

Longtime Saukville Fire Department officer takes the lead in organizing memorial procession, program

Saukville's first observance of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. was a modest affair.

That memorial was held in 2001, just a few days after the horrifying terrorist strike that toppled the Twin Towers in New York and scarred the Pentagon in the nation's capitol.

"Someone dropped off a candle on the walkway in front of the fire house and a number of us gathered around to talk about what was happening in our world," recalled Richard Schoenfeldt, administrative lieutenant with the Saukville Fire Department.

"As we gathered around the flag pole, people passing by pulled over and joined us. Neighbors joined with candles and brought extras."

Schoenfeldt, who has been with the fire department for 43 years, has been involved in planning the countywide observances since that modest first commemoration.

This year's observance will be Sunday, Sept. 11, starting at 7 p.m.

On the first anniversary of the attacks, the memorial was broken into two parts — one at noon and one in the evening — to give more people an opportunity to share in their grieving.

Today, the observance — which includes first responders, Scouts, veterans and military personnel from throughout Ozaukee County — has grown to the largest in metropolitan Milwaukee. It is started with a silent procession from the firehouse to Grady Park for a candlelight ceremony.

Schoenfeldt said planning the memorial event has been a labor of love, although he said volunteers to assist with organizing the program are often hard to line up until the day of the observance.

The biggest challenge, he said, has been finding speakers.

"I have tried to get speakers who were involved in either the Twin Towers incident or the Pentagon," Schoenfeldt said.

"I have learned that those people who either were at Ground Zero or lost someone there that day return there every year," he said, saying that makes it difficult to schedule first-hand witnesses.

This year's speaker will be retired U.S. Army Gen. Lynn Hartsell, a South Dakota resident who was assigned to the Pentagon at the time of the 2001 attacks.

Keeping the memory of 9/11 alive

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Schoenfeldt said community donations covered the cost of airline tickets for Hartsell and his wife, along with local lodging.

Undeterred by road construction and rain, he said past events have never failed to stir strong emotions in the hearts of those who attend.

Schoenfeldt said it is difficult for him to pinpoint why he has gotten so involved in the 9/11 memorial program, but likens it to patriotic observances from the past.

“I have always felt it my duty to participate in honoring our veterans and (observing patriotic) holidays,” he said.

“I recall that as a grade-school student, we used to make the actual wreaths that were placed at the area cemeteries. Over time, people just don’t take the time to observe and remember the reasons for Memorial Day, Veterans Day and Pearl Harbor Day.

“I had a number of relatives, including my dad, who were in World War II and remember how they respected these days, as they lost many friends in the war. I have always felt it is something I needed to do and to get my family involved.”

That reflective viewpoint carries over to Schoenfeldt’s attitude toward the importance of marking the 9/11 anniversary.

“As Americans, we may sometimes take the blessings of freedom and liberty for granted. Every day, around the world, American troops serve to defend our liberty and freedom. We also need to remember police, fire and emergency service personnel stand ready to protect us at home,” he said.

Units marching in Sunday’s procession are asked to gather at the fire station by 6:30 p.m. A single drummer will lead the march.

Bleacher seating will be available for those who attend the program in Grady Park, and signing will be available for the hearing impaired.

A free shuttle bus will be available to take participants back from the park to the fire station.

The event is sponsored by the Saukville police and fire departments, and Landt-Thiel American Legion Post 470.