

America's Camp Honored By Mets

NEW YORK, Sept. 11 -- Carol Gies remembers being at a baseball game with her son after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks claimed her husband, Ronnie Gies, of the FDNY's Squad 288 Hazmat Company. With 18-year-old son Tommy by her side, the Gies family watched as actor Tim Robbins threw out a ceremonial first pitch at Shea Stadium.



"My son turned to me and said, 'Mom, can you imagine being out there in front of all these people?'" Gies said.

On Sept. 11, 2004, three years after the terrorist attacks that leveled the World Trade Center and took the lives of thousands of citizens and rescuers, Tommy Gies got his chance.

Invited by the Mets to take the mound during a pregame ceremony honoring the heroes and victims of that day, Gies -- now following in his father's footsteps with the FDNY -- wound up and threw a high, hard strike to Mets catcher Jason Phillips, drawing tears of joy from his mother and cheers from an appreciative crowd.



The Mets honored the heroes and victims of Sept. 11 with an emotional ceremony, marking the third anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania.

Directors Jay Toporoff and Jed Dorfman and America's Camp Foundation President Larry Levy on the field at Shea Stadium with Al Leiter, Mets pitcher and a member of the America's Camp Board Of Directors.

Before the afternoon contest with the Phillies, New York native John Franco presented commemorative Mets jerseys to four dedicated individuals: Gies, FDNY captain Alfredo Fuentes (reportedly the last person to escape the wreckage of the World Trade Center's North Tower), NYPD officer Catherine Hernandez (who lost her father, Noberto, at the WTC restaurant Windows on the World), and **Jay Toporoff and Jed Dorfman from America's Camp, a one-week sleep-away camp in Massachusetts that hosts children who lost parents on Sept. 11.** The Sept. 11 theme continued with a stirring national anthem performance by the FDNY's Regina Wilson, out of Engine 219, Ladder 105 in Brooklyn, and concluded with a flyover by four U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters from the Army's B-Company, 3-142 Aviation team out of Islip, N.Y.

"The New York Mets are a first-class organization," Gies said. "They've done so much in the aftermath, the way they've helped the city and given so much."

The last three years have been tough for all New Yorkers, but especially so the scores of children, parents, family members and friends who lost a loved one on that tragic day. As the city continues to recover, there seem to be more opportunities for persons touched by that September morning to heal and embrace new events.

"Everybody has down times," said Gies, who was the valedictorian of his probationary class and is now assigned to Ladder 147 in Flatbush. "Everybody has times in their lives when things



Mets catcher Mike Piazza presents Jay Toporoff with an official Mets jersey.

aren't going the way you want. I can tell you that straight out. [But] everything comes together eventually."

Standing on the field at Shea, flanked by Mets stars like Mike Piazza, Tom Glavine and Al Leiter, Gies couldn't help but wish his father -- once a Mets season-ticket holder -- was there to see him. It's a feeling he says he carries every day, especially when he was going through the FDNY's fire academy.

"To be 18 years old [in 2001] and have your father taken from you, it's not easy," Gies said.

But even as vigils and prayer services were taking place all day at and around Ground Zero in Manhattan, Carol Gies said that she was happy she'd decided to accept the Mets' invitation.

"The way I look at it, we mourn every day," she said. "We feel hurt every day. This is a day that's great. It's just good to be somewhere that's upbeat, and we're having fun. I don't have guilt. Ronnie is with me every day. I don't need to go to a church to feel him."

Of course, Sept. 11 in New York will never be just another day, as loss and sorrow continue to hang over the city and a sympathetic nation. At Shea Stadium, which served as a staging ground for rescue workers immediately after the attacks, and as the host site for the first professional sports event in New York after Sept. 11, remembrances of the tragic attacks abounded throughout the afternoon.

The U.S. flag flew at half-staff in center field and was displayed waving on the video boards. On the playing field, Major League Baseball's "We Shall Not Forget" ribbon logo was painted along the baselines and printed on the lineup cards for both clubs.

Another ribbon of remembrance was cut into the grass in center field, and just as they did after Sept. 11, the Mets wore the hats of the eight different service organizations who lost members in the attacks: the FDNY, New York Police Department, Port Authority Police Department, New York Court Officers, NYPD K-9 unit, NYPD Emergency Squad, EMS Paramedics of New York and New York State EMTs.

"I don't think [Sept. 11] will ever be forgotten," said Piazza, who hit a dramatic home run in that first game back on Sept. 21, 2001. "Twenty years from now, I'm going to wake up on 9-11 and think about that day we were in Pittsburgh. The next thing you know, we're on a bus going back to New York and looking at Ground Zero with the smoke and spotlights. It was eerie."

In the Phillies' clubhouse, outfielder Doug Glanville, who grew up just across the George Washington Bridge in Teaneck, N.J., said that he could feel the spirit of New York and was happy to play a small part in the ceremonies.

"I think we'll always have remembrances, and it should be that way," Glanville said. "I don't necessarily feel that it has to be a somber, negative feeling, but we can remember how horrible experiences unite people. You never get over that kind of loss, but I think you learn from New York and how people responded. You can't take that spirit away."



Jed and America's Camp staff members Judd Rothstein, Carolyn Wares, and Simon Molyneux shake hands with Mets Tom Glavine, John Franco, Todd Zeile and Lance Wilson during the pregame ceremonies.

Fuentes, a former acting battalion chief in the FDNY, now works as a consultant for the Department of Homeland Security. He said he was pleased to see MLB's continuing commitment to honoring the heroes and victims of the tragedy.

"It's a solemn day," Fuentes said. "I think about my brothers in the Fire Department every day, but it's special that sports still remember them. To me, that's big. Sports is a big part of our American fabric, so when they take the time to remember 9-11, the civilians and the rescuers, I'm thankful."

Fuentes has authored a just-released autobiography, "American By Choice," which details his triumph over personal injuries. He was in a coma and badly hurt in the attack, and offers a glimpse of what life in the FDNY has been like after Sept. 11.

While he believes that progress has been made since the attacks, Fuentes said that more technology must be provided to help New York's first responders prepare for another crisis situation.

"There's a lot of work to be done," Fuentes said. "This terrorism is a serious threat to our country and we have to constantly stay on top. We're in the right direction, but I'd like to see more."

However, at stadiums across America, the security teams at sports events have never been safer or better equipped to handle serious situations. All facilities upgraded their security after Sept. 11 and improved their coordination with local, state and federal intelligence agencies, ensuring the sports viewing experience would be more secure.

"The whole world has changed and we've all had to make adjustments," Mets vice president of security Rob Kasdon said. "It's like everything else since 9-11. ... [Fans] can see it. A lot of things are very visible, and are meant to be. Some of our procedures that we've introduced are not visible. We're very protected."

In the Mets clubhouse, Piazza, Leiter and Danny Garcia examined a newspaper report detailing the designs for the Freedom Tower, which will be built on the World Trade Center site in the next few years.

Piazza said that playing a baseball game in New York on Sept. 11 was a special experience that made him appreciate the city and nation's ability to overcome and galvanize in the face of adversity, a sentiment echoed by many players.