

9/11 memorial is for New Yorkers, too, says Stuyvesant Town volunteer



Photo by Sabina Mollot

Memorial volunteer Cheryl Gross, standing outside the site on a recent afternoon, said it's tourists mainly who have been passing through.

By Sabina Mollot

In the past two months since the opening of the 9/11 memorial, site volunteer Cheryl Gross has noticed something about the thousands of people who come through the newly built park every day: Very few of them are New Yorkers.

Though some are locals, there to mourn the loss of someone

who died in the terrorist attacks, the majority of visitors are tourists, mostly from other countries, though a smattering are from the U.S. People who work in the area have also been known to pop by, but what Gross has seen is that few are aware they're supposed to get tickets before hand. Admission is free, though tickets have always been issued for crowd control, and often, she and her fellow

volunteers will have to re-route would-be visitors to another, nearby site on Vesey Street to get their tickets if they haven't registered online beforehand.

Gross, a Stuyvesant Town resident, has been one of 200 volunteers helping visitors to the downtown site figure out such things as where to go to get tickets,

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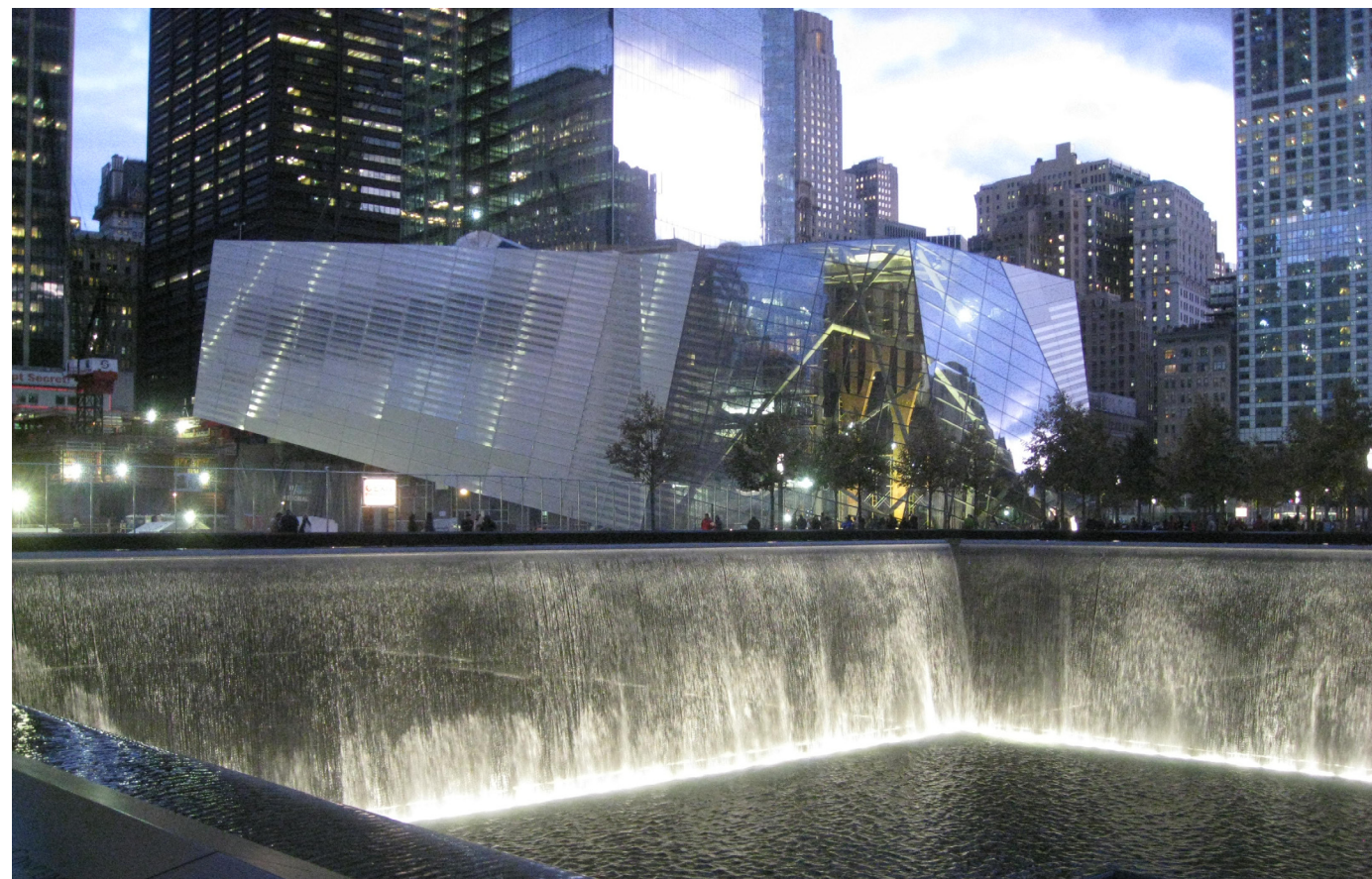
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In this photo taken by Cheryl Gross, her husband Bill touches the name of their friend who died in the attacks on the World Trade Center.



Cheryl Gross near ongoing construction at the site
Photo by Sabina Mollot



One of two reflecting pools, each with a 30-foot waterfall
Photo by Cheryl Gross

how to search for the name of a loved one in one of the reflecting pools, what the site looked like before 9/11, and where in the neighborhood they can find a bathroom, since there are none onsite.

On a recent shift, “We had a father come with a young son,” she said. “I had to say I’m sorry. I felt terrible.”

For Gross, the decision to volunteer at the site came recently, though she’d been thinking about doing so since the attacks happened. At that time, she worked as an administrative assistant at Beth Israel, and saw the buildings being destroyed from a window at the hospital. A friend of hers, a WPIX reporter named Steven Jacobson, died in one of the Twin Towers, and she’d wanted to volunteer in his honor. She and her husband Bill knew Jacobson through their congregation, Town & Village Synagogue.

Like for so many others, the details of the day are well embedded in Gross’s memory, from the long lines of stunned New Yorkers waiting to give blood to the stench that hung in the air and lingered for weeks.

“I wanted to volunteer so bad then but I didn’t know how to,” said Gross, who was even turned away once when approaching the barricaded ground zero site days later. But recently, as the tenth anniversary approached, while looking at an email from the Jewish Theological Seminary about various volunteer opportunities, Gross decided to work for the soon-to-open memorial.

Acting on her plan was surprisingly easy. After filling out an application online (911memorial.org), which included a pledge to work three four-hour shifts a month, Gross and other volunteers were given a two-hour training session and handed manuals. The manuals have come in handy for basic questions about the site like the size of the reflecting pools (roughly one acre each), the height of the waterfalls in them (30 feet, making them the largest manmade waterfalls in North America) and what

they symbolize: absence. The pools are lined with bronze plaques baring the names of those who died in the attacks in the WTC, Pennsylvania and in the Pentagon as well as those who died in the 1993 WTC attacks. Even the names were arranged with care given to relationships of the victims, in what was referred to as “meaningful adjacencies.”

“Explaining the sensitivity used in building the memorial — that’s one of the reasons I’m here,” said Gross.

Though there are plenty of other interesting facts in their manuals, volunteers will keep them to themselves unless asked, since they’re not supposed to approach visitors. The reason, Gross explained,

‘It’s a very peaceful place, and most New Yorkers don’t know what it’s all about.’

Cheryl Gross

is that some of the site goers are family members of the deceased, and the nonprofit entity that runs the memorial site takes issues of sensitivity very seriously.

Sometimes the day is hectic, with Gross having to help with crowd control, while on other days, she’s spent her shift joking around with the other volunteers since no one had any questions. Usually, the park sees about 15,000 visitors a day, who take in everything when strolling through, from the Survivor’s Tree (which somehow survived the attack and was recently returned to the site after being housed in the Bronx), to the ongoing construction of the new World Trade Center.

Gross, when strolling through on a recent afternoon, noted that the construction crew was up to the 90th floor.

Despite the noise from the work, the park itself is almost always eerily quiet in other ways, with most visitors content to gaze into the pools rather than chat. If they have any trouble finding the name of a specific person, computers are nearby to help locate them.

“So when I first came here, I knew exactly where to go,” said Gross, who, in keeping with Jewish tradition, once laid a stone on Jacobson’s plaque.

“It’s a very peaceful place,” Gross added, “and most New Yorkers don’t know what it’s all about.”

For those visiting the first time, Gross offered a few tips.

- Either go to the bathroom ahead of time or find out what others are available before entering the site. This is because the volunteers aren’t allowed to steer park goers anywhere specific.

- If you’re looking for a good place to eat nearby, ask. Volunteers have been known to be of help in that department and are often asked for their recommendations.

- Don’t smoke or bring anything that might need to be thrown away. Smoking is not allowed and there are also no trash cans at the site.

- Check hours ahead of time. On January 9, 2012, the memorial will change its hours of operation through March 10, and they will be Monday through Sunday from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. with the last entry at 5 p.m. Currently, hours are Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturdays and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

- To avoid wait time at Vesey Street, register for tickets online at 911memorial.org or call (212) 266-5211 before heading to the memorial site’s entrance at Albany and Greenwich Streets.

- Come back in 2012. Though the memorial site was opened in time for the 10th anniversary of 9/11, more is still to come including a museum to open on the site eventually, and the addition of 400 trees to the park area.

Meanwhile, beginning in January, the memorial is expected to see a dropoff in the number of volunteers and more will be needed. According to Danilo Minnick, a volunteer coordinator, the main responsibility of the volunteers is to provide a positive experience for visitors, and how busy they can get depends largely on weather. Volunteers should be okay with spending four

hours on their feet and foreign language skills are a plus.

“You’d be surprised at how often that comes in handy,” said Minnick.