

ADVERTISEMENT



September 11, 2005

[latimes.com](#) : National News
 E-mail :

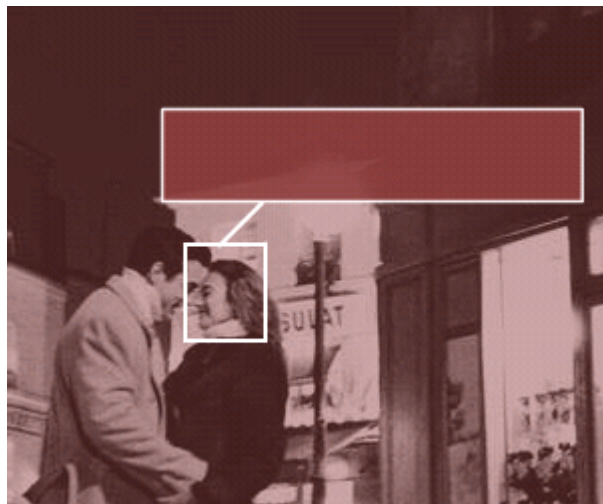
THE NATION

In Them, a Fallen Brother Lives On

■ Six siblings honor with good deeds a New York firefighter who died in the World Trade Center.

By Josh Getlin, Times Staff Writer

ADVERTISEMENT



NEW YORK — In life and death, Stephen Siller brought his family together.

With both of his parents dead by the time he was 10, his six brothers and sisters, all much older, helped raise him. When Siller, a New York firefighter, died in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, his siblings rallied around, helping his widow raise their five children.

As New York marks the fourth anniversary of the attacks at ground zero, the Sillers will once again stand together. In a ceremony today honoring siblings who lost loved ones, the Staten Island family will read Stephen's name from a list of the 2,749 people killed in New York when two jetliners flew into the World Trade Center towers.

"The pain doesn't end," said Russell Siller, the oldest brother. "But we diminish it by turning Stephen's memory into something positive, by doing good for others."

In the months after their brother's death, Siller's siblings created a foundation that has raised more than \$1 million, mostly for orphaned and abandoned children, burn victims and other causes. Last week, they became one of the first 9/11 families to publicly raise funds for Hurricane Katrina victims; they pledged \$100,000 toward relief efforts and sent two large trucks filled with water to the Gulf Coast.

All of these activities — fundraisers, planning sessions, community outreach programs, media interviews — have been life-changing experiences for family members who typically saw each other at barbecues, golf games and camping trips. They have learned that the relentless pace can be a blessing and a curse: It shields them from painful memories; it also ensures that the tragedy is never far from their minds.

"During the last four years, 9/11 has been 24/7 for us," said Frank Siller, pausing in his Hurricane Katrina relief work to reflect. "Each of us has had to deal with this problem, the darkness, in our own way. We're a close family, but we're all different."

The story of Stephen Siller's last heroic moments has spurred the fundraising in his name: As the 34-year-old was driving home after a night shift at his Brooklyn firehouse, he heard about the attacks on the radio. Wheeling his car around, he headed back to the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, which was closed to traffic.

Siller strapped on 80 pounds of gear and ran 1.5 miles through the tunnel to the World Trade Center. He died in the

collapse of the south tower.

It took several days for Siller's family to accept that he was dead. His siblings rushed to Sally Siller's side, trying to offer her support. She had been left with five children, ranging from 20 months to 10 years old.

Siller's brothers, Russell, George and Frank, and his sisters, Regina Vogt, Mary Scullin and Janis Hannan, again became surrogate parents. They spent hours at Sally's home, cooking meals, doing chores and taking care of the kids.

They remained strong in front of her. Yet each had moments when they crumbled privately from grief. They have continued to wrestle with these feelings.

On a recent evening, Russell, Janis and Gina gathered at the family-owned furrier business on Staten Island to discuss their personal journeys since their brother died. They found it unusual to be talking so candidly about themselves, because so much of the nation's attention has been focused on the spouses and children of 9/11 victims.

Gina, a teaching paraprofessional, said she didn't talk at work about the attacks and her family anymore because people expected her to have moved on. The idea that she could ever forget the death of her brother fills her with disbelief.

"As brothers and sisters, we don't feel forgotten, but maybe not fully understood," Janis said. "Sometimes people say to us, 'But he was your brother,' as if that somehow makes it less terrible. People who say that don't understand the Sillers."

The family's saga is the subject of a PBS documentary, "For the Love of Their Brother," which aired in many U.S. cities this weekend. When the siblings gave interviews for the film, they expected it to focus on their brother's sacrifice. Instead, it showed them celebrating — and mourning — him.

Stephen had a peaceful childhood, his family said. He grew up on Staten Island, a world of tree-lined streets, parks and tightknit working-class families. The island was separated from Manhattan's tumult by a 30-minute ferry ride.

The calm was shattered when his father, George, died of diabetes and his mother, Mae, succumbed to cancer in the late 1970s. Stephen, 10, was much younger than his siblings. He went to live with Russell and his wife on Long Island. The other brothers and sisters also spent long hours with the boy. Although his remaining family was intact, Stephen was plagued by doubts.

"Why was I born?" he once bitterly asked Frank during a walk near his home.

He found salvation in families of all kinds. After several stints as a day laborer and other jobs after high school, he found a professional home with the New York Fire Department, where he enjoyed the camaraderie with his colleagues.

He married Sally Wilson, a childhood flame, and they had five children in 10 years.

After Siller died, his siblings vowed to honor him. Within a few months, they had created the Stephen Siller, FDNY, "Let Us Do Good" Children's Foundation.

The family holds an annual fundraiser in late September called the Tunnel to Towers Run. Participants in the 5-kilometer run-walk retrace Siller's steps through the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel.

The family is also spearheading a \$1.5-million fundraising campaign as part of the \$6-million construction of Stephen's House, a temporary home for orphaned and abandoned children at New York Foundling Hospital in Staten Island.

Last week, the family began fundraising efforts for Hurricane Katrina victims. Their initial goal is to donate \$100,000 from this year's run.

"We know how we felt when the towers went down on Sept. 11, the feelings of loss and desperation, and we saw the same expressions on the face of hurricane victims," said Frank, who helps run the furrier store. "We wanted to give something back, because so much was done for our family and others after the attacks."

The pace is unrelenting: Although the Tunnel to Towers Run lasts several hours, it takes a year to plan. Hurricane relief demands additional hours. Reaching the \$1.5-million goal to help build Stephen's House takes up what little time is left.

For some family members, that's the point. They are determined not to wallow in the past, and too much free time can fill their minds with traumatic thoughts.

"If you think you can ride out the pain of 9/11 by hiding somewhere in a room, you're a goner," said Russell, a humanities teacher who has joined sibling support groups. "You have to face this sadness every day, and it helps to stay busy."

Mary agrees, even though memories come rushing back no matter what.

"I've learned to brace myself whenever there's a 9/11-related story on television," she says. "But Stephen's memory returns to me in softer, more unexpected ways. Sometimes he comes back in the snippet of a song. Or when I see his kids."

George, who runs a sporting goods store, fears the pace may be too draining. He recently had triple bypass heart surgery, and he believes his brother would have wanted the older siblings to take care of themselves — to stay emotionally strong.

"We all felt like we were underwater on 9/11, because Stephen was our little brother and suddenly he was gone," George said. "Since then, maybe we've got our heads above water. But with this tragedy, you're never completely out of the water."



FALL TV PREVIEW calendarlive.com

The networks are trying something new this year. The fall season will actually begin...in the fall. **NEW LINEUP**

• [What Does Fall Hold for TV News?](#)

latimes.com
Site Map

[California | Local](#)
[World](#)
[Nation](#)
[Business](#)
[Sports](#)
[Travel](#)
[Editorials, Op-Ed](#)

calendarlive.com
Arts & Entertainment

[Columns](#)
[Education](#)
[Food](#)
[Health](#)
[Highway 1](#)
[Home](#)
[Outdoors](#)

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:

