

Fort Collins 9/11 Memorial at Spring Park Aims to Help Community 'Never Forget.'



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Just before 9 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, Rick Vander Velde was driving home from his shift at the Longmont Fire Department when he heard on the radio that an airplane crashed into the north World Trade Center tower.

Minutes later, when he got home, he watched the second plane crash into the south tower. "As soon as that second plane hit, all my stuff was packed and I knew we were going," Vander Velde said.

Vander Velde deployed to ground zero shortly after the terrorist attack that killed almost 3,000 people — including 343 firefighters and 60 law enforcement officers — with Colorado Task Force 1, a statewide disaster response group. At the time, he was a lieutenant with the Longmont Fire Department. He joined Poudre Fire Authority in 2015 and now serves as the support division chief for operations.

Seven PFA firefighters responded to ground zero alongside other Colorado firefighters. Two other firefighters who now work for PFA, including Vander Velde, responded but weren't working for PFA at the time.

"I know it was 20 years ago, but you remember it like it was yesterday," Vander Velde said. "One of the biggest things that stuck with me is the eyes of the New York City firefighters. It was heart-wrenching."

Firefighters worked day or night shifts — Vander Velde worked nights, and the PFA crew worked days — and all slept only about two hours a day for the 12 days they worked sifting through debris. Vander Velde said they used torches and cutting tools to carefully remove debris without collapsing anything and lift pieces out using large cranes.

"Then you find a void and crawl through voids looking for anything you could find," he said. "... It was an honor to be able to go out and help where we did."

Vander Velde also remembers the kindness of New Yorkers who stood outside the events center that housed the visiting response teams to thank them for their help — he even spotted and got a hug from Loretta Jane Swit, who played Margret Houlihan in "M*A*S*H." "I think I've always carried (my deployment to ground zero) in a positive way even though it was a tragedy," Vander Velde said.

Vander Velde said he was asked in 1990 to help develop a nationwide plan to deploy national resources in response to natural disasters, and the plan was expanded to also respond to man-made disasters after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.

"The 'Never Forget' is also part of being able to respond and help citizens at these times and help our nation, whether it's an earthquake, a hurricane or a man-made disaster," he said.



Vander Velde also wants to make sure people never forget the sacrifices made during and after the events of 9/11, which also includes continued education and remembrance for those not born yet or too young to remember the day themselves.

"The world has changed from this," he said. "I want people to not get upset when they have to wait in the security line at the airport. To this day, every time I travel, I tell security people ... I'm just grateful that they're doing their job."

To serve as a permanent reminder of those sacrifices, a 9/11 Memorial Park will soon be built adjacent to PFA Station 3 next to Spring Creek Park in Midtown Fort Collins. At the park's center will be a 3,059-pound steel I-beam pulled from the World Trade Center debris and donated to PFA.

The beam arrived in Fort Collins in October 2015 after a four-day cross-country road trip, with Vander Velde giving it "its final ride into Colorado" from the state border. The beam will be at the center of a memorial garden and rest above three pools of cascading water to represent ground zero and the pile of debris from which it was recovered. Displays around the garden will inform visitors of the events of 9/11, how PFA firefighters responded and the beam's journey from New York to Fort Collins.

"We have people in the community that lost relatives, they lost friends," Vander Velde said. "This is for them just as much as it is for the firefighters, the police officers and the EMS personnel."

Until the park is built, the beam is housed in the lobby for the PFA Training Center next to a wall of photos commemorating PFA's work at ground zero. Vander Velde said he gently touches the beam every time he walks by.

He hopes the park will allow younger generations and younger firefighters look back on the history of 9/11 and know that they can take an opportunity to give back to their community and "be involved in something way bigger than themselves."