

Long Island Now

Vets start Montauk-to-Ground Zero walk

1:48 PM By Erin Geismar



Christopher Delaney responded to the scene of the World Trade Center on Sept. 12, 2011.

Sitting in a van with responders from all over the world as they were taken to the wreckage, he looked out the window to see hundreds of people lining the West Side Highway holding up signs offering hope and encouragement.

"They were out there 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and it was just a very great feeling of support," said Lindenhurst's Delaney, a

civilian at the time who later enlisted in the Coast Guard and served in the Iraq War.

On the 11th anniversary of the attacks, Delaney wants to regain some of that feeling of unity and support. At 8:46 a.m., the time at which the first plane crashed into Tower One, Delaney and two fellow veterans set off on foot from Montauk Point Lighthouse to Ground Zero.

"What I don't like is how the country has fallen complacent," said Delaney, who is also president of the support group 9-1-1 Veterans. "I would love to get that unity back. We're walking, I'd love to see as many people on the roads waving their flags just like the West Side Highway."

They estimate the 148-mile Hope & Strength Walk will take them between 36 and 48 hours. Every 10 miles, they will stop to greet anyone who may be gathered to cheer them on. ([Check here for how to find them.](#))

On Thursday, they plan to pay their respects at the memorial for those lost during and after the attacks; primarily, United States Coast Guard veteran Christopher Pupo.

Pupo, of upstate Tappan, was a NYPD officer who responded to the World Trade Center and credited 9/11 with his decision to join the Coast Guard. He served in Iraq, alongside Delaney, from 2009 to 2010 when, according to Delaney, he had already begun to feel sick. Later, he was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus, a result of working at the World Trade Center.

In June, Pupo, 39, succumbed to the disease, leaving behind his wife, and three daughters, ages 6, 8, and 11.

Delaney organized the walk this year in honor of Pupo, and to raise money for a scholarship fund for his daughters. Half of the funds raised, through corporate sponsorships and private donations, will also go to Ski's Open Heart Foundation, a nonprofit named in honor of first responder Mark Gajewski, of Patchogue, who was known as Ski, and who died from lung cancer in 2011 as a result of his exposure to toxins at Ground Zero.

His daughter, Crystal Gajewski, said the foundation helps families and victims of 9/11 who are burdened by medical bills.

She said the Hope & Strength Walk has raised about \$3,000 so far and donations are continuing to come in. She said she plans to walk with the group for a few hours Tuesday night and join them at the memorial on Thursday.

"We hope that people see that we are walking in honor of those that have made sacrifices," she said.

Thomas Ronayne, director of the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency, joined Delaney – along with fellow Coast Guard veteran Doug Williams, of Bay Shore; and U.S. Navy veteran Richard Bezouska, of Ohio – at the lighthouse on Tuesday morning, as the men raised an American flag, and folded another American flag and a Coast Guard flag to take with them on their journey. They'll eventually hand them to the Pupo family.

Ronayne said he was there to support them, and he'd also be driving alongside the men throughout the trip to ensure their safety. Every mile, the men will plant a small flag in the ground inscribed with the name of a victim of the attacks, or a responder or member of the military who has passed away.

Ronayne said the walk is a reminder to everyone that the tragedy of the attacks did not end on that day, or with the end of the Iraq War. He said so many people who responded to the scene and who joined the military afterward -- along with their families -- are still struggling.

"So many of us are sick as a result of the exposure of being at the World Trade Center," Ronayne said. "Chris [Delaney] had put it best when he said it's simply about making the community understand that the fight is not over. "We're still working, we're still struggling and we need to be there as a community to support one another."

Photo: Veterans, from left, Richard Bezouska, of Ohio; Doug Williams, of Bay Shore; and Chris