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For 9-11 Survivors, Seeds of Healing

A peaceful garden sprouts far away from Boston's petty political jungle. Untainted by dissent, unmarked by controversy, the Public Garden memorial to Massachusetts men and women killed on Sept. 11, 2001, opens quietly to the public next week.

The unveiling has been overshadowed by all those demons unleashed on that cataclysmic day when jetliners became flying bombs and our nation experienced the worst terror in its history.

We seem to have learned little since. The city is in a knot of dread about the upcoming Democratic National Convention. Roads will be closed, lives will be disrupted and fears of terrorism will reach a new high pitch.

Complicating the inconvenient logistics, political warfare heightens the tension. Mayor Thomas Menino has been steaming at Sen. John Kerry while the city's police union is threatening to disrupt the mayor's party of a lifetime.

The Garden Of Remembrance, however, provides a grace note in the cacophony of preconvention chaos. The Sept. 11 memorial, located in a hallowed corner of Boston, is a welcome relief from the shenanigans of the Grudge Capital.

"I know how contentious and fractious Massachusetts politics can be," says Blake Allison, whose wife Anna died aboard one of the planes, "but this project has been remarkably devoid of that kind of infighting."

In these days before the unveiling of the memorial, masons and landscapers continue to work on the site inside the Public Garden at the corner of Newbury and Arlington streets. A fence protects the area and plastic sheets cover 202 names engraved on an elegant swath of pink granite from prying long lenses. A TV crew tried to get pictures of the etched names, but Linda Plazonja, executive director of the Mass 9/11 Fund, says it's only right for the families to see their beloved name in person and not on TV.

During a recent tour of the site, Plazonja peels back the plastic for me to see the names of the dead carved into the granite in simple typeface. Crew members of the ill-fated aircraft have little wings beside their names. Flight officers are identified by rank. So are members of the military and firefighters with roots in Massachusetts. Other names etched without title.

Each family decided how their cherished name would be spelled out for eternity.

"We agreed early on that the names should be alphabetical," says Allison. The families' consensus also extended to the inscription of the memorial, which reads: "September 11,

2001. The people of Massachusetts will always remember our families: Our husbands, wives, sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, grandchildren, companions, friends and neighbors."

The impact is powerful.

"The families worked for hours and hours on the text," says Plazonja. She points out that when the words are arranged on the granite, they form a heart.

Overall, The Garden of Remembrance, its \$360,000 cost all covered by donated funds, is a sanctuary of thoughtful details. As designed by landscape architect Victor Walker, the space blends into the bucolic splendor of the larger Public Garden. Etched ivy borders on the new granite evoke the Victorian past. Four wooden benches will provide respite. Flowers will bloom in September as a reminder of rebirth and renewal.

For over a century, there has been no new monument built in the Public Garden, which is protected zealously by the Friends of the Public Garden and Boston's Landmarks Commission. It is part of this Massachusetts miracle that a spacious plot was made available. Friends of the Garden stipulated only that the memorial not be "funereal."

"It's an honor to be part of this space," Allison says. "The mayor has been great. He kept this in his sights so it didn't get lost in the convention shuffle."

In New York, plans grind on painfully for an official Sept. 11 site of remembrance. There is dissent about everything - from building in the hallowed footprint of the World Trade Center to the arrangement of names on the stone. New York remains Ground Zero, still a tender place.

Massachusetts families were no less grief-stricken, but they now have a place to reflect. For families who did not receive even a shred of DNA to bury, the name on the wall will be a precious relic.

On July 12, a private dedication is planned for family members. Menino, Sen. Ted Kennedy and Gov. Mitt Romney are scheduled to speak. So far, Kerry is not on the roster. On July 13 at 7 a.m., the memorial will be opened to the public.

Blake Allison suspects the new memorial will be too public a place to share a quiet moment with his late wife. Yet he knows that Anna, an avid gardener, would think the Public Garden space so appropriate.

"As I talk to you now, I look out the window. Except for a few things that have shifted around on their own, the garden looks very much as it did when she and I put it together," he says.

Another summer passes in another garden of remembrance.