

Fire heroes of 9/11 remembered beneath an Irish sky

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - March 2025

In a little fishing town in the south of Ireland, the firefighters lost on 9/11 will never be forgotten. In a Garden of Remembrance overlooking the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, a grove of oak and sycamore trees stands as a living memorial. There are 343 of them, each one bearing a name. They represent the firefighters who raced to danger in New York's World Trade Center as others fled the worst terrorist attack in history. It was September 11, 2001.



Many of the names on these trees are Italian. Some are Polish, Scottish, Portuguese and Greek.

But the vast majority of them are Irish. It has been estimated that, at times, some 80 per cent of New York City's 11,000 firefighters (FDNY) claim Irish descent. The slogan "343 Remember" is often found on other memorials – those of concrete and steel – or on bumper stickers and even bracelets and tattoos. However, the Garden of Remembrance in Kinsale, County Cork is unique in its longevity.

Kathleen Murphy, an Irish nurse who grew up in Kinsale and had emigrated to New York, was working at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan when the commandeered flights struck the towers. She spent that day treating injured and exhausted first responders. Returning to Kinsale in the weeks following the attacks, she planted the 343 trees in a tranquil hilltop section of her family's land.

Rose Foti, whose son Robert was one of those courageous firefighters lost on that awful day, met Kathleen Murphy in New York. Rose describes her as "precious" in the hearts of the families who lost sons on 9/11. Three times over the past 23 years, Rose has travelled to the memorial garden at Kinsale – visits which she describes as akin to a spiritual experience. It is a place of peace and solemn remembrance. Friends of Rose who make the trip from America to Kinsale update her with photos of Robert's tree.

On September 8, 2024, a group of about 100 active FDNY and Irish firefighters began a 278-kilometer cycling journey from Dublin, Ireland's capital, to the remembrance garden at Kinsale. Led by an Irish firetruck, they set out from the U.S. ambassador's residence, visiting 17 firehouses (and a few welcoming pubs) along the way. In small towns and villages throughout the rolling hills of their route, citizens gave the cyclists tremendous welcomes as they passed through their communities. The trip was a moving tribute to the firefighters' fallen compatriots slain in the line of duty on 9/11.

"I carry every one of those guys with me," said retired FDNY Battalion Chief Danny Sheridan of the ride. He referred not only to his 343 brothers who died in the twin towers but also to the 370 firefighters who have died since that day of 9/11-related cancers.

On September 11, to the wail of bagpipes and to thunderous applause from onlookers lining the route, television cameras captured the firefighters' arrival at Kathleen Murphy's Garden of Remembrance. Here a memorial service concluded the three-day affair. For many of the American firefighters, it was their first 9/11 anniversary spent away from the Ground Zero memorial in New York City.

Retired FDNY firefighter Danny Manning captured the spirit of the Garden of Remembrance at Kinsale, describing how the 343 trees "continue to grow, continue to flourish." Many members of the fallen firefighters' families come to Kinsale every year to mark the tragedy. Tour busses throughout the year have also begun to bring visitors, many of them Americans, to this hilltop grove of trees.

Kevin McHarg was one of a group of Sarnia firefighters who rushed to New York City in the days following 9/11 to be of service to the FDNY, which was reeling from the instant loss of so many. Like the Irish firefighters, McHarg exemplifies the bond of brotherhood that unites this brave and special breed of men and women who race to danger as others flee.

On a peaceful plot of land in Ireland, the bravest of the brave are remembered always.