

# A Day of Remembrance & Hope - September 11, 2013

## Gosnold's Hope Park in Hampton, Virginia

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A Personal History of the First "Day of Remembrance and Hope" Event

By Angela Leary

On Tuesday 4 September 2001, three Hampton Neighborhood Commissioners one each from District 4, 5, and 6 called together a group of citizens to work on a holiday tree lighting. Four of us were assigned to the Program Committee: Marjorie Ballard and her daughter Melody, Marie Stokes and me. We chose Tuesday 11 December 2001 as our date to hold "Holiday Tree Lighting Event" at Gosnold's Hope Park on Little Back River Road. One week later on Tuesday 11 September 2001, the world as we knew it changed in an instant.

Many of us felt helpless because we could not go to those actual three sites and help our brothers and sisters. That sense of helplessness turned inward to a sense of determination and a sense of "we can make a difference." We needed a message that would uplift others. When I heard the words "*we should plant Trees of Hope in the Soils of Justice*," while watching the memorial services on that Friday, I called Marjorie and asked her to meet me at the water tower Saturday morning. That day, as we talked, our "holiday program" turned into a vision of "planting trees" to show of our solidarity with our fellow citizens in New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia, where the Pentagon is located.

What kind of trees? As told by the historical marker by the park's evergreen trees representing "those ... who protect and serve", General George Washington had already chosen the "evergreen tree" as a symbol of Hope to his soldiers on 24 August 1777. Our forefathers knew a lot about Hope. They hoped to build a great Nation of free people. What price were they willing to pay? We must ask ourselves that same question every day. What are we now willing to pay? Freedom certainly is not free.

What were we all asking our leaders to do following 9/11? We wanted Justice didn't we? What could possibly represent Justice? Looking back, there was only one item that could represent justice. It wasn't a statue holding a scale in her hand. It was not a flag of any kind. The only thing following 9/11 and what was aimed at every single American was the very soil itself from each terrorist site. I began contacting the offices of the governors of New York, Pennsylvania, and New York and the story of "*Planting Trees of Hope in the Soils of Justice*" was repeated over and over again. Not one governor ever hesitated. Governors Schweiker, Pataki and Gilmore not only sent soils from each of these sites -- the same soils given to the victims' families -- they also sent a designated representative to be with us on Tuesday, 11 December 2001, to plant the trees in a ceremony at Gosnold's Hope Park in Hampton, Virginia.

Governor Mark Sweiker of Pennsylvania was the first to respond. He sent Mr. Bill Baker, Assistant Director of Emergency Management Operations in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. Bill also brought his wife Marilyn to visit Virginia. The Pennsylvania county sent their soil directly from the United Flight 93 site to Hampton in a container we had provided 6 weeks prior to our event. Bill and Marilyn spoke as first hand witnesses at the crash site.

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Marilyn had been visiting her parent's farm less than a half mile from the site when they heard the aircraft approaching. She ran outside and saw the plane upside down. She was the first to arrive at the crash site. Her husband arrived a few moments behind her. They described what the debris they saw strewn across the landscape and the large deep charred hole in the ground. The jet fuel had been so hot upon impact that the rocks actually turned to crystals that looked like coal. A snake sunbathing on a boulder had the imprint of his shadow permanently etched in the rock. Typing paper was still flying through the air; it was carried as far as 20 miles from the actual crash site. Debris was in the tree line. One gentleman's wallet was found in a tree. They later learned that United Flight 93 had flown 20 miles, 300 feet above the ground and upside down, before crashing to the ground. It was pointed directly into the earth with no possible chance of survival for the passengers.

Bill and Marilyn arrived in Hampton two days prior to 11 December so Bill could give an EMS presentation to emergency personnel in seventeen jurisdictions from the Hampton Roads Region. They were gathered that day in Suffolk to learn about Somerset County's rescue and recovery attempts. What would have normally been a one hour question and answer session lasted almost three hours, but Hampton Roads' emergency personnel learned a new way to face an unthinkable challenge. Emergency Management Services was about to make a global change.

Governor George Pataki of New York was the second to respond. Governor Pataki sent Mr. Tom Rinaldi, Assistant Director of Emergency Management Services from the State Capital Offices in Albany, New York, to "hand carry" soils from the basin of the World Trade Center site to Hampton on Tuesday, 11 December, 2001. Tom carried the soil to Virginia and was the first to be interviewed following the planting ceremony. He told the WVEC-TV reporters that Virginia had a place of "hallowed ground" just as the sites themselves were hallowed ground.

It took the Virginia the longest to respond because the crash site at the Pentagon was an ongoing FBI Crime Scene investigation site. Permission for access had to come directly from the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and only he could authorize the removal of the soils from the site. Secretary Rumsfeld gave his permission for the removal of the soils and directed that the procedure be handled by the Fairfax County Fire & Rescue unit, the first unit to arrive at the Pentagon on 9/11. Captain George Williamson, who led the Fairfax unit on 9/11, removed the soil just 48 hours prior to the 11 December ceremony and shipped it to Hampton by UPS Overnight Express. When we opened the plain brown shipping box, we found the soil packed in a shiny new paint pail covered with yellow tape that simply stated "crime scene investigation." The soil was still damp and the stench of jet fuel was overwhelming. Governor James Gilmore of Virginia sent Mr. Michael Klein, Director of Emergency Management Services for the Commonwealth of Virginia, to be his designated representative at the ceremony.

During the service, many attendees called the site "hallowed ground" because of the soils around the trees. I believe it too. It was hallowed by the many acts of courage and kindness that were committed that day by the people who worked in the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, and the passengers on United Airlines Flight 175, American Airlines Flights 11, American Airlines Flight 77, and United Airlines Flight 93. We do not

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know the thoughts and actions of those passengers on the first three flights, but we do know a little about the thoughts, hopes and prayers of those on United Flight 93 because they had a window of time to call outside their plane. Todd Beamer prayed the 23rd Psalm with a telephone operator whose name was the same as his wife Lisa. Jeremy Glick talked to his wife so lovingly. We know the passengers took a VOTE to determine their own destiny before they acted, and they willingly chose to place themselves in harm's way for the sake of saving others in Washington, D.C. Don't the men and women in uniform do the same thing every single day? Yes, they do -- our armed forces and National Guard, our state and local police officers, the sheriff's office, and our firefighters.

Our December 11<sup>th</sup> program had to be moved inside the Langley Elementary School Cafeteria because a misty rain had begun outside. The United States Continental Army Band played for us and our three guests spoke to a standing room only audience comprised of Hampton citizens, fire and rescue personnel, the Chief of the Boat and crew members from the USS Hampton; representatives from the Virginia State Police Department, the Hampton Police Department, the United States Army, the United States Air Force, the United States Navy, the United States Coast Guard, the United States Marine Corps; Justices from the Hampton Circuit Court and local and state elected officials.

Following the services inside the school, the entire group moved outside for the "*Planting of Trees of Hope in Soils of Justice*". The soils from the three sites were commingled with Hampton soils because LAFB fighter pilots were among first responders to United Flight 93. As our three guest officials attended the shovels to place the soil around the trees, citizens filled the paved area around the site and sang God Bless America and other patriotic songs. A garrison U.S. flag brightly lit on the adjacent water tower whipped through the air from the light blowing misty breeze as voices were raised in unison.

Please come to this place called Hope --Gosnold's Hope Park -- on 11 September 2013 for "A Day of Remembrance and Hope" as we read aloud the names of all those we lost on 9/11 as well as the names of all those in the Armed Forces that have made the ultimate sacrifice to our Nation since then.

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*Post Script: While working on this project, I was sent to Bethesda Medical Center for a triple by-pass on 31 October 2001. Everywhere I turned someone was talking about Hope. The word HOPE was everywhere. After today, if you listen, you will be amazed at how much it is used. Every time I doubted myself about this first event, someone would say it. Then one day while watching OPRAH, I heard Maya Angelou talking about it and she stated, "Every single one of us need a place furnished with Hope!"*