

NEW YORK

New York Sen. Chuck Schumer hammers away for WTC workers; first nail in January inaugural stage salvaged from Twin Towers

Democratic House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi taps nail to little effect but Republican Speaker John Boehner finishes the job, walks off with hammer

BY JOSEPH STRAW / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2012, 1:53 PM



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Architectural drawings of the 2013 Inaugural Platform are on display during the "First Nail" ceremony, signifying the start of construction of the platform on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol.

WASHINGTON — When the President-elect takes the oath of office Jan. 21, he and 1,600 other VIPs will gather on a stage supported by New York mettle.

The House-Senate panel that will run the show gathered outside the Capitol Thursday morning to hammer in the platform's ceremonial first nails.

Committee chairman [Sen. Chuck Schumer \(D-N.Y.\)](#) placed one salvaged from the original World Trade Center and wielded a carpenter's hammer borrowed from construction of the Freedom Tower rising from Ground Zero.

Among a row of gleaming white congressional hard hats laid out for the lawmakers was a misfit: battle-worn, its orange shell flipped backward on its suspension and covered in stickers.

The helmet belonged to union welder Mark "Ski" Gajewski of East Patchogue, Long Island, who spent months working recovery at Ground Zero.

Like many of his fellow volunteers, Gajewski died of a rare lung cancer in December.

"I think it's very symbolic because in a certain sense, what he died for is what we're doing here - peaceful passing of the torch," Schumer said.



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(L-R) Architect of the Capitol Stephen Ayers, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY), Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH), House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) swing their hammers during the "First Nail" ceremony, signifying the start of construction of the 2013 Inaugural Platform on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol September 20, 2012 in Washington, D.C.

Leaders from both parties lined up, hammers in hand, behind a platform section and their respective nails. Five drove theirs home decisively, but on the left, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) tapped away to little effect.

Amused laughter turned uncomfortable. House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), who stood next to Pelosi and long since done with his own nail, made a statement: he turned, hit hers flush with the wood and abruptly walked off, hammer still in hand.

Gajewski, a 6-foot-4, 280-pound biker who wore a Care Bears hat his daughter gave him, survived testicular cancer in his 20s and served in the Marine Corps before taking up his trade.

On 9/11 he headed straight for Ground Zero because he "felt it was his duty," daughter Crystal Wajewski said.



CLIFF OWEN/AP

Senator Chuck Schumer displays the hammer he used during the First Nail Ceremony for the official launch of construction of the Inaugural platform where the President of the United States will take the oath of office on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington.

"It's just an honor that of all the construction workers that were at the World Trade Center, they would ask me
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for my dad's hard hat," Gajewski said.

This month administrators of the 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund added 50 cancers to the diseases qualifying for claims, but a deficit reduction measure threatens budget cuts starting Jan. 2 that place \$329 million of the \$4.3 billion program on the block.

Compensation law coauthors Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-Manhattan, Queens), plus Schumer and Reps. Jerry Nadler (D-Manhattan, Brooklyn) and Pete King (R-L.I.) have vowed to fight the cuts.

"Obviously if [the cut] occurs - and I don't think it will - it will present a new challenge, but we're up to that challenge," Schumer said.

The across-the-board budget cuts would spare veterans' programs. That rationale should also shield 9/11 funds, Maloney argued.

"This was the cause of the war on terror, and they should be protected like veterans," she said.

On June 11, which would have been their father's 53rd birthday, Gajewski and her brother Sean established Ski's Open Heart Foundation, a charity serving Ground Zero workers, their families, as well as children and animals in need.

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