

Eulogy for Firefighter Graffagnino

To Linda, to young Mia and Joseph, and to the rest of Joseph's family, let me begin by extending my deepest sympathy. I can't imagine the pain and the grief that is in your hearts.

But during this time of great sorrow, I hope you can find comfort in the profound gratitude of the people of New York. Every New Yorker is with you today.

None of us will ever forget what happened last Saturday, the day when September 11, 2001—our worst collective nightmare—leapt from the shadows and cruelly claimed two more lives.

Just like on 9/11, black smoke poured from a building downtown, and firefighters rushed to the scene, fighting bravely despite unimaginably difficult conditions. Just like on 9/11, neighbors, friends, family members and heroes have been taken from us. And—just like on 9/11—the sorrow and anger we feel is more than we can bear. No words can do justice to the sacrifice that has been made or to the sadness that we feel.

Yet, even in the depths of our grief, we know there is more than sorrow here: there is valor, there is virtue and there is honor. So today, we pause to celebrate the life of one of our best citizens.

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While I never had the honor of meeting Joseph, I have been amazed at how many New Yorkers have been touched by his life.

How many people can say at the age of 33 that they are part of the bedrock of their community and a revered icon in their neighborhood? There is not a dry eye in Dyker Heights today. No one here will ever forget how Joseph's daily acts of kindness and generosity—sharing a story to brighten the day of a friend or shopkeeper, shoveling a neighbor's walkway in winter, or embracing his position as a role model for neighborhood kids—helped make this neighborhood such a special place. His legacy will live on in every home, on every sidewalk, in every yard, and on every corner of this wonderful neighborhood.

Most of all, Joseph will be remembered as a family man. Indeed, Joseph loved and treasured his family in a special way.

I was heartbroken to read a newspaper account in which a neighbor remembered how Joseph would carry Mia on his shoulders. The neighbor cried: who will carry Mia now?

The answer is: all of us will. Mia, every New Yorker will carry you—and young Joseph—on our shoulders—today and forever.

When someone praised Joseph Graffagnino for his public service, he would have been the first to tell you that he was an ordinary New Yorker.

Yet in 1999, he made a decision that showed extraordinary bravery and courage: he joined the New York City Fire Department. He was a nozzle man, praised by his commanders as “strong as an ox.” Firefighters are a special brotherhood, the bonds of which are formed by the omnipresence of danger—and Joseph was a beloved member of that brotherhood.

But nothing exemplifies Joseph’s greatness as a citizen more than his ultimate sacrifice. The events of that tragic day should remind us of the incredible bravery of firefighters everywhere.

When a former President spoke to families of fallen firefighters, he would often quote a passage from the book of Isaiah. In this passage, God asks: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And Isaiah replies: “Here am I. Send me.”

When there’s a fire anywhere in this city or in this state, our firefighters reply: “Send me.”

When the call came on September 11—when terrorists cruelly and coldly attacked our city and the lives of untold thousands were in danger—the men and women of the Fire Department did not hesitate in replying: “Send me.”

And on August 18, when the call came again, Firefighters Joseph Graffagnino and Robert Beddia did not waver. They simply replied: “Send me.”

As they sped from their station in SoHo to the burning tower, they followed the same trail their fallen brothers had followed six years before. As they approached Ground Zero and first glimpsed the smoke, how could they not have thought back to that day? Yet they jumped from their trucks, strapped the air tanks to their backs, and did not hesitate to engage with that horror once again. But tragically, the flames that erupted on a bright Tuesday morning in September 2001 reached across history and claimed their lives.

Today, as we mourn Joseph’s sacrifice, console his loving family, and celebrate his memory, let us also make a resolution, a commitment to ourselves and to one another: Let us commit to being worthy of the courage and bravery that he showed.

Let us begin by uncovering the truth about what happened, demanding answers to the unanswered questions, and then doing whatever is necessary to make sure a tragedy like this one never happens again.

Let us take down that building—an accursed reminder of so much suffering and loss—as quickly and safely as possible.

Let us pause and pay tribute to all of our firefighters, who have forsaken a life of material gain, safety and comfort and chosen to enter the most dangerous arena of all so their fellow citizens can be protected. Can there be a better definition of heroism than that?

Let us pay special tribute to the men and women of Engine 24 and Ladder 5, who—despite the tragedies of March 1994 and September 2001 and all the others that will never grab the headlines—continue to bravely put their lives on the line when the call sounds.

Let us hold Joseph up as an example for how we should live our own lives—with valor and courage, but also with compassion, sacrifice and love.

Finally, in the most difficult moments, when we are confronted by tragedy that we cannot understand, in the depths of sorrow and anger we cannot begin to describe, let us remember the words of the Scripture: “The souls of the just are in the hands of God.”

Joseph, may you rest in peace.