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Rebuilding the Souls of Our Nation

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In memoriam of the lives lost on 9/11, the San Diego Fire Department strives to heal our spiritual wounds with art. By Christy Castellanos, Staff Writer Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13 This inspirational verse served as the theme for the Sept. 11 memorial celebrated Saturday at Balboa Park. This free event, hosted by the San Diego Fire Department, was a dedication to all of the modern American heroes who willfully died in order to save the lives of others. Upon entering, flags from 82 nations surrounded the pavilion and greeted incoming guests. The flags signified that America was not the only nation which suffered the sting of the terrorist attacks. The "Release of Souls" memorial at the Balboa Park Organ Pavilion exhibited the work of more than 20 artists. It also featured the music of critically acclaimed gospel and opera singer/songwriters Glenda Rae and Fiona Blackburn, who wrote the inspirational "Wings of Peace." This was dedicated to the children who lost one or both parents in the tragedy. Another musical highlight included a performance by the Emerald Society of Pipes and Drums, a group which often performs at New York Firefighters' functions. The sound of the Scottish bagpipes brought a fresh feel to the ceremony. Professors, doctors, government officials and firefighters who survived Sept. 11 also verbalized their heartache. Their words perforated the night's air with poignancy and flagrant agony. Some spoke of their families, others defined their idea of heroism and a few speakers pleaded for audience members to pray for humanity and a better existence. Speaker and event organizer Mitch Mendler hoped the event would help San Diegans understand the effect Sept. 11 had on the firefighting community as a whole. Speaker and FDNY fireman Joshua Gallo spoke to audience members, "No other single event in United States history has cost as many firefighting casualties - none." The main memorial structure honoring these heroes and their families was aptly titled "Release of Souls." It was created by Canadian artists Louis Louw, Dave Rouleau and Kathleen Tonnesen. The structure consisted of metal frames representing the charred remains of the once third tallest buildings on earth, the Twin Towers. These vacant metal towers evoked the emptiness Sept. 11 brought to thousands of American hearts. Behind the frames stood two 18-foot high panels bathed in crimson, orange and yellow colors. Images such as a silhouette of firefighters and the face of a distraught President Bush communicated the ache and anguish an entire nation experienced. Engraved on the backside of these panels are the names of the 343 firefighters who sacrificed their lives to help save 25,000 individuals trapped inside the blazing World Trade Center. About 100 pairs of firefighters' boots decorated the ends of each bench in the pavilion, and firefighting uniforms could be found strewn on tables next to some of the artwork. Other symbols included a chunk of marble from the fallen edifice, a piece of glass and the corner of a slightly burnt World Trade Center document that was mounted in a box next to a pair of dusty boots recovered from the rubble at ground zero. Artists from all walks of life were featured in the exhibit, including a painting by Warren E. Clymer, famed art director from The Godfather movies and two-time Emmy Award winner. His black-and-white watercolor painting depicts a chilling image of the rubble left behind after the buildings crumbled. Other images on display included a pencil sketch of a firefighter trying to grasp on to sanity as he digs through the rubble and ruin. The palpable anguish in his face is relatable to that feeling of helplessness so many Americans felt during that time. Yet another exhibit included a nine-panel bead quilt made out of more than 500 3-inch squares. The squares were created by 500 artists from eight countries across the world. This effort was spearheaded by Andrea Adams, a woman who felt so inspired by the event she decided to post the idea on an internet forum in which artists and bead workers could submit their work. The response was overwhelming and now sections of the quilt will be flown to museums in New York, Pennsylvania and the Bead Museum of Washington, D.C. The colorful beads explore such themes as sorrow, patriotism and heroism, with images ranging from the Japanese characters for the word "love" to the phrase "Religion is a drug." The quilt, along with all the sights and sounds of the "Release of Souls" exhibit, brought a feeling of peace and understanding as the audience quietly contemplated the atmosphere. There were no overtones or undertones of hatred or blame, no political references - all that existed was a true spirit of healing not often

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