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FEATURED EDITOR'S PICK

'The idea is to never forget': Artist reflects on birth of Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden

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1 of 5



Artist Gordon Huether poses on Aug. 27 at the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden on Main Street in downtown Napa. Huether designed the memorial, which was dedicated in 2013 on the 12th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Nick Otto/Register

It began in a Napa art studio as a series of television images, each more horrific than the last.

On the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, Gordon Huether was inside his studio at the brick-lined Tannery Row on South Coombs Street. Suddenly, a project manager ran to his side with inconceivable news — two hijacked jetliners had been crashed into New York City's World Trade Center, each plane rammed into one of the twin towers.

The manager immediately switched on an office TV. For the rest of the morning, Huether and two dozen staff members struggled to make sense of what they saw — the thunderous collapse of the south and north towers, the Pentagon torched by a third hijacked plane, a fourth plane plowed into a field in western Pennsylvania, nearly 3,000 lives lost in less than two hours.

“It just seemed so surreal, it did,” Huether, a Napa-based creator of public art projects across the U.S. and overseas, recently recalled of the day terrorists attacked America. “It didn’t seem real at all, you know. And you’re not there — you’re on the other side of the country, and you’re watching it on the television. But it just looked like some sort of crazy action-horror movie or something. The first feeling was of disbelief, and then horror.”

But what began as helplessness in the face of the 9/11 attacks became for Huether and other Napers a mission to honor the people who died in New York, near Washington, D.C., and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

The result — penned by Huether and funded with local donations — was the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden, the downtown monument whose frosted glass panels, etched with the names of the dead, are mounted to four columns of structural steel salvaged from the World Trade Center.

Shortly before the 25th anniversary of 9/11 — and the 12th anniversary of the Napa memorial’s dedication — the 66-year-old Huether reflected on his path from witnessing infamy to seeing its physical remains up close to using some of those remains to pay tribute to those who died and honor those who gave their lives saving others.

Out of tragedy, gifts

Starting in August 1968, thousands of workers pieced together some 200,000 tons of steel to form the skeletons for a pair of skyscrapers stretching 1,368 feet and 110 stories above Lower Manhattan.

Twenty-eight years after their completion, the towers crashed to the ground, less than half an hour apart.

For the next eight months, crews recovered the remains of hundreds of office workers and many of the firefighters and police officers who had worked to save others. Workers gradually cleared ground zero of 1.8 million tons of twisted metal and pulverized concrete.

By 2009, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which had developed the trade center, began to offer 840 pieces of the fallen towers' steelwork to nearly 1,600 museums, governments and nonprofits that wished to refashion them into 9/11 memorials. By the time the final artifacts were given out seven years later, the pieces had been incorporated into memorials and museum displays in all 50 states and eight nations, including installations in Yountville in 2011 and American Canyon in 2016.

The Napa city fire marshal, Darren Drake, learned of the program from the September 11th Families Association. He reached Huether by cellphone as the artist was stepping out of a taxi at the Salt Lake City airport, where he would later design artwork to adorn a new \$1.8 billion terminal.

"Darren asked if I would be interested, and not knowing what it meant to say yes, I said, 'Yes, of course,'" Huether remembered.

What neither he nor city officials yet knew was the scale of the task that awaited them.

Planners of a Napa memorial would themselves have to arrange a cross-country truck trip to New York to retrieve their allotment — 30 tons of steel in the form of four rust-red beams and two smaller chunks. The city would need to choose a site for the monument while also raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for its design and assembly.

Supporters of a Napa memorial sent an application to the Port Authority, and more than eight months passed before Huether received an email — Napa's pick of a half-dozen steel fragments. Huether offered to take them all.

A little over a month later, Huether would see the six steel pieces in person — in what had become a graveyard of flattened and shattered artifacts of the twin towers' collapse.

Facing the rubble

Since the 1960s, Hangar 17 at John F. Kennedy International Airport had sheltered planes flown by since-vanished airlines like Pan Am and Tower Air. In 2002, the empty hangar in Queens began to fill again — with steel beams, mangled taxis, twisted elevator doors and the other debris from the destroyed World Trade Center.

When Huether entered Hangar 17 to see the components of Napa's 9/11 memorial, he was confronted with the blunt reality of mass death.

“They had everything stored — crushed police cars, crushed fire engines, boxes of shoes,” he said. “I mean, they treated every artifact as if it were a crime scene, which it was. ... And we're walking through this enormous, enormous airplane hangar; it must have been multiple football fields in size.

“And then I remember coming around a corner, and (meeting) a curator of all of the artifacts. He pointed over off to the side of the room and said, ‘Well, that's yours right there.’ And my jaw dropped at the size of it.”

Biagi Bros., a Napa trucking firm, offered two flatbed big rigs to make the 5,600-mile round trip to carry the twin towers’ steel remnants west. Spectators cheered the trucks’ return home in May 2011 as the flatbeds headed down their final stretch to Huether’s relocated studio on Monticello Road, where the half-dozen metal pieces were delivered.

The Napa City Council approved a location for the monument just west of Main Street. A 9/11 Memorial Garden Coalition formed to coordinate fundraising, which attracted more than \$130,000 to join \$120,000 from the city’s public art fund. Huether donated his time, as did landscape designers, engineers and others.

Meanwhile, Huether planned out how to turn rubble into tribute.

Four I-beams, two each from the north and south towers, would form 24-foot-tall pillars in a stone-rimmed ring of decomposed granite, with the two smaller metal pieces marking the entrance. Attached to the I-beams would be four panes of thick glass, inscribed with the names of the victims — those who were at the Pentagon, in the twin towers and aboard the four hijacked planes, including Flight 93, whose passengers stormed the cockpit to thwart a probable second attack on Washington. On one of the panels would be a list of all first responders who died on Sept. 11.

The memorial garden’s plot of land placed it just west of Main Street and near Napa Creek, at a busy crossroads for downtown pedestrians — a location Huether said encourages people to walk up rather than stand at a distance.

“I wanted people to feel the magnitude of those buildings as best I could with what I was working with,” he said. “I wanted people to be able to interact with it. In other words, it's not something like in a museum, where you stand or sit and look at something. It's more something that you enter into, and walk around, and touch it, and read the names and the narrative.

“And in fact, when I’ve visited, I have always ended up walking through it in some fashion or another,” he said.

A garden takes shape

The memorial garden broke ground at Napa's 2011 observance of the 10th anniversary of 9/11. By June 2013, with construction well advanced, local high school students — preschoolers or kindergartners on the day of the attacks — loaded concrete and rebar that had been stripped off the six steel pieces into a metal vault, which was buried by the memorial.

On Sept. 11, 2013 — a dozen years after the attacks — some 500 people gathered on a plot of land on Main Street, in front of the then Kohl's store. As the evening sun slipped behind downtown buildings and a public address speaker played "God Bless America," lights were switched on, illuminating four central glass panels and the 2,977 names inscribed on them.

"It's important, for those of us who can remember where we were 12 years ago and for those who are babies coming up, that we create a place to keep the memory alive and create a place where people can come and understand and contemplate and hopefully continue as a whole to be peaceful," Gretchen Stranzl McCann, the landscape architect for the memorial garden, told an audience that included uniformed first responders, service members, veterans and flag-waving children.

Drake, the Napa fire marshal, described the fire truck adorned with the names of the 343 firefighters who had died on 9/11. Ed Henderson, the Napa mayor in 2001, spoke of the sudden signs of patriotism he had witnessed on a four-day, cross-country homeward drive he and three other local officials had made from Washington after the Pentagon attack, during a nationwide air lockdown.

And Huether, standing beside the newly dedicated monument, recounted his walk through Hangar 17 at JFK. "I was really struck by the enormity of the hatred that could cause destruction like that," he said.

Then he asked Napers not to lose their ability to stand in support of others.

"I would just encourage all of us to not wait for the next disaster to treat each other the way so many of us treated one another after that disaster," he said. "We should love each other every day."

'Never forget'

On the eve of the 25th anniversary of the attacks, the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden still stands in a downtown that continues to grow and evolve around it.

The nearby Kohl's shut its doors in March 2025. A pair of five-story structures, towering over the garden in their blue scaffolding, are rising in its place, a hotel and residential building overwriting a 50-year-old department store building and plaza square. Crowds have continued to gather around the twin towers' steel beams and their glassy plaques every Sept. 11, and the city will host an observance there on Friday, the 25th anniversary of 9/11.

Fifteen days before the anniversary, and an hour after visiting the memorial garden he had penned, Huether stood by his call for community spirit from a dozen years before — though perhaps with less optimism than before.

“Humanity is very hard to understand,” he said wearily. “And things have not really gotten better since then. We're still killing each other and fussing and fighting.”

Above all, Huether hoped that Napans continue to remember Sept. 11, 2001, not only as history, but as a day of loss.

“The idea is to never forget, and each one of those names represents a life of a human being with a family,” he said.

This story draws on historical reporting by the Napa Valley Register, Los Angeles Times and The Associated Press.

Local 9/11 remembrances

Napa

Friday, 11 a.m.

Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden, 1075 Main St.

American Canyon

Friday, 11 a.m.

Public Safety Facility, 911 Donaldson Way East

Yountville

Friday, 9 a.m.

Yountville Community Center, 6516 Washington St.

Photos: The Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden through the years

Firefighters Prepare Steel Beams for 9/11 Memorial

Sep 1, 2011



Local firefighters worked on Sept. 1, 2011, on removing debris from the steel beams to be used in the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden, which the artist Gordon Huether created from materials from the World Trade Center.

J.L. Sousa/Register

Gordon Huether and the Napa 9/11 Memorial

Sep 2, 2011





The Napa artist Gordon Huether in September 2011 with a model of the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden, which he created from steel beams salvaged from the fallen World Trade Center. The memorial was dedicated in 2013 for the 12th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks.

J.L. Sousa/Register

Gordon Huether and the Napa 9/11 Memorial

Sep 2, 2011



A model showing the proportions of the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden before its erection in 2013 on downtown Main Street.

J.L. Sousa/Register

Firefighters Prepare Steel Beams for 9/11 Memorial

Sep 1, 2011



Firefighters removed concrete and rebar from steel beams intended for the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden on Sept. 1, 2011. The beams, which were part of the collapsed World Trade Center, were stored at Gordon Huether's studio on Monticello Road as he worked on the art installation, which was dedicated in 2013 on the 12th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks.

J.L. Sousa/Register

Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden Dedication Ceremony

Sep 11, 2011



One of the six pieces of steel from Ground Zero of the fallen World Trade Center that was incorporated into the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden. The steel sections were displayed at a dedication ceremony on Sept. 11, 2011, the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks, and the memorial was completed in 2013.

J.L. Sousa/Register

Burying remnants for Napa's 9/11 Memorial 1

Jun 13, 2013



Brianna Quade, center, throws a piece of concrete from the World Trade Center into a vault as Makenna Stone, 6, right, and her Napa Valley Water Polo teammates AJ Diakon, center left, and Kathleen Schafle, far left, pitch in to bury remnants from the twin towers at the site of Napa's 9/11 Memorial on Thursday morning, June 13, 2013.

Lisa James/Register

World Trade Center beams arrive

Jun 25, 2013

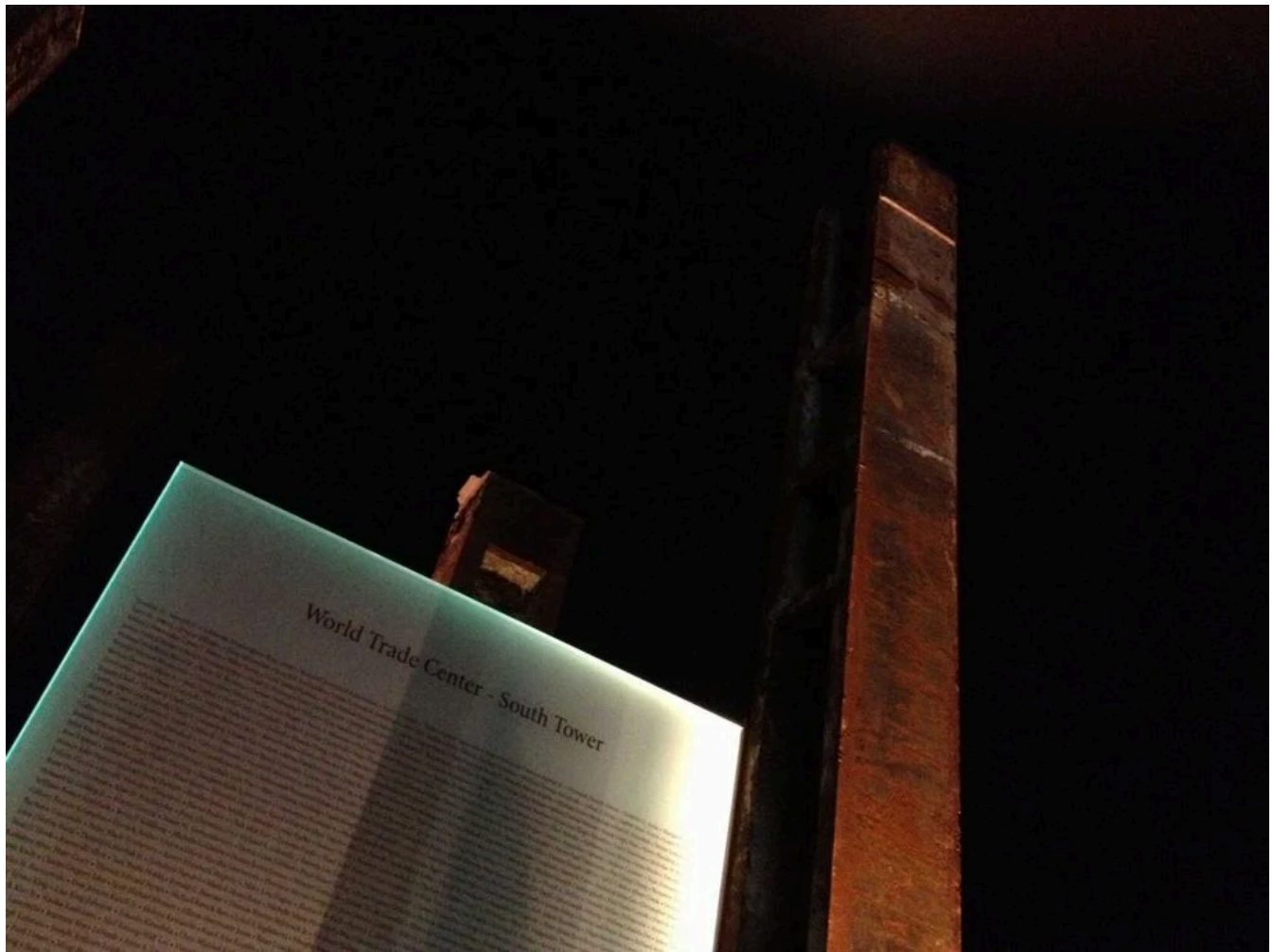


Steel beams from the World Trade Center, which were incorporated into the Napa 9/11 Memorial, arrived at the memorial site on Main Street on Tuesday afternoon, June 25, 2013, and were erected the next morning.

Lisa James/Register

9/11 Memorial Garden dedicated

Sep 11, 2013

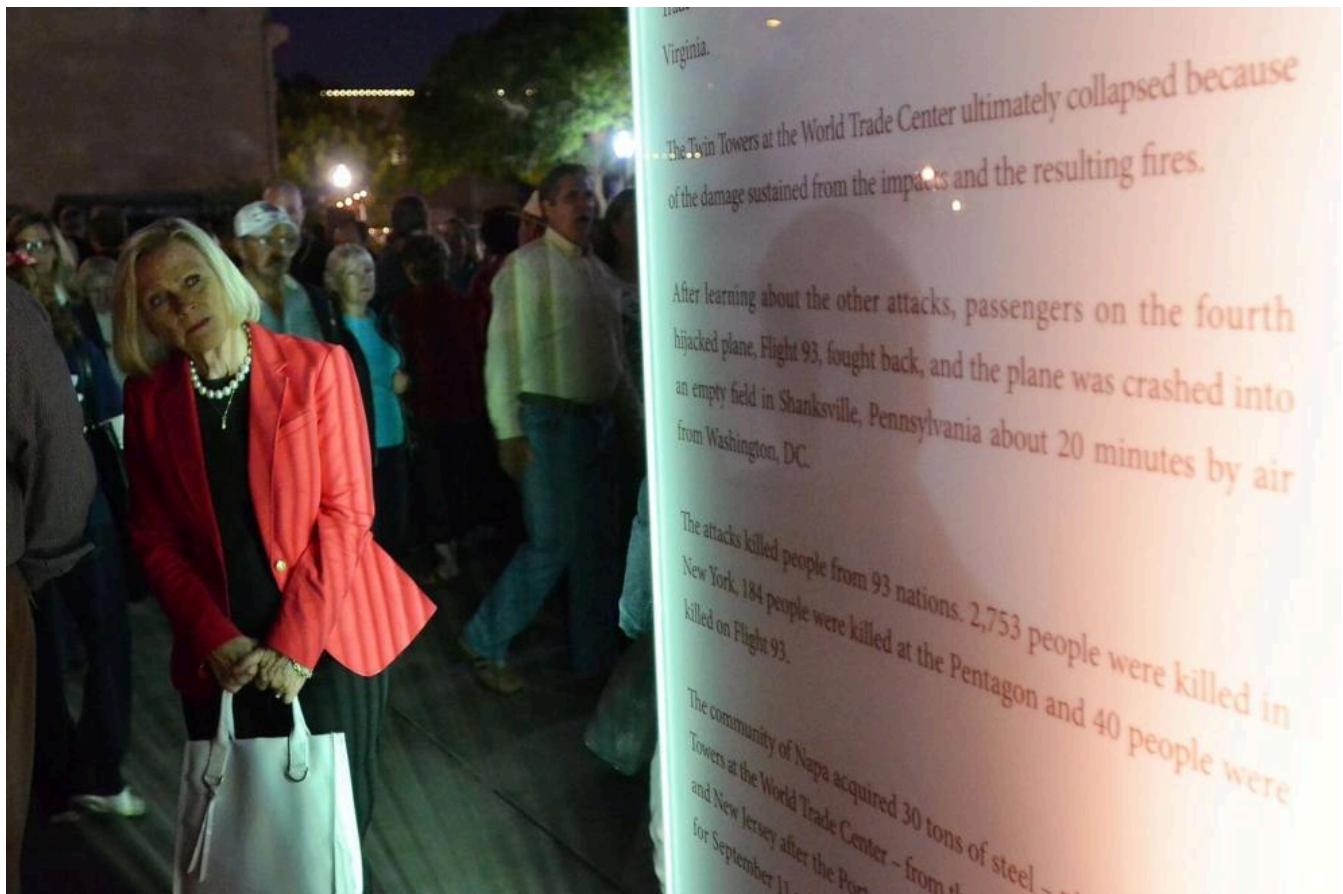


Napa's 9/11 Memorial Garden was dedicated and illuminated for the first time on Wednesday night, Sept. 11, 2013, the 12th anniversary of the terrorist attacks. The monument includes six steel beams recovered from the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

J.L. Sousa/Register

9/11 Memorial Dedication

Sep 11, 2013



A woman looked at one of the panels of Napa's new 9/11 Memorial Garden on the night of Sept. 11, 2013, just moments after the lights were turned on to illuminate the glass plates bearing the etched names of nearly 3,000 people who died in the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Register file photo

9/11 Memorial Dedication

Sep 11, 2013



Gordon Huether, designer of the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden, stood between two of the glass panels before the monument's dedication on Sept. 11, 2013, the 12th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Lisa James/Register

9/11 Memorial Dedication

Sep 11, 2013



Visitors to Napa's new 9/11 Memorial touched the steel beams that were part of the World Trade Center before the dedication ceremony on Sept. 11, 2013.

Lisa James/Register

9/11 Memorial Garden Dedication

Sep 12, 2013

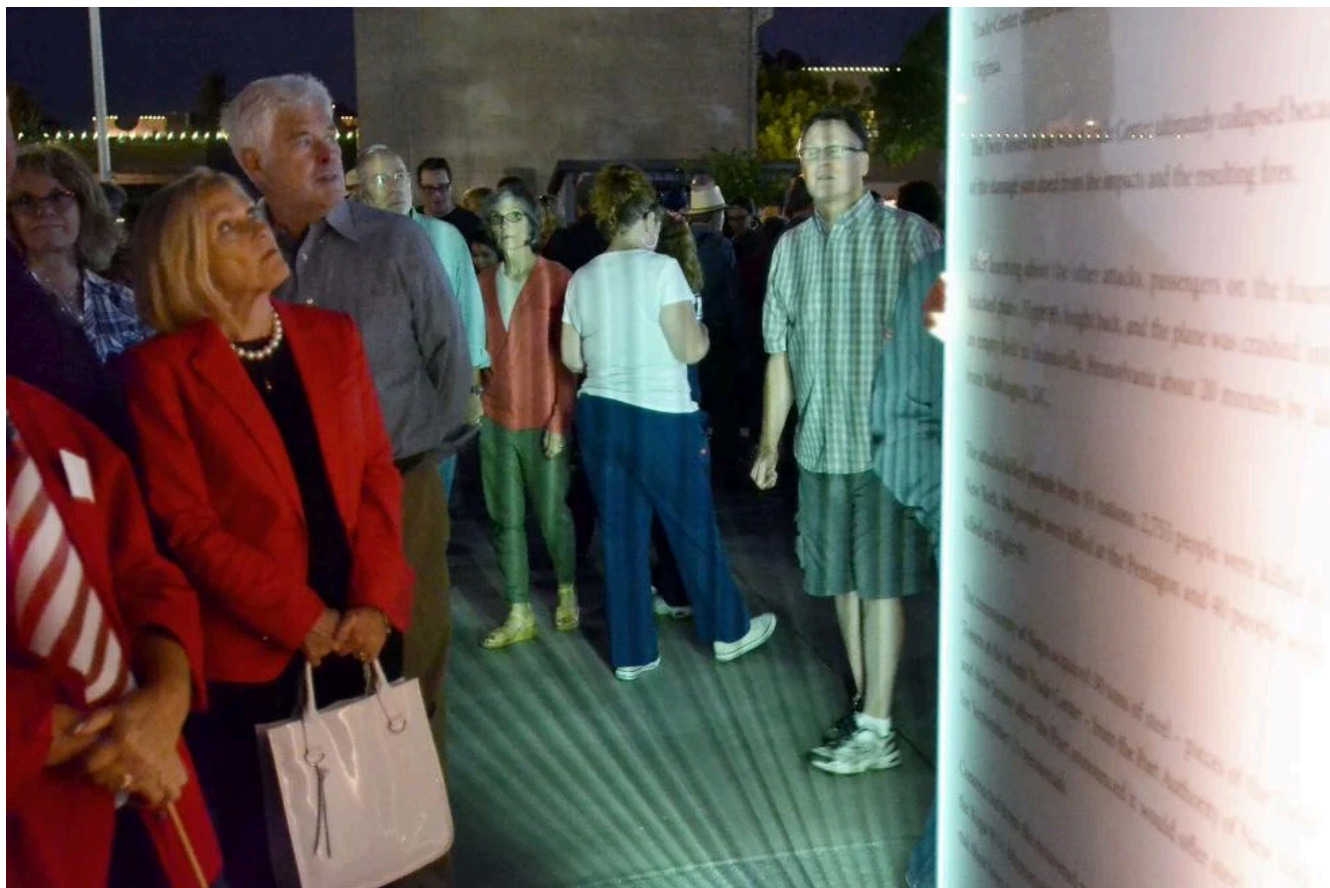


Dominic Manzo, right, and Michelle Rodriguez paused inside the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden before its dedication ceremony Sept. 11, 2013.

Lisa James/Register

9/11 Memorial Garden Dedication

Sep 13, 2013

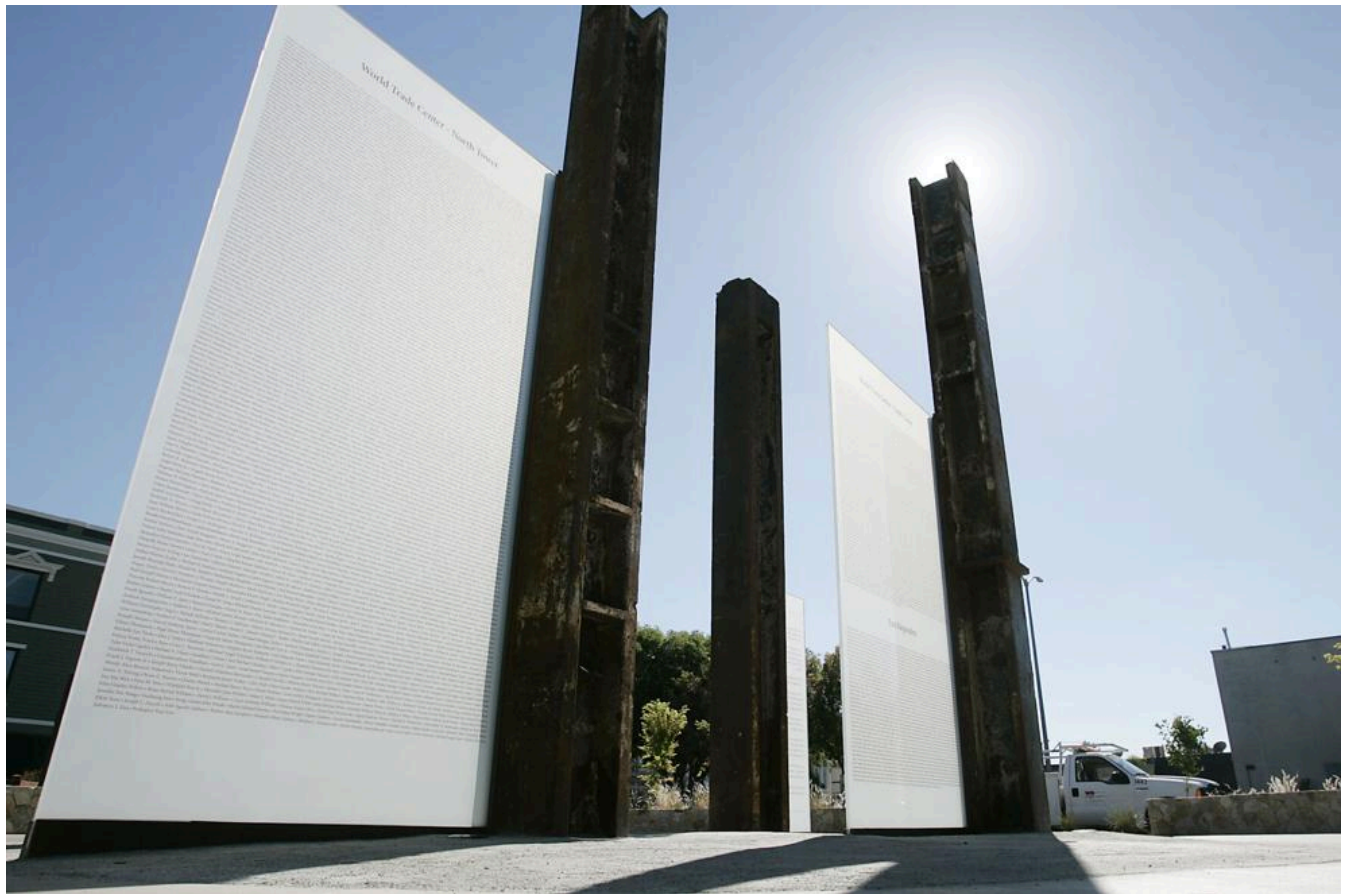


Crowds looked at the panels of the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden shortly before the first illumination on the night of Sept. 11, 2013.

Lisa James/Register

Napa 9/11 Memorial

Sep 16, 2013



Napa's 9/11 Memorial Garden became a beacon for locals and visitors soon after its opening in September 2013.

Register file photo

9/11 Rememberance Ceremony Napa

Sep 11, 2014



People gathered with Napa firefighters, police officers and city officials at the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden during the city's 13th anniversary observance in 2014.

Lisa James/Register

Napa 9/11 Memorial Ceremony

Sep 11, 2015



Fourteen-month-old Lucia Dziuk of Napa wandered through Napa's 9/11 Memorial Garden under the watchful eye of her father Mark Dziuk on Sept. 11, 2015, the 14th anniversary of the 2001 attacks.

J.L. Sousa/Register

Napa 9/11 Memorial Ceremony

Sep 11, 2015



Alec Risley of Napa played taps at a remembrance ceremony at Napa's 9/11 Memorial Garden on Sept. 11, 2015.

J.L. Sousa/Register

Napa 9/11 memorial in 2016

Sep 6, 2017

• Jeffrey James Olsen • Steven John Olson • David Ortiz • Michael John Otten • Jeffrey Matthew Pal
 mes Wendell Parham • Robert Parro • Richard Allen Pearlman • Durrell V. Pearsall Jr. • Glenn C. Per
 ickford • Shawn Edward Powell • Vincent A. Princiotta • Kevin M. Prior • Richard A. Prunty • Lincoln Qu
 ald J. Regan • Robert M. Regan • Christian Michael Otto Regenhard • Kevin O. Reilly • BruceAlbert Reyn
 hael Edward Roberts • Antonio José Rodrigues • Anthony Rodriguez • Richard Rodriguez • Matthew R
 l Thomas Russo Sr. • Matthew L. Ryan • Thomas E. Sabella • Christopher A. Santora • John August Sar
 trick Schrang • Mark Schwartz • Gregory Sikorsky • Stephen Gerard Siller • Jeff Lyal Simpson • John P. S
 • Timothy M. Stackpole • Gregory Stajk • Jeffrey Stark • Edward Thomas Strauss • Walwyn Wellington Stua
 ck Tallon • Paul Talty • Allan Tarasiewicz • Paul A. Tegtmeier • William H. Thompson • John Patrick Tie
 n T. Vigiano II • Joseph Vincent Vigiano • Sergio Gabriel Villanueva • Vince Virgilio • Mitchel Scott Wa
 haniel Webb • Michael T. Weinberg • David M. Weiss • Timothy Matthew Welty • Eugene Michael Wh
 nce Wooley • William Wren, Ret. • Raymond R. York



A white rose was laid in front of a panel of the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden for the 15th anniversary of the 2001 attacks in 2016.

Howard Yune/Register file photo

Sept. 11 20th anniversary ceremonies in the Napa Valley

Sep 11, 2021



A ladder truck held the Stars and Stripes aloft over the Napa 9/11 Memorial in 2021 during a ceremony marking the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Glass panels bonded to steel beams from the fallen World Trade Center list the names of nearly 3,000 people who died in New York, at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Howard Yune/Register

Napa 9/11 memorial ceremony 2022

Sep 7, 2023



In 2022, Nick Rizzo of Napa Fire took his 19-month-old son Cooper to the panel of Napa's 9/11 Memorial listing all first responders who died during the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Howard Yune/Register file photo

Napa 9/11 Remembrance 8

Sep 11, 2023



Kyle Reichenberg and his son, Easton, walked through the frosted glass panels of the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden after the city's annual remembrance gathering on Sept. 11, 2023. The garden's glass panels bear the names of those who died aboard hijacked planes that crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania on Sept. 11, 2001.

Nick Otto/Register

Napa 9/11 Remembrance 14

Sep 11, 2023



A woman touched a beam from the World Trade Center during the 2023 observance at the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden.

Nick Otto/Register

Napa 9/11 Remembrance 21

Sep 11, 2023



A fire truck ladder held the Stars and Stripes aloft over the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden during the city's 2023 ceremony for the 22nd anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Nick Otto/Register

Gordon Huether

Aug 27, 2026



Artist Gordon Huether poses on Aug. 27 at the Napa 9/11 Memorial Garden on Main Street in downtown Napa. Huether designed the memorial, which was dedicated in 2013 on the 12th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Nick Otto/Register

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By Howard Yune
City Editor
