2006, then 10 years later in 2011, the 9/11 babies --children who were born after their father's deaths -- were recognized by ABC News. Diane Sawyer was the lead journalist for covering it and if a child was born within the month of 9/11, they were considered a 9/11 baby.

"I don't really remember much from meeting with Diane Sawyer because I was 12. But something that I do remember was having this tragedy in common with all these kids who are my same age," Morgan Rodriguez. "They [the other children] were struggling with the same things from the event that I was."

In two years, Morgan will again meet with Diane Sawyer for a continuation of the 9/11 documentary. Derek hopes to go into the military when he graduates.

The driving force behind Derek's motivation to join the Navy Seals is his father's death in the 9/11 attack.

"The Seals were pretty much a huge contributor to cleaning up the aftermath," Derek said. "Seal team 6 is now retired, but



(Left) Senior Derek and freshman Morgan Rodriguez laugh while trying on their dad's hat and remembering him. (Above) Displayed is a picture of Derek as a baby with his father Anthony Rodriguez, along with Anthony's firehat and medals.

they were the ones who killed Osama bin Laden. The Navy has impacted my life in the biggest way possible."

Morgan and Derek, although living in Mt. Pleasant, still participate in anniversary events. For the 10th anniversary, they traveled to New York to listen to the names of victims being read, and they have visited the Memorial at Ground Zero.

"Everything about it was amazing. I just didn't like the museum," Derek said. "It was a bit harsh for the families to watch the videos of people jumping out of the buildings."

Every year on Sept. 11, there are documentaries on the attack.

"As much as my mom tells me to stay away from the documentaries of 9/11, I don't. I obviously look for clues and keys whether or not I can see my dad for a quick moment," Derek said. "Recently, the FBI reached out to us and sent us four photos, and that was the first actual piece of closure that he was there."