

DOCS commissioner attends Forgotten Victims ceremony

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ATTICA — A hymn, wreath, and reading of names. Prayers and “Taps.”

Surviving hostages, family members and officials gathered at noon Saturday as Forgotten Victims of Attica conducted its annual memorial service in front of Attica Correctional Facility.

And the group received a significant acknowledgment, as Acting Commissioner Anthony J. Annucci of the New York State Department of Corrections attended and spoke to those gathered.

It’s the first time a state corrections commissioner has ever attended the group’s ceremony.

“The experience of listening to your stories and reading your statements had a very deep and profound effect on me, which I will carry for the rest of my life,” said Annucci in his remarks. “Certainly as acting commissioner, your statements have helped cement my resolve to do everything reasonably possible, to take every possible precaution, in order to prevent such a catastrophic event from ever again occurring.”

The Forgotten Victims group includes widows and family members of prison staff killed in the riot. It has long sought full disclosure of what happened during and after the 1971 prison riot.

Annucci worked with the group during the 2002 Attica Task Force hearings, as the survivors and family members recounted their experiences and how their lives were affected in the aftermath.

He had presented Forgotten Victims members with property items which had belonged to family members, earlier Saturday morning, in an invitation-only meeting.

The items had been confiscated and kept in Batavia since the prison’s retaking 43 years ago.

“Contrary to popular belief, time does not heal all wounds,” Annucci said. “There are certain wounds and certain scars that run too deep to ever completely heal, regardless of how much time has lapsed.”



Wreath laying

Grandchildren and great-grandchildren of hostages who died during the riot laid the wreath during Forgotten Victims of Attica service. (Rocco Laurienzo/Daily News)

Under those circumstances, trying to provide a measure of healing is perhaps the best that can be done, he said. In that vein, Annucci said he didn't need to instruct his staff to be as sensitive and accommodating as possible, when releasing the personal items to family members.

"They fully realized how difficult and emotional this would be for you," he said. "They wanted to do everything humanly possible to be mindful of your needs, to be sensitive to your wishes, and provide a dignified and uncomplicated process, for the examination, identification and transfer of the items to the appropriate survivors and family members."

Annucci noted the very real people to whom the items had belonged.

"You have properly decided to call yourselves Forgotten Victims of Attica," he said. "Unquestionably, you have achieved many things throughout the years since your very first meeting.

"But perhaps, above all else, your greatest accomplishment is this: You will never again be forgotten. Never. That is my promise."

The pain still runs deep for the group, which continues to press for an apology and acknowledgment from the state's leadership.

Dee Quinn Miller of Batavia led the ceremony. She's the daughter of William Quinn, who died two days after he was beaten by inmates during the initial riot.

She's a Forgotten Victims member, and gave special thanks to Annucci.

"It's beyond meaningful," she said. "We've never had (a state DOCS) commissioner. Don't get me wrong — we've invited them. It's unprecedented, it really is, and Tony Annucci is the one to do it."

She said they'd been through the process together for 15 years, and predicted a kinder and gentler DOCS under his leadership.

Where to now, for Forgotten Victims of Attica?

"We're going to work on the records," Quinn Miller said. "Because it's still important for us to get the records open. And we will never give up on the apology from the state of New York."

Forty-three people died over the course of the riot and re-taking of the facility. State police gunfire was cited in 39 deaths, including 10 hostages and 29 inmates.

The commemorations on Saturday included a state service later that evening, attended by corrections officers from around the country. An honor guard was present all day at the facility's memorial.

About 100 people attended the Forgotten Victims ceremony, including former hostage John Stockholm.

He said he was impressed that Annucci attended.

“The bottom line is it’s about the ones we lost,” he said. “The sad thing is the widows who were hurt the most. The state never did them right, and this group, Forgotten Victims, got together for them to assist any way we could.”

It was very helpful that people had access to some of the personal effects, Stockholm said.

“But there will never be closure,” he said. “This will always be in the back of their minds.”