

# Families created Tribute Center out of love

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Enlarge By Todd Pitt. USA TODAY

Lee Ielpi, a retired New York firefighter whose son Jonathan was killed on 9/11 and was also a New York firefighter, gives a tour inside the Tribute Center.

By Olivia Barker, USA TODAY

**NEW YORK** — The tentacled metal forms look organically, even beautifully sculptural, like chunks of coral dipped in silve

Except the objects are the product of terror, not nature. They're molten pieces of what was the World Trade Center.

"This is what hatred, this is what ignorance did," says Lee Ielpi, clutching a visitor's arm. Ielpi, a retired FDNY member who lost a firefighter son on 9/11, is the co-founder of the Tribute Center, a new museum of artifacts, images and stories that is across from their source: Ground Zero.

Created by the September 11th Families Association, the Liberty Street center opens to the public on Sept. 18 as an interim destination until the official memorial is completed on the twin towers' site in 2009. (Today's tour is for survivors, victims' families, rescue workers, neighbors and media.) Five galleries across 6,000 square feet of mostly cool white space remind visitors of "what we had," says Ielpi, his brown eyes warm. And "what we lost."

The idea emerged in early 2004, when the family group saw "there was clearly a need," says center president Lynn Tiern. Thousands of visitors were seeking information about 9/11, and families and survivors were seeking to share it. With construction of the memorial mired in "too much politics," says Ielpi, the center was designed to fill a visceral void.

Funded in large part by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the Lower Manhattan Development Corp., the \$3.4 million center is "a way to influence the story of what gets built" across the street, Tierney says.

This place, Ielpi stresses, is not for survivors. It's not for family members of the victims. "It's for you all out there who are already becoming complacent."

There's a receipt for breakfast bought in the towers by a Port Authority worker and stamped 9/11/2001 8:29. The diner, P. Miller, made it out and is now one of the Tribute Center's 122 volunteer guides, all part of the 9/11 community.

A dirt- and rust-encrusted airplane window appears antique, not 5 years old. Like the twisted steel girder propped up near the museum doesn't specify which plane, or tower, it came from. "It's better left unsaid," Ielpi says.

Thirteen floor-to-ceiling panels present a timeline told through pictures, voices and written words. Some of the printed quotes are almost poetic in their horror. Says Brian Clark of Euro Brokers: "The air on the 84th floor was a gray and yellow fog, a someone was shaking a sack of concrete."

The vignettes are "like little personal haikus," says co-curator Wendy Aibel-Weiss.

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This is going to be one of those museums.

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The wall facing the timeline is painted Sept. 11 blue, to evoke "how beautiful the sky was that day," Ielpi says. Toward the back of the gallery, the blue becomes clouded with missing-persons posters. 375 in all, scanned from the originals that papered a wall outside St. Vincent's, the West Village hospital that was to have been the triage center for all the wounded never showed up.

Beyond lies a gallery of more photos, depicting nearly 1,100 of the dead. Some victims are represented by mementos: a baseball cap, a beer cozy, a birdhouse.

There's also a rosary, a picture of a grinning mom and dad surrounded by their five kids, and a slip of teletype paper welcoming Timmy "Jobs" Stackpole into his new role as an FDNY captain and wishing him good luck. It's dated 9/10/01.

Distilling a "larger than life" personality into a few small things was "the tricky part," says Stackpole's widow, Tara, 42, of Queens. But "there were three things important to him: his faith, his family and the fire department."

Ielpi walks over to one end of the collage. "I'll introduce you to my son," a picture of Jonathan, a member of Squad 288, napping in bed with his two sons.

Flanking the collage are two lists of the victims' names, one printed and alphabetical, the other a 4½-hour video that flash names by affiliation, whether Cantor Fitzgerald or Marsh & McLennan. "It's what the families said: 'I want my loved one w they were,' " not among strangers, Ielpi says.

A man standing before the screen weeps at the sight of his wife's name. "This is going to be one of those rooms," Ielpi sa

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