

SUNCOAST JOURNAL



Florida Suncoast Chapter of the Kiwi Club - Chartered 2008

We are a social and philanthropic organization of former and current flight attendants of American Airlines and former and current flight attendants of airlines acquired by or merged with American Airlines.



Remembering September 11, 2001

A few years after September 11, 2001, former FL Suncoast member Sharee McClellan Thieleman was instrumental in getting our chapter involved in planning, organizing, and participating in 9/11 Remembrance ceremonies that continued for several years.

Sharee felt strongly that the flight attendants and pilots aboard those airplanes were not given enough attention or recognition for the way they handled, to the very best of their ability and training, an unimaginable and horrifying situation. She wanted to be sure they were remembered.

The early "A Day of Remembrance" events were held at Rumrunners, a restaurant overlooking a wide canal in Cape Coral, FL. The ceremonies began early in the morning with the presentation of colors, the National Anthem, Pledge of Allegiance, an invocation, and more. The names of the airline crew members were read aloud, and at the precise times the planes struck, a fireman's bell would ring out. Each year, more men and women from our local first responder agencies became involved. Many agreed to speak, some sharing deeply moving, firsthand accounts of their experiences in New York City, or Washington DC, on September 11. The setting on the water made the ceremonies especially memorable. Boats from law enforcement and first responder agencies throughout the county paraded slowly past the restaurant patio while a bugler played "Taps" or bagpipers played "Amazing Grace." Some years, white doves were released into the sky. The ceremonies ended with white roses being tossed into the water in remembrance.



Attendance continued to grow until eventually we outgrew the restaurant deck and patio. By then, the annual remembrance had become an important community event, and first responder organizations in Fort Myers and Cape Coral took over, holding future ceremonies at local fire and police stations.

On the 10th anniversary of September 11, a special remembrance ceremony was held at the Broadway Palm Dinner Theatre. Well known local artist Leoma Lovegrove had created an enormous 10-by-18-foot canvas and for a couple of months prior to the unveiling, invited thousands of residents and visitors to participate by helping paint the names of all the 9/11 victims onto it. During the ceremony, Leoma completed the work by painting a soaring eagle over the names. The finished canvas is now on display at Florida Gulf Coast University.

That ceremony brought another unforgettable moment for the FL Suncoast Kiwis. Joe Andujar, a Lee County sheriff, and former NYPD motorcycle officer, gave an emotional speech and then conducted a solemn flag-folding ceremony. When he finished, he presented the folded American flag to our FL Suncoast Kiwi chapter. There wasn't a dry eye in the place when Deputy Joe presented the folded flag to former flight attendant, Kiwi Marilyn Lowe, "in honor of their loss and heroism." The accompanying certificate stated that the flag had flown over Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center. We treasured that flag and later loaned it, along with the certificate and other memorabilia, to the Southwest Military Museum in Cape Coral for safekeeping and public display. Sadly, when we learned the museum would be moving and asked for our items to be returned, they could no longer locate them.



Left - Joe Andujar holds the folded flag and stands in front of the completed completed canvas. He presented it to Marilyn Lowe for the FL Suncoast Kiwi chapter.

Center - Kathy Kuzminski & Marilyn Lowe hold the flag in front of the Lovegrove canvas with victims names painted on it.

Right - Sharee Thieleman is given the flag and certificate at our chapter luncheon.

Below - One of the 9/11 displays at Southwest Military Museum in Cape Coral. Eunice Wood Rofsky, Kathy Kuzminski, Sharee Thieleman



Our chapter's connection to September 11 continued through former New York City paramedic, Randy Kraus, who now was a lieutenant and medical officer for the Fort Myers Beach Fire Control district. When Randy learned that pieces of steel recovered from Ground Zero were being made available, he requested one and was given a sizable steel beam from the rubble of the World Trade Center. That piece of history, a piece of the World Trade Center, weighs 700 pounds and is 30 inches by 16 inches by 16 inches. That beam became the centerpiece of a permanent 9/11 memorial at Fire Station 33, 121 Lenell Road in Fort Myers Beach, just before Santini Plaza.

The FL Suncoast Kiwis were honored to contribute to that memorial by donating engraved pavers bearing the names of airline crew members and other victims of September 11. Because of our chapter's years of involvement in remembering the airline crews, and working side by side with the local first responder agencies, this memorial holds a very special meaning for us.

Randy saved shavings from the World Trade Center steel beam and had beautiful Lucite plaques created for people and organizations who had helped make the Fire Station 33 memorial possible. One of those plaques was presented to the Suncoast Kiwis. Inside the clear Lucite is an image of the Twin Towers, filled with actual shavings from the steel recovered from Ground Zero.

The inscription reads:

Presented to Suncoast Kiwis

Thank you for your caring support for the remembrance of September 11, 2001.

"Some gave all, all gave some."

It is an incredible gift—and an extraordinary piece of history for our chapter.



What began with Sharee Thieleman's determination that the flight attendants and pilots of September 11 should never be forgotten grew into years of remembrance, community involvement, and lasting friendships with local first responders.

For the FL Suncoast Kiwis, remembering September 11 has always been especially personal. Those airline crew members were doing the jobs so many of us had done ourselves. We understood their training, their responsibilities, and their instinct to care for their passengers even in circumstances no training could ever have fully prepared them for.

We remember them.
And we always will.



L-R - Sandy Gardner, Sharee Thieleman, Jane Finzer, Eunice Rofsky, Ruth McConnell, Kathy Kuzminski, Marilyn Lowe, Betsy Howlett, Nancy Moylan, Tina McNeice, Sandy Pagden-Gribaudo





Left - Randy Kraus Center - Joe Andujar
2021 9/11 Memorial service held at
convention center downtown Fort Myers



Posed behind Joe's NYPD motorcycle: Nancy Moylan,
Kathy Kuzminski, Sandy Pagden-Gribaudo, Marilyn Lowe,
Tina McNeice, Betsy Howlett, Sharee Thieleman,



Frank Silecchia, left, attended the 2014 9/11 remembrance & dedication ceremony for the steel beam at FMB Fire Station #33. A union construction worker, he was helping with rescue and recovery at ground zero, when he discovered a 17 - 20 foot tall structure - two intersecting steel beams - that looks like a Christian cross. Rescue workers used the the site of the cross as a makeshift shrine for prayer and comfort. The cross is displayed in the 9/11 Memorial Museum in NYC. He had a cross made for himself from a piece of the steel.



Right, Kiwi Nancy Moylan holds the large, heavy cross.