

Banner memorialize

By Robert C. Pollack
Record-Journal staff

SOUTHINGTON — They lined up on the town green Tuesday evening to affix their names and brief message to a 40-by-60-foot banner memorializing Sept. 11 that already contained more than 18,000 signatures from people in all 48 contiguous states.

Artist-photographer Michael Joseph came up with the "We the People Banner" idea and has traveled more than 21,000 miles to 325 cities and towns with his girlfriend, Paige Obrig, with one simple theme: "Help keep the spirit of unity that erupted after 9-11 alive and growing."

That spirit was very much in evidence as more than 250 people scrawled their names and messages on one of 12 white vinyl panels that make up the huge banner, which will soon be displayed at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

But of all the messages — most of them simple declarations such as "We Will Never Forget," "God Bless America" and "Thanks to the NYPD and NYFD" — the first signature on July 4 by a young girl in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., was the one that brought tears to the eyes of both Joseph and Obrig.

"She stood over the panel for almost half an hour, sobbing," Obrig said. "And then she told us a cousin, aunt and boyfriend had gone to the top of one of the towers the morning of Sept. 11 but she stayed outside because she was afraid of heights."

She lived.

They died.

She wrote on the first panel: "Aunt Suzie, I wish I had gone inside with you. I'll never forget or forgive."

"It's one of the few negative messages on the banner," Joseph said.

He and Obrig talked about visiting Oklahoma City, where the federal building was destroyed by a huge truck bomb. They described sitting down with a Boston assistant fire



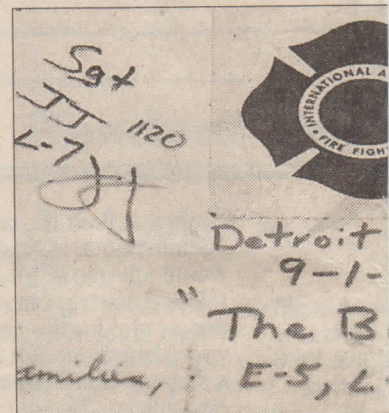
police force.

He died in one of the towers.

They talked about "being adopted" by firefighters all across the country who housed them and fed them and called them their own. "The support was amazing, really amazing," Joseph said.

A cardboard box for donations was on display, but it was clear that the couple had to dip into their savings to launch the 2½-month project, since each of the 12 panels cost \$300.

"It's a labor of love," Obrig said, adding, "When Michael came up with the idea, I knew in my heart it



Top, Samantha Swartz, 10, signs the Town Green. Above, signat

ington

s 9-11 in a big way



just have to look hard to find it." He said learning from what happened is the key, concluding, "We shouldn't dwell on it, but we shouldn't forget."

The banner panels laid out on the grass were bordered with photographs of the twin towers and headshots of the 343 firefighters lost when the towers came down.

"May there be peace in the world," Southington resident Diane Pelletier wrote on the panel before her. "This banner gives us a chance to express our emotions," she said.

"I think it's wonderful," added resident Julie Zarrella.

That was the sentiment echoed over and over by people of all ages, who came together to relive an event that changed the country forever.

"We spread the banner out at St. Peter's Church right next to ground zero last week on Sept. 11," Joseph said. "That's when Mayor Giuliani signed it and so did many who lost loved ones in the towers and I can't begin to describe how emotional that was."

"This is a lifetime experience, this is history," he said as a group of young children knelt near him to sign a panel and become part of that history.

One of them, Stephanie Kalat, 11, who thanked the New York firefighters and police officers in her message, was oblivious of all the commotion around her as she carefully drew her letters with one of the many pens Joseph supplied for the occasion.

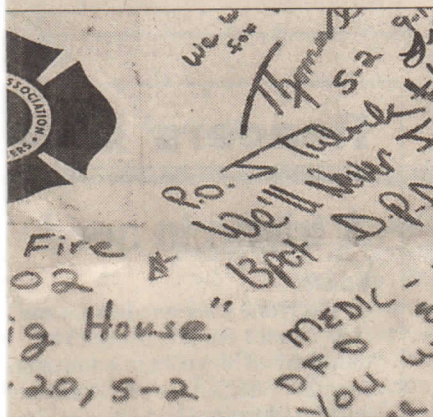
"Our thanks and prayers are with all of you," wrote Town Councilor Victoria Triano.

But it took a little girl who didn't want to give her name to put the whole thing in perspective.

"I keep crying when I see the television pictures of the towers coming down," she said. "I keep crying. But this banner gives me a chance to do something else."

She said her message on the banner was simple.

"We will survive."



Photos by Chris French / Record-Journal

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vice surround an International Assoc

"I am so proud of him," said his mother, June Prestipino, a sentiment echoed by his father, Julio, and other members of his family.

Joseph and Obrig now live in Fort Lauderdale, but Joseph is a Southington native and graduate of Southington High School and this was the last stop of his 48-state journey.

"I thought ending it here would be appropriate since it's my hometown," he said.

Capt. Harold "Buddy" Clark was there with Headquarters Co. A Shift and was one of those who wrote "We Will Never Forget."