

DEDICATION SPEECH EXCERPTS
9/11 MEMORIAL UNVEILING CEREMONY

BY SASSONA NORTON

Dear commissioners, distinguished guests, friends and family,

Today, I wanted to share with you some thoughts and feelings that have occupied me since I started to work on the memorial.

First and foremost, my heart goes out to any and all who have lost loved ones in the 9/11 attack. No memorial can express the pain – so private and individual – the suffering, and the tragic change of life that you have gone through - and still might.

When I first heard about 9/11 I was in my studio in London. But my sister had just been to New York to visit and went, naturally, to the World Trade Center. She left to go back home just a few days before 9/11. It still makes me think – and quite often - about the randomness in which some of us were personally spared, while others were not. Yet, we all were impacted. Life as we had known it has changed. Collectively.

It is to this collective experience that I tried to give a voice.

When the commissioners of Montgomery County announced the competition to design and build the 9/11 memorial, they stipulated that it would have to include an I-beam that was once a part of the North Tower of The World Trade Center.

I welcomed the idea full heartedly, as an American and as an artist.

The I-beam is a witness to the tragedy. It is also its victim as well as its symbol. Like the towers, the I-beam became an unwilling participant in the horrors of the day.

Look at it: It was torn, folded on itself twice, completely twisted. From an everyday element of construction, industrial in character, it turned into something mystical. From cold and man-made form it turned into an organic shape. I saw this change as evidence of the destruction, but I also wanted to use it as an opportunity to express transformation and hope.

I have never had a relationship with an inanimate object similar to what I have developed with the I-beam. I first saw it on my trip to Norristown when I was notified that I was among the finalists. I was taken to the fire fighters academy where it had been lying on the floor for quite some time, and from the first minute I saw it, I felt as if it was alive. I got down on my knees and touched it.

The I-beam lived in front of my studio for long months; I removed the studio doors, but it was still too large to be moved in, so it hung

outside, suspended on cables from a temporary 20-foot-tall structure. Every day, at 7 o'clock in the morning, I would walk to my studio through the woods. But Rob, my assistant, was always there earlier, and he would raise the I- beam that had been lowered to the ground the night before. From the distance, through the woods, I could hear the sound of the I-beam being pulled up against the cables, link by link. The sound was rhythmic, and melodious, and very peaceful. Just like bells. And it would fill my heart with tenderness.

To express tenderness as well as hope, the I-beam is lifted upward into the sky by a large pair of hands. The hands cradle the I-beam, but their sheer size reflects strength, as well as tenderness.

What happened on 9/11 included so many acts of heroism and sacrifice that it is not difficult to imagine the lifting of the I- beam also as an expression of resilience and courage.

So many were involved in acts of bravery in response to the urgent call for help. The first responders: from the fire fighters to the police officers to the medics - everyone who was around in one way or another – all fought to lift, and to save lives. I wanted to create the image of lifting as we might envision it in a moment of duress: a large pair of hands that can reach out to us. The hands are strong, muscular, and experienced. They have known time. They have known life. And they are capable of rising above everything to carry us from wherever we are - into safety.

Consequent acts since 9/11 engage expressions of lifting as well. What took place on that day: the lifting of fallen particles and debris in order to uncover and carry the victims out into daylight - has changed later into construction. The broken parts are lifted now in order to clear the site for a future rebuilt.

I hope that the acts of lifting that were the core image of the memorial hold a promise for some solace. I hope that remembering 9/11, remembering the many who were killed so randomly, and remembering the first responders who fought to save others – may bring some peace. I hope that pain – as unwanted and as unwarranted – holds some lessons that we may discover in the process.

Reflecting on the past can make us collectively stronger. Including the past in our thoughts for a better future can make us collectively whole.

Memories never die.

If any of this reaches some spot in the heart of a viewer - I would feel rewarded.

Thank you.