

Students prepare to sing at 9/11 Mass in NY

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For those not yet born or too young to remember the world-altering events of September 11th, 2001, a complete understanding of what exactly took place will likely take years to attain.

But as the 10th anniversary of the attacks approaches, many children are beginning to witness — and even feel for themselves — the sorrow felt by the nation on that tragic day.

On Saturday, 16 young singers — ranging from third-graders to one 11th-grader — from Our Lady of Grace parish in Penndel will be the only representatives from the Delaware Valley to participate in a special 9/11 Mass of Remembrance at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

Cathy Galie, longtime music director for the parish and a music teacher at the parish school, has been practicing with the choir during recess and after school to make sure everyone is properly prepared for such a special and somber event.

"These are the kids who really stepped up and sacrificed part of their summer vacation and their free time to honor the memory of all those in our area and around the country who lost their lives on Sept. 11," Galie said during a recent rehearsal.

Fifth-grader Kate Cleary's memories of that historic and tragic morning come from stories from her family, which was forced to spend the day worrying about Kate's father, who was serving with the Air Force.

"My dad was about to take off on a normal day of flying when everybody got called in and told that the twin towers had just been crashed into by planes. So, then, he had to protect the skies above our house and Philadelphia and near New York," she said. "I think it's really special to remember all the people that got killed that day so that they know that we care."

The Mass, which is being organized by the American Federation of Pueri Cantores, will feature 500 students from various cities all singing a complex selection of songs, many of which are in Latin.

Because many in the group are so young and the post-9/11 world is all they've known, Galie encouraged the kids to talk to their parents about the attacks and ask questions.

Choir member Danielle Walter, 16, was in first-grade in 2001 and watched most of the events unfold live on TV after being picked up from school shortly after the planes hit the towers.

"To take part in this 10 years later with the understanding of what happened is just an honor," she said. "Knowing that I will be singing and trying to give back to these people that lost their lives feels amazing. When I heard there was a chance to be involved, I jumped at it. I knew I had to be part of this."

For Susan Smiley, seeing her children Seamus, 10, and Tessa, 8, prepare for something like this was a proud moment.

"My son was about 8 months old and my daughter wasn't even born yet, but they know the story of that day," she said. "I'm not sure they really grasp the magnitude yet, but these rehearsals have definitely made them more aware."

Theresa Brown also looked on as her daughter Sarah, 9, took part in the practice session.

"As parents, I think we sometimes forget or underestimate how much the kids sort of intuitively know about these things," she said. "I think they just process what they can as they mature."

While the group has already secured a bus to take them up to the Mass, they are hoping for some generous people to help pay for the expense through donations.

Anyone interested in assisting the choir send a check payable to "Our Lady of Grace" care of the rectory at 225 Bellvue Avenue in Penndel.

Our Lady of Grace Church is also hosting an interfaith prayer service at 7 p.m., Sept. 11 in remembrance of the attacks.