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Patriotic mission touches Manatee

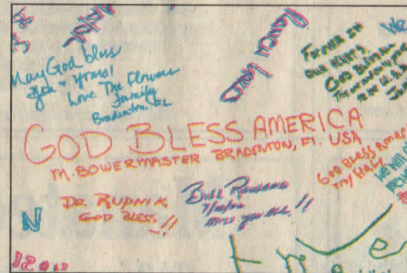
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BRADENTON — No glitz, no glamour, just a man collecting signatures while visiting every state in the nation.

Michael Joseph, a 41-year-old artist, is creating a display of thoughts, remembrances and tributes to Sept. 11 that he hopes will hang in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. He also is collecting signatures to have a postal stamp fashioned from a striking black and white photograph he took of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers with the cross from St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church nestled between them.

He began his journey July 4 from his home in Fort Lauderdale. His trail of compassion found its way to DeSoto Square mall Wednesday.

In the middle of the food court



GEORGE MCGINN/Special to the Herald
Some of the signatures on the World Trade Center petition.

were two white banners, swirling with colorful inscriptions of pride, strength and resilience.

Joseph said he was "deeply moved" by Sept. 11 and part of his mission is for Americans to remember not just what happened, but how they felt.

MISSION TO 6C



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Michael Joseph wants a picture he took to be made into a Sept. 11 stamp.

LOCAL & STATE

MISSION FROM 1C

"This is a compassionate, caring effort to unite the country," he said. "We hugged a little longer after Sept. 11. Why does that have to go away?"

The idea for the project came after Joseph realized that the emotions so evident after Sept. 11 were fading. He said people have been receptive to the idea of writing messages about their experiences.

"People putting something in writing is very personal," Joseph said. "It's like a love letter to America."

Wednesday evening that "love letter" had about 2,000 signatures, and while Joseph says he expects that number to rise, no number could be equated with the true goal.

He said that during a casual conversation someone suggested that he petition to have a postal stamp designed from his photograph of the Twin Towers. "The idea is to have a stamp," he said, "but it's not the ultimate goal."

Joseph took a picture of the World Trade Center on Oct. 19, 2000, and titled it "In God We Trust." The photograph did not have nearly as much significance then as it does now and he has given away copies to some of those most affected by the tragedy.

He isn't fueled by fame, he said, but just wants to spread a "message of peace and love."

Among his most ardent supporters are firefighters and police officers. Several members of the Cedar Hammock Fire Department were at the mall supporting Joseph.

Fire Commissioner Benjamin Milks said that many members of the fire department had met Joseph previously and were aware of his project. He said that by signing the banner, people have a way they can "put an imprint on how they feel."



GEORGE MCGINN/Special to the Herald

Michael Joseph holds his photo of the World Trade Center with signatures.

"We hugged a little longer after Sept. 11. Why does that have to go away?"

Michael Joseph

41-year-old artist

Lt. Chuck Benenati said he was moved by Joseph's work. He said firefighters consider each other brethren regardless of location, so the post-Sept. 11 outpouring of grief and sympathy was automatic.

"For us to be moved is one thing," he said. "But for him to devote so much time and effort to this, that's really moving."

Joseph will continue his state-by-state trek across the nation and wants to visit Alaska and Hawaii, too. He plans to travel to Tallahassee on Monday. He plans to have his mission accomplished in time for the anniversary of the terrorist attacks and wants to end in New York after stops in Shanksville, Pa., and Washington, D.C.