

Memorial aims to teach kids about 9/11

Originally published: September 4, 2011 6:41 PM

Updated: September 4, 2011 9:12 PM

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Photo credit: Kevin P. Coughlin | Mike Mauro, left, of the Rocky Point Veterans of Foreign Wars Post, and Buddy Gangler unveil a plaque Sunday honoring the Wounded Warrior Project on the base of the Brookhaven Town 9/11 memorial. (Sept. 4, 2011)

The children playing on the jungle gym at Brookhaven Town's Diamond in the Pines park or taking their first Little League swings on its fields were born years after Sept. 11, 2001.

But the memorial unveiled there Sunday aims to teach them as much as it honors that day's dead, those who dedicated it said.

"I hope this can all be a lesson," said Richard Acritelli, the Rocky Point High School social studies teacher who, along with members of Post 6249 Rocky Point Veterans of Foreign Wars, persuaded town officials to dedicate space for the memorial and local businesses to donate labor and materials.

"This doesn't replace those who were lost, but it will help us cherish their memory," he said.

The ceremony at the park in Coram was among many planned to be held across Long Island, home to almost 500 killed on 9/11. Brookhaven and Riverhead alone lost at least 46 residents and 18 graduates of local high schools and their names are inscribed on the memorial.

Acritelli, who was in the Army Reserves in 2001, later recalled driving home that day from the school where he taught to wait for a call from his unit: "There were fighter planes above me and there was a

convoy of rescue workers going the other way . . . I tell the kids that this really did happen, and life really did change overnight."

The memorial consists of boulders surrounding a central cube topped by a section of steel girder recovered from Ground Zero and a statue of an eagle in flight.

The boulders honor victims of the attacks, those who worked to save them and those who fought the wars that followed.

Two town residents who were sixth-grade boys on the day of the attack helped build the memorial: Morgan Walters, 21, of Rocky Point, did the initial design sketches, and Brendan Kelly, 21, of Mount Sinai, welded the eagle to the girder.

Both remembered being curious as many classmates were picked up early from school, then confused as they saw endless footage of planes hitting the towers. In the months that followed, said Walters, "kids were missing school for funerals."

Kelly said the experience showed him "how people are tied together, more than you'd think. If it wasn't your family, or a close friend, it was someone you knew."

Suffolk County Legis. Kate M. Browning (WF-Shirley) echoed that, saying, "It touched everybody . . . and this is not over." Her husband suffers from breathing problems that she said started after he served at Ground Zero as a police officer; her son was deployed to Afghanistan with the Air National Guard three times.

Norma Pardo, 72, of Sound Beach, who came to the ceremony, said she will bring her 10-year-old granddaughter back with her. "I'll show her the memorial," Pardo said. "We feel we're a part of this."