

September 11th Memorial Program, 2020

Chief Joseph Baccellieri:

Good Morning:

It is our tradition to gather each year on the anniversary of the September 11th attacks to pay tribute and to honor our brave brothers, Captain William Harry Thompson, Sgt. Mitchel Wallace and Sgt. Thomas Jurgens who we tragically lost in the vicious and cowardly terror attacks.

We also honor the scores of court officers and other first responders who raced to the scene, hundreds were lost that day and we continue to lose even more as they succumb to illnesses caused by their exposure to toxins at ground zero. And, of course, we honor the thousands of innocent lives stolen from us on that horrific day.

While our commitment to never forget is strong and steadfast, the unprecedented challenges and necessary precautions to keep people safe during this global pandemic have temporarily prevented us from assembling in person.

It is our hope, that today's commemoration will provide some comfort to the families of our brave heroes and that in spite of the challenges, we endeavor to pay homage to these extraordinary men and keep our promise to never forget.

To this day, I am continually asked why Harry, Mitch, Tom and other court officers selflessly raced to the site of the attack, the hallowed ground we know as ground zero. Some even go as far as to say that they were especially brave because they were not required to go, they chose to go. While my fellow brothers and sisters in uniform are truly humbled by these sentiments, I respectfully submit to you that public service is a calling. When you put on a uniform, strap on a weapon and swear an oath to protect and serve, these are not just words to us, they are gospel with a deeply profound meaning.

Harry, Mitch, Tom, court officers and all first responders who dedicate their lives to public service understand that there is no choice. It's in our DNA, the essence of who we are, commitment to helping others no matter the cost. These are principles the overwhelming majority of our first responders live and die by and our nation must acknowledge and revere them for we constitute the first line of defense.

Harry, Mitch and Tom had no choice, they responded to the needs of others, they did not ask

nor did they care what your race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background or immigration status was, their fellow humans needed help and they answered the call and gave everything they had, they epitomize the innate good of our people.

To the families of our fallen brothers, I know that even with the passage of 19 years, no words of mine can assuage a loss so deep and we are truly sorry.

As you know, in 2018, our Chief Judge, the Honorable Janet DiFiore and the UCS dedicated and named our new state of the art Court Officers Academy in honor of our fallen heroes. It is in this house of learning that future generations of NYS court officers will come to be indoctrinated in the tenets of professionalism, courage, service to others, tolerance, compassion and leadership. Harry, Mitch and Tom personify those qualities, their story and their character is the cornerstone and core of our curriculum.

The Academy's leadership award is inscribed with this profound statement: "what we have done for ourselves alone dies with us, what we have done for others and the world is immortal."

Harry, Mitch and Tom and their ultimate sacrifice will forever be memorialized and etched into the minds of all who pass through these halls, we pray that this provides solace to their families and all those they touched throughout their lives.

I am grateful and blessed to have personally known these fine men, proud to wear the uniform of a NYS court officer and privileged for the opportunity to share some of my deepest thoughts with you today, the 19th anniversary of the most evil attacks on our nation.

We will never forget! May God bless you all, stay safe and god bless the United States of America.

Please remain with us as the NYS Courts Ceremonial Unit, the NYS Courts Pipes and Drums and Sergeant Jessica Hernandez lead us in the pledge of allegiance and a rendition of our national anthem.

Thank you.

Chief Judge Janet DiFiore:

Thank you to our New York State Court Officers for that very moving tribute. --

Today, we come together as one court family. And we come together in solidarity with the rest of our nation, to honor the memories of the thousands of Americans who were senselessly killed 19 years ago on September 11th, including our own New York State Court Officers:

- Captain William “Harry” Thompson;
- Sergeant Mitchel Wallace; and
- Sergeant Thomas Jurgens.

Captain Thompson; Sergeant Wallace; and Sergeant Jurgens were among the first uniformed officers to respond to the World Trade Center on 9-11. These men instinctively, reflexively, rushed headlong into one of the most dangerous situations that anyone could imagine, and they selflessly did so to save innocent lives, and to help and assist in any way that they could.

And while, tragically, they lost their own lives on that fateful day, their example of bravery,-- of sacrifice,-- and of heroism not only unified us, but inspired us to muster and collect the strength and courage we needed to move forward during those dark and frightening days that followed 9-11. – And their selfless acts, to help and protect others, endure in our memories and continue to inspire us to be **our** best selves, to this very day, almost two decades later.

We vowed then never to forget them, and each year we look forward to honoring that commitment, coming together in courthouses across the state to restate our appreciation for their service, and to honor their sacrifice. And by permanently dedicating our Court Officers Academy to their memories, we underscore in the hearts and minds of our future Court Officers, the high honor and privilege it is to wear the same shield for which Captain Thompson; Sergeant Wallace; and Sergeant Jurgens gave their lives in service to all of us, and our families.

And, of course, we have not forgotten the many Court Officers who responded, and served alongside these three brave men that day, risking their lives to rescue victims;... risking their lives to provide aid and comfort to the injured;... and then risking their lives to assist in the critical recovery efforts that followed at Ground Zero. Every one of those men and women was faithful to, and honored, their oath to serve and protect, and we are enormously proud, and grateful for their efforts on our behalf.

And 19 years later, amazingly, though not surprisingly, this same spirit of service, courage and resilience has been on full display throughout the COVID pandemic. Our Court Officers have been on the front lines from Day One, safely supporting our operations to keep our courts open and functioning. And so, on behalf of the entire Unified Court System, and the lawyers and the litigants who seek our services, I take this opportunity to express our appreciation, and praise, for their valued and critical contributions, necessary to keep our courts open and functioning during this historic public health crisis.

Nothing tests character like adversity, and in the case of our court system I am proud to say that your ability and commitment on 9-11, and, again, during the pandemic, to overcome every challenge and faithfully carry out our mission of delivering justice, and upholding the rule of law, has been on full display.

Thank you for your service, and thank you for being a part of this ceremony, to honor and remember. And now, a few words from our Chief Administrative Judge, Lawrence K. Marks.

Chief Administrative Judge Lawrence Marks:

Good morning to everyone and thank you for tuning into today's commemoration. As we all know, today marks the 19th anniversary of the horrific attacks on the Twin Towers, on our city, and on our country. Today we honor the memory of the nearly 3,000 individuals who lost their lives and their futures so suddenly, and so tragically. And today, we remember and honor each of those lives that was stolen 19 years ago, including three of our own -- Captain William Harry Thompson, Sergeant Mitchel Wallace, and Sergeant Thomas Jurgens -- brave and heroic court officers who made the ultimate sacrifice that day to serve and protect, and to save New Yorkers.

Three selfless, brave, and incredibly honorable individuals who died so that others could live. They did not hesitate to go above and beyond their duty in the face of grave danger, and they gave their lives for it. And with the dedication of our Court Officers Academy last year, we honor those men -- each and every day -- and all of the other first responders who risked their lives.

As much as these events are part of our personal memories, they are now, 19 years later, engrained in our history as well. They are a part of who we are. Yet more and more, as the years go by, there will be people who only learn about September 11th second-hand. There are now Americans who will cast votes in the upcoming Presidential election who were not alive to bear witness to the Towers vanishing from the New York skyline.

But we honor and cherish the memory of those valiant individuals with each new class of court officers at the Academy. And we carry the weight of the day the towers fell in everything we do as New Yorkers. Today, and every day, we hold in each of us the spirit and the courage of those first responders, and in particular our three fallen officers. We cannot bring these men back, but we can live every day honoring each of them and their sacrifice. We remember their extraordinary heroism and we deeply mourn their loss. Their courage will forever be an inspiration, and they live on in our hearts and our minds.

We extend our deepest sympathy and warmest wishes to their families on this day of remembrance. It is difficult to imagine how painful these past 19 years have been for you. But we hope you find comfort in the enormous impact these men had on all of us in the court system, and on so many more New Yorkers and Americans.

In recent months, in a similar spirit of selflessness, our court officers did not hesitate in reacting to the dangers of the coronavirus pandemic. Court officers risked their own health and safety by reporting to court each and every day to protect others. And we know how much those officers' actions were inspired by Captain Thompson, Sergeant Wallace, Sergeant Jurgens, and the other first responders from 19 years ago.

I echo the Chief Judge's gratitude for the commitment shown by our court officers, who rose to the challenge of keeping our courts in operation while helping to protect court users and the general public from this terrible virus. At a time when New York City and New York State faced

shutdowns, we continued to serve the public by keeping the courts running, and by keeping everyone as safe as possible.

New York was hit hard by the pandemic, losing far too many of our friends, neighbors and fellow citizens. But if recent months have shown us anything, it is that our city and state remain as strong as ever, as unified as ever, as resilient as ever. To that end, we all express our thanks to the judges and nonjudicial personnel, and in particular the court officers who tirelessly promoted the operations of our court system, and ensured that New Yorkers continued to have access to justice.

So along with them, please join me in honoring the heroic men and women -- and especially Captain Thompson, Sergeant Wallace, and Sergeant Jurgens – who went above and beyond to protect and save fellow New Yorkers 19 years ago. And with that, and to conclude our commemorative program, let us return to the 9/11 Memorial.
