

Local bagel store honors firefighters

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BRANCHVILLE—The motif started with a few axes on the bottom shelf of a muffin case. After more than four years in business and the arrival of a fire truck in the front lawn, Firehouse Bagel Company in Branchville has transformed into something of a museum.

More than 150 firefighter-themed items, including antiques, pictures and memorabilia make up the walls of the store. Helmets, hoses, a fire truck grid, a diamond plate counter and a fire truck, which formerly belonged to Demarest Fire Department, are just a few of the items on display. Statues modeled after the owner's helmet and boots join the fire truck on the lawn. A firepole, with legs and boots perpetually suspended, suggest a fireman sliding down from the store's ceiling.

"People come in and just start staring," said owner Eugene LaMastro, of Hardyston.

Fueling the firehouse theme is LaMastro's background and a desire to honor fellow firemen, especially those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. LaMastro is a retired captain of the Union City Fire Department, where he worked for 29 years. Prior to that he worked in Union City Police Department, with 38 years of combined police and fire service. He also served in the U.S. Marines from 1968 to 1970.

Due to his fire department's proximity to the city, it responded to the World Trade Center attacks. As

a result, LaMastro witnessed the destruction of Sept. 11 firsthand.

"It was just a horror," he said. He remembers stopping and looking out at the "16 acres of destruction" with another fireman.

"When I saw that I thought, 'look what they did, the hatred these people had,'" he said.

In aiding in the rescue, he was confronted with the horrifying task of matching limbs and other body parts, watching stretchers carry away pieces. Aside from some concrete and a twisted fork he found in the rubble he said, "Nothing was recognizable."

A crushed fireman's helmet was found, and all rescuers stopped their search momentarily and bowed their heads, then continued on. LaMastro said the moment of silence occurred whenever evidence of someone lost in the rescue effort was found.

"The devastation was mind boggling...Everything was pulverized, including people," he said.

The number 343 can be found throughout the store, representing the number of firemen killed on Sept. 11. Also on display is a memorial submitted by customer Joe Foti for his son Robert, a New York City fireman who lost his life on Sept. 11.

LaMastro said his growing collection serves to educate people about being a fireman and also to remind of the ultimate sacrifice many make to keep others safe. Some items in the store are even unknown to seasoned firemen, he said, as some of the equipment is antique. As the menagerie multiplies, its association with Sept. 11



By Katie Brenzel / NJ Herald

Eugene LaMastro, owner of Firehouse Bagels in Branchville, discusses memorial of fireman Robert Foti, a fireman who lost his life in Sept. 11, 2001. The memorial, which was brought in by customer Joe Foti, Robert's father, is on display in the store.

remains a constant.

"(Sept. 11) is always in the memory of people when they see anything from a fire department," he said.

The police and fire patches covering a section of one of the store's walls is testament to the many departments that have visited Firehouse Bagel. Though much of the exhibition is from fireman flea markets and LaMastro's own collection, visitors often add to the

store's displays.

Soon a new addition will be made to the front of the store. In honor of the tenth anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks, Walter Sansone of Gallery Works is constructing ten-foot-tall steel statues of the towers for LaMastro. A dedication ceremony will be held either at the end of this month or early in October. For Sept. 11, LaMastro

plans to display a 25-foot, commemorative banner across the store lawn, as well as an 18-by-22 foot military flag.

Though retired now for more than one year and with possible plans of opening more stores in the future, LaMastro still feels very much connected to his former career.

"Being a fireman, you can never get that out of your blood," he said.

"Honored to have been a part of the design and installation of the 9-11 Memorial at Sussex County Community College"

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