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Toll of 9/11, stitch by stitch - Memorial quilt gives glimpses at those killed in terrorist attacks

By Alex Lyda

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The soft cloth mosaic, with its bright stitching and happy faces, belies the cold reality of Sept. 11, 2001.

Hanging in neat rows at Cuyamaca College's gym are the 142 sections of the 9/11 memorial quilt, each panel covered with the names of victims who died in the terrorist attacks. The air is muffled by the vast expanse of fabric and the thick plastic tarp laid down for the thousands who will walk through the memorial.

The 16,000-square-foot quilt made its only stop in San Diego at a public exhibit that opened yesterday. For the first time, San Diegans can touch some of the victims' personal effects that have been woven into the mobile memorial, which has traveled across the United States and will make its way to Australia in 2005. On one block is a patch of a victim's jeans. Another has pictures of a victim's cats.

Denise Hobson was moved to tears as she stood before a row of panels.

"I came in here thinking this was kind of like an art exhibit," said the 39-year-old Pine Valley resident, choking back tears. "But instead, it is more like a cemetery. You read all the individual stories and it really hits you. . . . The quilt doesn't become art anymore. It becomes individual people."

The quilt, begun in May 2002, was made mostly by people who didn't know the victims. They rallied to the call of Corey Gammel, a Long Beach man who felt compelled to honor each of the dead. Every square was crafted individually, and the San Diego stop marks the first time that all panels have been displayed in one spot with every Sept. 11 victim memorialized, Gammel said.

More than 3,000 squares pay tribute to those who died -- among them a man who loved washing the windows of the World Trade Center's twin towers and a young woman, five months pregnant, who worked there.

Noticeably missing are the most horrific sensory aspects of the attacks, which killed more than 3,000 people and broke the hearts of many others: the smell of charred electronics, of vaporized steel, of burning flesh. Buried now are the flag-draped bodies that emerged from "the pile" -- the 1,000-plus-degree underground fire that licked the heavy cranes every time oxygen seeped through the stirred-up rubble.

The air has long since cleared. What's left for many is raw emotion.

Chatter quickly faded into silence as San Diego residents walked among the quilt sections, a scene reminiscent of people standing before the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., trying to comprehend lives cut short and inscribed in a seemingly endless sea of names.

The average age of a 9/11 victim was 32, Gammel said.

One of them was Sophia Addo, who had emigrated from Ghana five years ago and was on the housekeeping staff at the Windows on the World restaurant in one of the towers. Her morning shift began as hijackers aimed two Boeing 767s at the New York City skyline.

Addo, 36, was studying to be a nurse and hoped to eventually bring her 10-year-old daughter to the United States.

Betty Almand, 63, of Avondale Estates, Ga., didn't know Addo. She had a hard time finding anyone who did. But the retired data-entry specialist decided to honor her memory with information gleaned from the Internet.

In researching Addo's life, Almand learned that it was only after a relative took in Addo's

hairbrush that investigators were able to make a DNA match to confirm her death. Her remains were otherwise indistinguishable.

"I cried a lot when I was making that quilt," Almand said in a telephone interview yesterday. "And here all we have are pieces of cloth to take the place of humans."

The quilt also memorializes victims of the Pentagon attack and United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pa., shortly after Lisa Beamer's husband, Todd, ended a cell phone call with the words, "Let's roll."

Capt. Derek Kemp, the commanding officer of San Diego Naval Station at 32nd Street, stood straight as he paused in front of the squares honoring two Navy colleagues killed in the Washington attack. One man he had known since 1984.

"The whole thing is much more than a number," Kemp said. "When you see this display for each one of them, it really drives it home, the magnitude.

"There are two emotions -- the sorrow for the loss of life, but also the commitment of guys like me, the firemen and the policemen, who swear to make sure this doesn't happen again."

Two paramedics walked in tandem through the Cuyamaca gym, the only building on campus large enough to house the quilt.

"We couldn't go (to New York City), so this brings it to us," said Paul Maxwell, a paramedic with the San Miguel Fire Department. "I've had the urge of going there and being there. But I haven't had that opportunity yet."

In the days that followed the World Trade Center attacks, while most San Diegans viewed Ground Zero in media photographs and images, others felt the impact at home.

Deborah Borza of Mira Mesa lost her 20-year-old daughter on United Flight 93. The Santa Clara University student was returning to San Diego after visiting friends in New Jersey when she boarded the plane.

Yesterday afternoon, when Borza heard the quilt was coming to town, she planned immediately to go see the square dedicated to her daughter.

"The quilt is truly a labor of love," Borza said. "I know these people were moved when they made it."

For Kim Monins, a resident of Jersey in the United Kingdom, it was a mission.

"Some of them are forgotten, and we don't even know if they were here legally. But they have to be remembered as well," said Monins, who has made 37 squares. "When I can't find out anything about them, that's the saddest part."

As people walked past the quilt, squares near the ground seemed to get less attention. Stooping to examine a square, one passer-by read the childlike scrawl written between the stripes of an American flag:

"It was a dark day in America.

There was no amazing grace.

Freedom did not ring.

Tragedy attacked sky-high.

Fiery terror reigned.

Structures collapsed.

Red with blood.

White with ash."

Editor's note: Alex Lyda was a reporter for The Associated Press in New York City in the weeks after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. He worked at "the perch," a condominium next to Ground Zero with a view of the recovery effort.

Quilt viewing

The 16,000-square-foot quilt memorializing victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks is on display at Cuyamaca College's gym, 900 Rancho San Diego Parkway, El Cajon. It can be

viewed from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. today and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. tomorrow and Sunday.

Admission is free.

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1. The Cuyamaca College showing is the first time the 9/11 quilt has been displayed with every victim memorialized. 2. Deora Bodley of San Diego died on United Flight 93. Her mother, Deborah Borza, said the quilt is "truly a labor of love." 3. Quilt panels memorializing Sept. 11 victims drew Cuyamaca College student Mihaela Guess yesterday. (A-13) 4. Quilt viewing (A-13) 1,2,3. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune photos

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