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Section: LOCAL NEWS MONTGOMERY COUNTY & THE REGION

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Forged in steel, born in tragedy

Monument honors 9/11 sacrifice

Jeff Shields INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

They came to the Montgomery County Courthouse yesterday to see it for the first time, a memorial for their loved ones killed on Sept. 11, 2001, and a monument for those who rushed to their aid.

Mothers carried photos of their children as though still searching for good news and wondered what they would find behind the black curtains. Hidden from view on the granite courtyard stood the 18-foot memorial, never yet publicly seen.

A crowd gathered, the bagpipes played, and 21 black-robed judges filed in. The speeches began.

County Commissioner Jim Matthews had pushed to make a permanent memorial in Norristown out of a ragged **steel** beam pulled from World Trade Center wreckage. His reasons were to honor the victims and rescue workers, and to ease the grief of their families. And "because we should," Matthews said yesterday.

"Perhaps this monument . . . will very so slightly alleviate such anguish," said Matthews, "as we, the people of Montgomery County, cast **in steel** our perpetual grasp of their memory."

He read the names of 11 victims whose family hail from Montgomery County, the courthouse bell tolling for each one:

Timothy D. Betterly. Christopher "Buddha" Clarke. Andrew Kates. Alisha C. Levin. Kathryn Blair Lee. Robert Francis Mace. Noell Maerz. Robert G. McIlvaine. Johanna Sigmund. James J. Straine Jr. Sigrid Charlotte Wiswe.

"Every day I feel the emptiness of losing my son," Ralph Maerz, whose son died **in** the South Tower, told the hushed crowd, 600 strong.

By the end of Maerz's speech, the wind had picked up, lifting the curtains and revealing a glimpse of the 7-foot bronze hands reaching skyward, cradling the wounded piece of metal. Plans were changed, a button was pushed, the curtains fell, and there it was.

"Gorgeous!" someone cheered.

"I'm **in** awe," Maerz would say later.

The beam, once straight and strong, now ripped and crumpled, radiated its terrible power. Such force kept some families away - "That could be the beam that hit my son," Robert McIlvaine of Springfield, whose son, Bobby, died outside the World Trade Center, said by phone.

For Janet Clarke of Villanova, the beam was an unsettling revelation. She saw what happened to that piece of **steel**, and she better understood.

"That's why we haven't found him," she said, distractedly, straightening the worn photo button of her son, whom everybody called "Buddha."

Many, like Clarke, never recovered a body, and have no place other than New York City to grieve.

"We don't have a grave," said Birgit Wiswe of Collegeville, sister of Sigrid Wiswe, who was working for American Express at the World Trade Center.

"We've never been able to go to a place and . . .," she said, gesturing **in** a way that showed she wasn't sure what to do there.

Artist Sassona Norton, chosen from among 30 candidates to design the memorial, received a standing ovation and mesmerized the audience with an impassioned explication of her work - the hands, worn but strong, "experienced," she called them.

"They have known life, and they are capable of rising above everything and carry us from wherever we are into safety," she said.

"They're trustworthy hands," said Ute Bongers, Sigrid Wiswe's mother.

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