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WTC Tribute Center Has 100,000th Visitor

BY COLLEEN LONG

NEW YORK -- Barely four months after the Sept. 11 Tribute Center opened near ground zero, 100,000 people have visited it.

Created at the impetus of the September 11th Families Association, the center, formally the Tribute WTC Visitor Center, tries to give visitors an understanding of what was lost on Sept. 11, 2001. The opening gallery has the trade center area's street plan inlaid into the floor; a model of the twin towers is on a table.

On Tuesday, Gwynnie Carder, visiting New York from Salisbury, England, with her husband, Nigel, was the official 100,000th visitor to the center.

"The real feeling for me is that I shouldn't actually be here. It never should have happened," she said. "We wanted to come down here. We saw it on TV, saw what happened, and we wanted to come visit and pay our respects."

Carder, 42, said ground zero was on her list of things to see along with tourist attractions including the Statue of Liberty and Times Square.

She received a framed photograph of a tattered American flag that was recovered from the trade center site and is now on display at the center, and she was given a tour by the center's co-founder Lee Ielpi, whose firefighter son died in the attacks.

"What they've done here is fascinating," she said. "It really paid respects to what happened on 9/11."

The center, which opened Sept. 18, 2006, is averaging many more visitors than officials expected _ about a thousand per day, said Lynn Tierney, president of the Tribute Center. As many as 1,800 people per day came during the holidays. About 8.1 million people are expected to visit ground zero in 2007, about 22,000 a day.

The Tribute Center, occupying 6,000



Visitors and members of the media look at exhibits in the new Tribute WTC Visitor Center, in this Sept 6, 2006 file photo in New York. Barely four months after it opened, 100,000 people have visited the Sept. 11 Tribute Center near ground zero which was built to offer visitors to the attack site a glimpse into the lives of the people who were lost and the towers that once stood.

square feet on two floors, features five galleries.

One wall is covered in the missing-person fliers that blanketed the city in the days after the attacks. Nearby is a piece from one of the hijacked planes; another section holds twisted metal from ground zero.

Two sections of wall have been turned into a giant photo gallery, filled with images of smiling faces sent in by victims' families: There's the woman in her wedding dress, the man lying down with his toddler son, the proud graduate. Interspersed are personal mementoes, like the green swim cap with Chicago Triathlon emblazoned on it, a baseball, a rosary of blue beads.

The center also offers guided tours of the site led by people with experiences of the attacks _ survivors, residents, victims' family members. It will serve as a memorial space until the official memorial opens in 2009.

Ielpi said the Tribute Center should be on every tourist's list of things to see in New York.

"The world needs to see the Tribute Center," he said. "They leave with a much better, clearer understanding of what hatred and intolerance did and continues to do."