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‘A day for memories, a day of resolve’: Impact of 9/11 still resonates even with those not yet born in 2001

By **BILL JONES**

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Cadet Lt. Daniela Nieves leads Navy JROTC students in a hand salute during a Sept. 11 memorial ceremony outside Bloom High School in Chicago Heights. (Bill Jones / Daily Southtown)

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Nearly 20 years after terrorists carried out a series of attacks on American soil, the Southland has not forgotten.

Amid ceremonies and memorials planned throughout the region in the lead up to Saturday's anniversary, themes of gratitude and remembrance were constants.

At Bloom Township High School in Chicago Heights, the Navy junior ROTC led a memorial ceremony Thursday in front of the school's main entrance to recognize those who lost their lives on Sept. 11, 2001. In addition to recognizing the tragic events of that day, the ceremony offered thanks to all first responders who risked their lives during and after the attacks.

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The ceremony began with the presentation of colors and national anthem, followed by words from Superintendent Lenell Navarre, who spoke of the sacrifices made by firefighters, police officers and medical personnel who responded to the Sept. 11 attacks.

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“Today is a day for memories,” Lenell said. “Today is a day of resolve, to show the world that we will never, never forget.”

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Navarre, a former reservist who said he always takes time to reflect on the anniversary of Sept. 11, noted students now in high school were not yet alive in 2001, which makes it all the more important to share that knowledge with them. Students involved with the Navy JROTC put together the ceremony, and the district streamed it for students in school.

“It teaches them a lot,” Lenell said. “It’s part of their history that they should know.”

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Navy JROTC members stand ready to present the colors outside Bloom High School during a Sept. 11 memorial ceremony held annually by the Chicago Heights school. (Bill Jones / Daily Southtown)

Among those students was Cadet Lt. Cmdr. Crystal Rendon, who gave the keynote address of the ceremony. She called Sept. 11 “an event that changed our world and our lives forever.” She said many remember it like it was yesterday, “while others, like myself, cannot comprehend the death of the tragedy that occurred 20 years ago.”

“Although I was not yet born when the Sept. 11 attacks took place, I have spent years listening to various accounts of the events of that day, trying to understand why we were violated in such a cruel and vicious way,” Rendon said.

She asked those in attendance to pause for a moment to reflect upon life and not to take the sacrifices people made for granted.

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“We have seen their faces; we have heard their names; we have mourned their passing,” she said. “We will continue moving forward in the name of freedom and democracy despite the adversity our country may face.”

Cadets also took turns at the microphone to recount moments in time from the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. A bell tolled following each moment. District 206 School Board President Henry Drake presented a memorial wreath. And students gifted the district a Flag of Heroes to be placed in the administrative offices.

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Bloom High School Principal Jerry Anderson takes the podium during a memorial ceremony at the school in Chicago Heights recognizing those who lost their lives 20 years ago during the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. (Bill Jones / Daily Southtown)

Bloom Principal Jerry Anderson thanked first responders for the sacrifices they have made.

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“Especially with our Navy JROTC and our students, it’s important to remember the sacrifices that have been made for the freedom that we don’t always recognize,” she said. “We have to really help them understand where this patriotism comes from and the importance of standing together. It’s like all of our history. It’s very important that we remember our history so we make better choices for our future.”

The ceremony concluded with a moment of silence to remember those who lost their lives on Sept. 11, 2001.

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Lt. Stacy Henderson-Shaw, who oversees the Navy JROTC with Master Chief William Goggins, said the ceremony still hits close to home two decades after Sept. 11, 2001.

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“As we reflect on those events 20 years ago, I still get very emotional, very choked up,” Henderson-Shaw said. “I always get choked up, even now, 20 years later. It still hurts.”

Henderson-Shaw was stationed in San Diego in 2001 and driving to the Naval hospital when her mother called from Savannah, Georgia, and asked her to pull over before telling her what was happening. Her mother turned up the TV so she could hear the news reports of the attacks over the phone.

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devastation, the grief, the loss of life, and I thought about why I serve. Wearing this uniform, the cloth of our nation, it's an honor and a privilege.”

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Bloom High School students present a Flag of Honor created using the names of those who died in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to be placed in School District 206's administrative offices during a ceremony commemorating the 20th anniversary of 9/11. (Bill Jones / Daily Southtown)

Henderson-Shaw said the ceremony would normally take place on Sept. 11, but it falls on a Saturday this year and there was no school scheduled for Sept. 10. She said Bloom “certainly could not let Sept. 11 go by without acknowledging it in some way.” Now more than ever, it is important to teach a generation that did not live through that history what it means to this country, she said.

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“I make it a point to remind them how important it is for us to stand fast in the face of adversity,” Henderson-Shaw said. “We also have to remind them it was not just an insignificant event. Sept. 11, 2001, changed the course of our world, our lives,

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have to be steadfast on those principles, values and morals that make us who we are as humans and also make us who we are as Americans, as a people. Those things must unite us.”

Henderson-Shaw, Goggins and the cadets also took part in a 9.11 Mile Virtual Fitness Challenge from Sept. 1-7 in honor of those who lost their lives on Sept. 11, 2001. Students also listened to news stories, watched videos and shared their thoughts on the events of that day, Henderson-Shaw said.

“It gave them a broader sense of awareness of what occurred on that day and why it’s so significant not only for those of us who were alive then but for them going forward,” she said.

Bill Jones is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.

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